

PROLOGUE

As a little girl I walked for hours alone in the silent woods behind my house in Louisiana, singing songs. Being outside gave me a sense of aliveness and danger. When I was growing up, my mother and father fought constantly. He was an alcoholic. I was usually scared in my home. Outside wasn't necessarily heaven, either, but it was my world. Call it heaven or hell, it was mine.

Before going home, I would follow a path to our neighbors' house, through a landscaped yard and past a swimming pool. They had a rock garden full of small, soft pebbles that would trap the heat and stay warm in a way that felt so good against my skin. I would lie down on those rocks and look up at the sky, feeling the warmth from below and above, thinking: *I can make my own way in life. I can make my dreams come true.*

Lying quietly on those rocks, I felt God.

Raising kids in the South used to be more about respecting your parents and keeping your mouth shut. (Today, the rules have reversed—it's more about respecting the kids.) Disagreeing with a parent was never permitted in my house. No matter how bad it got, there was an understanding to stay mute, and if I didn't, there were consequences.

In the Bible it says your tongue is your sword.

My tongue and my sword were me singing.

My whole childhood, I sang. I sang along with the car radio on the way to dance class. I sang when I was sad. To me, singing was spiritual.

I was born and went to school in McComb, Mississippi, and lived in Kentwood, Louisiana, twenty-five miles away.

Everyone knew everyone in Kentwood. Doors were left unlocked, social lives revolved around church and backyard parties, kids were put in matching outfits, and everyone knew how to shoot a gun. The area's main historic site was Camp Moore, a Confederate training base built by Jefferson Davis. Each year there are Civil War reenactments the weekend before Thanksgiving, and the sight of the people dressed up in military outfits was a reminder that the holiday was coming. I loved that time of year: hot chocolate, the smell of the fireplace in our living room, the colors of the fall leaves on the ground.

We had a little brick house with green-striped wallpaper and wood paneling. As a girl I went to Sonic, rode go-karts, played basketball, and attended a Christian school called Parklane Academy.

The first time I was truly touched and got shivers down my spine was hearing our housekeeper singing in the laundry room. I always did the family laundry and ironing, but when times were better financially, my mom would hire someone to help. The housekeeper sang gospel music, and it was literally an awakening to a whole new world. I'll never forget it.

Ever since then, my longing and passion to sing have grown. Singing is magic. When I sing, I own who I am. I can communicate purely. When you sing you stop using the language of "Hi, how are you..." You're able to say things that are much more profound. Singing takes me to a mystical place where language doesn't matter anymore, where anything is possible.

All I wanted was to be taken away from the everyday world and into that realm where I could express myself without thinking. When I was alone with my thoughts, my mind filled with worries and fears. Music stopped the noise, made me feel confident, and took me to a pure place of expressing myself exactly as I wanted to be seen and heard. Singing took me into the presence of the divine. As long as I was singing, I was half outside the world. I'd be playing in the backyard like any kid would, but my thoughts and feelings and hopes were somewhere else.

I worked hard to make things look the way I wanted them to. I took myself very seriously when I shot silly music videos to Mariah Carey songs in my girlfriend's backyard. By age eight, I thought I was a director. Nobody in my town seemed to be doing stuff like that. But I knew what I wanted to see in the world, and I tried to make it so.

Artists make things and play characters because they want an escape into faraway worlds, and escape was exactly what I needed. I wanted to live inside my dreams, my wonderful fictitious world, and never think about reality if I could help it. Singing bridged reality and fantasy, the world I was living in and the world that I desperately wanted to inhabit.

Tragedy runs in my family. My middle name comes from my father's mother, Emma Jean Spears, who went by Jean. I've seen pictures of her, and I understand why everyone said we look

alike. Same blond hair. Same smile. She looked younger than she was.

Her husband—my grandfather June Spears Sr.—was abusive. Jean suffered the loss of a baby when he was only three days old. June sent Jean to Southeast Louisiana Hospital, a by-all-accounts horrible asylum in Mandeville, where she was put on lithium. In 1966, when she was thirty-one, my grandmother Jean shot herself with a shotgun on her infant son's grave, just over eight years after his death. I can't imagine the grief that she must have felt.

The way people talk about men like June in the South is to say "Nothing was good enough for him," that he was "a perfectionist," that he was "a very involved father." I would probably put it more harshly than that.

A sports fanatic, June made my father exercise long past exhaustion. Each day when my father finished basketball practice, no matter how tired and hungry he was, he still had to shoot a hundred more baskets before he could come inside.

June was an officer for the Baton Rouge Police Department and he eventually had ten children with three wives. And as far as I can tell, no one has one good word to say about the first fifty years of his life. Even in my family, it was said that the Spears men tended to be bad news, especially in terms of how they treated women.

Jean wasn't the only wife June sent to the mental hospital in Mandeville. He sent his second wife there, too. One of my father's half sisters has said that June sexually abused her starting when she was eleven, until she ran away at sixteen.

My father was thirteen when Jean died on that grave. I know that trauma is part of why my father was how he was with my siblings and me; why, for him, nothing was ever good enough. My father pushed my brother to excel in sports. He drank until he couldn't think anymore. He'd disappear for days at a time. When my father drank, he was extremely mean.

But June softened as he got older. I didn't experience the vicious man who had abused my father and his siblings but rather a grandfather who seemed patient and sweet.

My father's world and my mother's world were completely opposite from each other.

According to my mother, my mom's mom—my grandmother Lilian "Lily" Portell—was from an elegant, sophisticated family in London. She had an exotic air about her that everyone commented on; her mother was British and her father was from the Mediterranean island of Malta. Her uncle was a bookbinder. The whole family played instruments and loved to sing.

During World War II, Lily met an American soldier, my grandfather Barney Bridges, at a dance for the soldiers. He was a driver for the generals and he loved driving fast.

She was disappointed, though, when he brought her with him to America. She'd imagined a life like what she had in London. As she rode to his dairy farm from New Orleans, she looked out the window of Barney's car and was troubled by how empty his world seemed. "Where are all the lights?" she kept asking her new husband.

I sometimes think about Lily riding through the Louisiana countryside, looking out into the night, realizing that her large, vibrant, music-filled life of afternoon teas and London museums was about to become small and hard. Instead of going to the theater or shopping for clothes, she would have to spend her life cooped up in the country, cooking and cleaning and milking cows.

So my grandmother kept to herself, read a ton of books, became obsessed with cleaning, and missed London until the day she died. My family said that Barney didn't want to let Lily go back to London because he thought that if she went, she wouldn't come home.

My mother said Lily was so distracted by her own thoughts that she had a tendency to start clearing the table before everyone was done eating.

All I knew was that my grandmother was beautiful and I loved copying her British accent. Talking in a British accent has always made me happy because it makes me think of her, my fashionable grandmother. I wanted to have manners and a lilting voice just like hers.

Because Lily had money, my mother, Lynne; her brother, Sonny; and her sister, Sandra, grew up with what you might consider money-money, especially for rural Louisiana. Even though they were Protestant, my mom attended Catholic school. She was gorgeous as a teenager, with her black hair worn short. She'd always go to school wearing the highest boots and the tiniest skirts. She hung out with the gay guys in town, who gave her rides on their motorcycles.

My father took an interest in her, as well he might. And probably in part because June made him work so ridiculously hard, my father was unbelievably talented at sports. People would drive for miles just to see him play basketball.

My mom saw him and she said, "Oh, who is this?"

By all accounts, their relationship was born of mutual attraction and a sense of adventure. But the honeymoon was over long before I came along.

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

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

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

My dad started doing really well. In our little town he became one of the most well-off men. My family threw big backyard crawfish boils. They had crazy parties, with dancing all night long. (I've always assumed their secret ingredient for staying up all night was speed, since that was the drug of choice back then.)

My mom opened a daycare center with her sister, my aunt Sandra. To cement their marriage, my parents had a second baby—me. I was born on December 2, 1981. My mother never missed an opportunity to recall that she was in excruciating labor with me for twenty-one hours.

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

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

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

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

"It wasn't even a bad accident!" I told my mother. I begged to see Lexie. She was my favorite person.

"No, I'm afraid she's getting senile," my mom said. "It's not safe for you to be with her alone anymore."

After that, I saw her at my house, but I couldn't get in the car with her or have sleepovers with her ever again. It was a huge loss for me. I didn't understand how being with someone I loved could be considered dangerous.

At that age, my favorite thing to do besides spending time with Lexie was hiding in cabinets. It became a family joke: "Where's Britney now?" At my aunt's house, I always disappeared. Everyone would mount a search for me. Just when they'd start to panic, they'd open a cabinet door and there I'd be.

I must have wanted them to look for me. For years that was my thing—to hide.

Hiding was one way I got attention. I also loved dancing and singing. I sang in the choir of our church, and I took dance classes three nights a week and on Saturdays. Then I added gymnastics classes an hour away in Covington, Louisiana. When it came to dancing and singing and acrobatics, I couldn't get enough.

At career day in elementary school, I said I was going to be a lawyer, but neighbors and teachers started to say that I was "Broadway bound," and eventually I embraced my identity as "the little entertainer."

I was three at my first dance recital and four when I sang my first solo: "What Child Is This?" for a Christmas program at my mother's daycare.

I wanted to hide, but I also wanted to be seen. Both things could be true. Crouched in the cool darkness of a cabinet, I felt so small I could disappear. But with everyone's eyes on me, I became something else, someone who could command a room. In white tights, belting out a song, I felt like anything was possible.

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

One day when I was four, I was in the living room of our house, sitting on the couch with my mom on one side and my friend Cindy on the other. Kentwood was like a town in a soap opera—there was *always* drama. Cindy was chattering away to my mom about the latest scandal while I was listening in, trying to follow along, when the door burst open. The boy’s facial expression was enough for me to know something terrifying had happened. My heart dropped.

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

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

Finally, we arrived at the field where my brother, Bryan, had been playing with his neighbor friends. They had been trying to mow down some tall grass with their four-wheelers. This seemed like a fantastic idea to them because they were idiots. Inevitably, they couldn’t see one another through the tall grass and had a head-on collision.

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

A helicopter airlifted him to the hospital.

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

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

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

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

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

I said no.

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

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

As my brother got better, we became heavily involved with the community. Since it was a

small town of just a couple thousand people, everyone came out to support the three main parades a year—Mardi Gras, Fourth of July, Christmas. The whole town looked forward to them. The streets would be lined with people smiling, waving, leaving behind the drama of their lives for a day to have fun watching their neighbors slowly wander by on Highway 38.

One year, a bunch of us kids decided to decorate a golf cart and put it in the Mardi Gras parade. There were probably eight kids in that golf cart—way too many, obviously. There were three on the bench seat, a couple standing on the sides holding on to the little roof, and one or two swinging from the back. It was so heavy that the tires of the cart were almost flat. We all wore nineteenth-century costumes; I can't even remember why. I was sitting on the laps of the bigger kids up front, waving at everyone. The problem was, with that many kids in a golf cart, and its flat tires, the thing got hard to control, and with the laughing and the waving and the excited energy... Well, we only hit the car ahead of us a *few* times, but that was enough for us to get expelled from the parade.

When my father started drinking heavily again, his businesses started to fail.

The stress of having no money was compounded by the chaos of my father's extreme mood swings. I was particularly scared to get in the car with my dad because he would talk to himself while he was driving. I couldn't understand the words he was saying. He seemed to be in his own world.

I knew even then that my father had reasons for wanting to lose himself in drinking. He was stressed out by work. Now I see even more clearly that he was self-medicating after enduring years of abuse at the hands of his father, June. At the time, though, I had no idea why he was so hard on us, why nothing we did seemed to be quite good enough for him.

The saddest part to me was that what I always wanted was a dad who would love me as I was—somebody who would say, "I just love you. You could do anything right now. I'd still love you with unconditional love."

My dad was reckless, cold, and mean with me, but he was even harder on Bryan. He pushed him so hard to do well in sports that it was cruel. Bryan's life in those years was much rougher than mine because our father put him through the same brutal regimen June had pushed on him. Bryan was forced to do basketball and also football, even though he wasn't built for it.

My dad could also be abusive with my mom, but he was more the type of drinker who would go away for days at a time. To be honest, it was a kindness to us when he went away. I preferred it when he wasn't there.

What made his time at home especially bad was that my mom would argue with him all night long. He was so drunk he couldn't talk. I don't know if he could even hear her. But we could. Bryan and I had to suffer the consequences of her rage, which meant not being able to sleep through the night. Her screaming voice would echo through the house.

I'd storm out into the living room in my nightgown and beg her, "Just feed him and go put him to bed! He's sick!"

She was arguing with this person who wasn't even conscious. But she wouldn't listen. I would go back to bed furious, staring daggers at the ceiling, listening to her yell, cursing her in my heart.

Isn't that awful? He was the one who was drunk. He was the one whose alcoholism had made us so poor. He was the one passed out in the chair. But she was the one who ended up pissing me off the most, because at least in those moments, he was quiet. I was so desperate to sleep, and she wouldn't shut up.

In spite of all the nightly drama, by day my mom made our home a place my friends wanted to come to—at least when my father respected us enough to drink somewhere else. All the kids from the neighborhood came over. Our house was, for lack of a better word, the cool house. We had a high bar with twelve chairs around it. My mom was a typical young Southern mom, often gossiping, always smoking cigarettes with her friends at the bar (she smoked Virginia Slims, the same cigarettes I smoke now) or talking with them on the phone. I was dead to all of them. The older kids would sit on the bar chairs in front of the TV and play video games. I was the youngest one; I didn't know how to play video games, so I always had to fight to get the older kids' attention.

Our house was a zoo. I was always dancing on the coffee table for attention, and my mom was always chasing after Bryan when he was little, jumping over couches trying to catch him so she could spank him after back-talking her.

I was always overly excited, trying to draw the older kids' eyes away from the screen in the living room or to get the adults to stop talking to one another in the kitchen.

"Britney, stop!" my mother would yell. "We have company! Just be nice. Be on good behavior."

But I ignored her. And I would always find a way to get everyone's attention.

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

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

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

For my audition, I sang “Sweet Georgia Brown” while doing a dance routine, adding in some gymnastics flips.

They narrowed the group of thousands from across the country down to a handful of kids, including a beautiful girl from California a few years older than me named Keri Russell.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

compete.

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

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

Something hadn't been sewn up properly after she gave birth. She was gushing blood. I screamed for my father. “What's wrong with her?” I yelled. “What's wrong with her?”

Daddy rushed in and drove her to the hospital. The whole way, I kept screaming, “Something cannot be wrong with my mom!”

I was nine. To see a river of blood flowing out of your mother would be traumatic for anyone, but for a child at that age, it was terrifying. I had never seen that much blood before.

Once we got to the doctor, they fixed her in what felt to me like two seconds. No one even seemed that concerned. Apparently, postpartum hemorrhage isn't that uncommon. But it lodged in my memory.

At gymnastics class, I'd always check to make sure my mom was on the other side of the window, waiting for me to be done. It was a reflex, something I had to do to feel safe. But one day I did my usual check-in out the window and she wasn't there. I panicked. She'd left. She was gone! Maybe forever! I started crying. I fell to my knees. Seeing me, you'd have thought someone had just died.

My teacher rushed over to comfort me. “Honey, she's going to come back!” she said. “It's okay! She probably just went to Walmart!”

It turned out that my mom had done exactly that: she had gone to Walmart. But it was not okay. I couldn't take her leaving. Seeing how upset I was when she got back, she never left that window during class again. And for the next few years she never left my side.

I was a little girl with big dreams. I wanted to be a star like Madonna, Dolly Parton, or Whitney Houston. I had simpler dreams, too, dreams that seemed even harder to achieve and that felt too ambitious to say out loud: *I want my dad to stop drinking. I want my mom to stop yelling. I want everyone to be okay.*

With my family, anything could go wrong at any time. I had no power there. Only while performing was I truly invincible. Standing in a Manhattan conference room in front of a woman who could make my dreams come true, at least one thing was completely within my control.

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

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

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

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

"No, sir," I said.

"Why not?"

"They're mean."

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

"Well, it depends," I said.

"I get that a lot," Ed said.

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

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

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

While I was doing the show, we rented a little apartment for my mom, baby Jamie Lynn, and me near my public school, the Professional Performing Arts School, and I took classes nearby at Broadway Dance Center. But mostly I passed my time at the Players Theatre downtown.

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

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

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

In my little-girl mind, I didn't understand why I'd want to do that—continue performing through the holidays. So I quit the show and went home.

The schedule of New York City theater was just too rough on me at that age. One good thing did come out of it, though: I learned how to sing in a theater with small acoustics. The

audience is right beside you—just two hundred people in the room. Honestly, it's strange, but in that space, the feeling of singing is more electric. The closeness that you feel with the people in the audience is something special. Their energy made me stronger.

With that experience under my belt, I auditioned again for the *Mickey Mouse Club*.

Waiting to hear about the *Mickey Mouse Club* back in Kentwood, attending Parklane Academy, I became a basketball point guard. I was tiny for eleven, but I could run the plays. People imagine I was a cheerleader, but I never was. I danced a little bit on the side, but at school I wanted to play ball, so I did in spite of my height. I had this huge number 25 jersey, way too big for me. I was a little bitty mouse zipping around out there.

I had a crush for a while on a basketball player who was fifteen or sixteen. He made every three-pointer, and he made it look easy. People would come from far away to see him play, just like they had to see my dad. He was good—not as good as my dad had been, but still, a genius with the ball.

I marveled at him and my friends who were taller than me. My thing was to steal the ball away from an opposing player mid-dribble, run down, and make a layup.

I loved the thrill of quickly weaving around the other team. Just the rush of no script, the play being unpredictable, completely unknown, made me feel so alive. I was so small and so sweet that no one saw me coming.

It wasn't the same as being onstage in New York City—but under the bright lights on the court, waiting for the sound of applause, it felt like the next best thing.

My second audition for the *Mickey Mouse Club* got me booked. Matt, the nice casting director who had referred my mom to our agent, Nancy, decided I was ready.

Being in the show was boot camp for the entertainment industry: there were extensive dance rehearsals, singing lessons, acting classes, time in the recording studio, and school in between. The Mouseketeers quickly split into our own cliques, divided by the dressing rooms that we shared: Christina Aguilera and I were the younger kids, and we shared a dressing room with another girl, Nikki DeLoach. We looked up to the older kids—Keri Russell, Ryan Gosling, and Tony Lucca, who I thought was so handsome. And quickly I connected with a boy named Justin Timberlake.

We were shooting at Disney World in Orlando, and my mom and Jamie Lynn, who at the time was two years old, had come along with me. During the day, for our breaks, the cast would go ride rides and goof off. It was honestly a kid's dream—unbelievably fun, particularly for a kid like me. But it was also exceptionally hard work: we would run choreography thirty times in a day, trying to get every step perfect.

The only bad moment was when, not long into filming, we got a call that my grandmother Lily had died. Maybe because of a heart attack or stroke, she drowned in the pool while swimming. We couldn't afford to fly home for the funeral, but Lynn Harless, Justin's kind mother, lent us the plane fare. It was something family would do, and the kids and parents on that show became family.

One day, Tony was looking for a hat that a wardrobe person had left in the girls' room, and he came into our dressing room. He walked in and my heart fell out of my chest. He was my crush. I couldn't believe the guy had just walked into my dressing room! My little heart just went to the floor.

Another time, at a sleepover, we played a game of Truth or Dare, and someone dared Justin to kiss me. A Janet Jackson song was playing in the background as he leaned in and kissed me.

It took me back to a moment in the library when I was in the third grade, holding a guy's hand for the first time. It was the biggest deal to me, so real, so powerful. That was the first time somebody had paid me any sort of romantic attention, and it felt like a wonderful rebellion. The lights were off—we'd been watching a movie, and we hid our hands underneath the desk so the teachers couldn't see.

The *Mickey Mouse Club* was a terrific experience; it got my feet wet in TV. Performing on that show *ignited* me. From then on I knew I wanted to do what I did there—singing and dancing.

When the show ended a year and a half later, a lot of my castmates were going off to New York or Los Angeles to continue chasing their dreams. But I decided to go back to Kentwood. Already within me was a push-pull: part of me wanted to keep building toward the dream; the other part wanted to live a normal life in Louisiana. For a minute, I had to let normalcy win.

Back at home, I returned to Parklane, settling into normal teenage life—or the closest thing to “normal” that was possible in my family.

For fun, starting when I was in eighth grade, my mom and I would make the two-hour drive from Kentwood to Biloxi, Mississippi, and while we were there, we would drink daiquiris. We called our cocktails “toddlies.” I loved that I was able to drink with my mom every now and then. The way we drank was nothing like how my father did it. When he drank, he grew more

depressed and shut down. We became happier, more alive and adventurous.

Some of my best times with my mom were those trips we took to the beach with my sister. As we'd drive, I'd sip on a little bitty White Russian. To me, the drink tasted like ice cream. When it had the perfect amount of shaved ice and cream and sugar and not too much alcohol, that was my piece of heaven.

My sister and I had matching bathing suits and matching perms. Now, today it's basically illegal to give a little kid a perm, but back in the nineties it was just *cute as hell*. At three, Jamie Lynn was a living doll—the craziest, most adorable child ever.

So that was our thing. We'd go to Biloxi, drink, go to the beach, come back happy. And we had fun. We had a *lot* of fun. Even amid all the darkness, there was still a lot of joy in my childhood.

By thirteen, I was drinking with my mom and smoking with my friends. I had my first cigarette at my one “bad” friend's house. All my other friends were geeks, but this friend was popular: her sister was a senior and she always had the best makeup, and guys were all over her.

She took me out to a shed and handed me my first cigarette. Even though it was just tobacco, I felt *high*. I remember thinking, *Am I going to die? Is this feeling going to go away? When is this feeling going to go away?* Once I survived my first cigarette, I immediately wanted another one.

I did a pretty good job hiding my habit from my mother, but one day she was having me drive us home from the store along the long road that led to our house—I started driving at thirteen, too—when suddenly she started sniffing the air.

“I smell smoke!” she said. “Have you been smoking?”

She grabbed one of my hands off the wheel fast and pulled it to her to smell. As she did that, I lost control of the wheel, and the car spun off the road. It felt like everything was moving in slow motion. I looked back and saw little Jamie Lynn pressed backward into the seat: she had on a seat belt but wasn't in a car seat. As we spun what felt like very slowly, I kept thinking, *We're gonna die. We're gonna die. We're gonna die.*

Then, *wham!* The butt of the car hit a telephone pole.

Hitting the way we did was a miracle. If we'd hit the pole going forward, we would've gone through the windshield. My mother jumped out of the car and just started yelling—at me for crashing, at cars passing by for help, at the world for letting this happen.

No one was hurt, fortunately. All three of us walked away. Even better: my mom forgot all about how she'd caught me smoking. The crime of teenage me smoking? *Whatever. We almost died!* After that, she never mentioned it again.

One day some of the boys in the sixth grade at school asked me to go smoke a cigarette in their locker room during break. I was the only girl they ever asked to join them. I've never felt cooler. Fortunately, the boys' locker room had two doors, one of which led to the outside. I remember we jammed the door open so the smoke could escape and we wouldn't get caught.

It became a ritual. But it didn't last. A little while later, I decided to try it on my own, without the boys. This time my best girlfriend and I went to smoke in the girls' locker room, but that room only had one door. Disaster—we got caught red-handed and were sent to the principal's office.

“Were you smoking?” the principal asked.

“No!” I said. My best friend reached down and secretly pinched my hand so hard. It was clear the principal didn't believe me, but guess what—somehow we actually got away with just a warning.

Later my friend said, “I swear to God, Britney, you’re the worst liar I’ve ever seen in my life. Let me do the talking next time, please.”

I wasn’t just drinking and smoking by that age; I was precocious when it came to boys. I had a huge crush on one of the guys who was always hanging around my “bad” friend’s house. He was eighteen or nineteen, and he had a girlfriend at the time—a tomboy. They were really together, the “it” couple at our school. I wished he’d look at me, but I didn’t have much hope given that I was five years younger than him.

One night, I was sleeping over at my “bad” friend’s house. With no warning, the guy I had a crush on snuck into the house in the middle of the night—it must have been three in the morning. I was sleeping on the couch, and I woke up to him sitting next to me. He started kissing me, and then we were fully making out on the couch.

What is happening? I thought. It was like some sort of séance—like I’d conjured him! I couldn’t believe my crush had just appeared out of nowhere and started making out with me. And it was sweet. That was all he did—kiss me. He didn’t try anything else.

That year I liked a lot of the boys in my brother’s crowd. As a kid, Bryan was funny—*weird*, in the best way. But when he was a senior, he became king of the school, an absolute badass.

His senior year, I started dating his best friend, and I lost my virginity to him.

I was young for the ninth grade, and the guy was seventeen. My relationship with him ended up consuming a lot of my time. I would go to school like normal at seven a.m. but leave at lunchtime, around one p.m., and spend the afternoon with him. Then he would drive me back right as school was getting out. I’d just innocently get on the bus and go home like nothing had happened.

Eventually, my mom got a call from the school office; I’d missed seventeen days, which I had to make up.

My mom said, “How did you do it? How did you just leave?”

“Oh, I forged your signature,” I said.

The age difference between me and that guy was huge, obviously—now it seems outrageous—and so my brother, who was always very protective, started to hate him. When Bryan caught me sneaking out to go visit his friend, he told on me to our parents. As punishment, I had to walk around the neighborhood all day with a bucket, cleaning up garbage like a prisoner on the highway. Bryan followed me around taking pictures as, crying, I picked up trash.

Moments like that aside, there was something so beautifully normal about that period of my life: going to homecoming and prom, driving around our little town, going to the movies.

But, the truth was, I missed performing. My mom had been in touch with a lawyer she’d met on my audition circuit, a man named Larry Rudolph, who she would call sometimes for business advice. She sent him videos of me singing, and he suggested I record a demo. He had a song that Toni Braxton had recorded for her second album that had ended up on the cutting-room floor; it was called “Today.” He sent me the song and I learned it, then I recorded it at a studio an hour and a half away from us, in New Orleans. This would become the demo that I would use to get in the door at record labels.

Around the same time, Justin and another Mouseketeer, JC Chasez, were in a new boy band called NSYNC that was being assembled. Another castmate, Nikki, with whom I’d shared that dressing room, was joining a girl group, but after I talked it over with my mom, we decided to pursue the solo avenue instead.

Larry played the demo for some executives in New York who told him they wanted to see

what I could do. So I put on my little-bitty heels and my cute little dress, and I returned to New York.

I had tried to go back to being an ordinary teenager, but it hadn't worked. I still wanted something more.

Who is this man? I thought. *I have no idea, but I like his office, and I really like his dog.* He was just this little old man, but his energy was insane. I estimated that he was probably sixty-five years old (he was actually in his fifties).

Larry had told me the man was a big contact named Clive Calder. I had no idea what he did. If I'd known going in that he was a record executive who'd founded Jive Records, maybe I would have been more nervous. Instead, I was just curious. And I loved him from the second I met him.

He had an incredibly intimidating three-story office. And in the office was a teacup terrier—a kind of dog I didn't even know existed—that was, I swear to God, the smallest, most precious thing. When I walked in and saw that office and that dog, I felt like I was entering a parallel universe. Everything opened up into a different dimension. I walked into an amazing dream.

“Hi, Britney!” he said, practically vibrating with enthusiasm. “How are ya?”

He acted like he was part of some sort of powerful secret society. He had a South African accent that made it sound to me like he was a character in an old movie. I'd never heard anyone talk that way in real life.

He let me pick up his dog. As I held the tiny animal, so warm in my arms, and looked around at the giant office, I couldn't stop smiling. In that moment, my dreams got a jump start.

I hadn't recorded anything yet other than the demo. I was just visiting these people Larry had told me to meet with. I knew I was supposed to go sing a song for record label executives. And I knew I sure wanted to be around that guy more, and that the way he was had something to do with the way I wanted to be. I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd been my uncle in a past life. I wanted to always know him.

It was his smile. Clever, smart, wise. He was a mystical smile of a man. I'll never forget it. I felt so much joy with him, and I felt like the trip to New York was more than worthwhile even if all it gave me was the chance to meet someone like that, someone who believed in me.

But my day wasn't done. Larry took me around town, and I went into rooms full of executives and sang Whitney Houston's “I Have Nothing.” Gazing out at rooms full of men in suits looking me up and down in my small dress and high heels, I sang *loud*.

Clive signed me right away. And so I ended up getting a recording deal with Jive Records at the age of fifteen.

My mother was teaching second grade now in Kentwood, and Jamie Lynn was little, so we got our family friend Felicia Culotta (I called her “Miss Fe”) to come with me everywhere.

The label wanted me in a studio immediately. They put Fe and me up in an apartment in New York. We would drive to New Jersey every day and I would go into a booth and sing for producer and songwriter Eric Foster White, who'd worked with Whitney Houston.

Honestly, I was clueless. I didn't know what was going on. I just knew I loved to sing and I loved to dance, and so whichever of the gods could come down and coordinate that for me, I was going to show up for them. If anyone was able to put something together for me that presented me in a format people could relate to, I was ready. I don't know what happened, but God worked his magic, and there I was in New Jersey, recording.

The booth I sang in was underground. When you're inside it, you just hear yourself sing, nothing else. I did that for months. I never came out of the booth.

After working nonstop, I went to a barbecue at someone's house. I was very girly at the

time—always in a dress and heels. I was there talking with people, trying to make a good impression, and at one point I ran to go get Felicia and bring her out on the balcony. I didn't realize that there was a screen door there. I ran straight into it, hit it with my nose, and fell back. Everyone looked up and saw me on the floor, holding my nose.

When I tell you I was embarrassed, I swear to *God*...

I got up and someone said, "You know there's a screen there."

"Yeah, thanks," I said.

Of course, everyone just laughed their little fannies off.

I was *so* embarrassed. Isn't it funny that out of all the things that happened to me in that first year of recording, that is one of my most vivid memories? That was over twenty-five years ago! I was devastated! But honestly, I think I was more in shock because I did not know that screen was there. It made me think I might have been recording in that booth for too long.

About a year into my time in New Jersey, things were coming together for my first album. Then all of a sudden one of the executives told me, "You need to meet this producer from Sweden. He's really good. He writes cool songs."

"All right," I said. "Who has he worked with?"

I don't know how I knew to ask that question, inexperienced as I was, but I'd started to have clear ideas about how I wanted to sound. I did a little bit of research, too, and learned that at that point he'd done songs for the Backstreet Boys, Robyn, and Bryan Adams.

"Yes," I said. "Let's do it."

Max Martin flew to New York and we had a dinner meeting, just me and him, with no assistants or label people. Even though I usually had handlers around because of my age, in this case they wanted me to meet him by myself. As we sat down, a waiter came over and said, "How may I help you?"

Somehow a candle flipped over and sent the whole table up in flames.

We were at one of the most expensive restaurants in New York City, and our table had just become a wall of fire—from "How may I help you?" to flame wall in under a second.

Max and I looked at each other in horror. "We should go now, yeah?" he said.

He was magic. And we started working together.

I flew to Sweden to record songs, but I barely registered the difference between there and New Jersey: I was just in another booth.

Felicia would come in and say, "Do you want some coffee? Let's go take a break!"

I would shake her off. I worked for hours straight. My work ethic was strong. I would never come out. If you knew me then, you wouldn't hear from me for days. I would stay in the studio as long as I could. If anyone wanted to leave, I'd say, "I wasn't perfect."

The night before we recorded "... Baby One More Time," I was listening to Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" and fell in love with that sound. I stayed up late so that I'd go into the studio tired, my voice fried. It worked. When I sang, it came out gravelly in a way that sounded more mature and sexier.

Once I felt what was happening, I became so focused on the recording. And Max listened to me. When I said I wanted more R&B in my voice, less straight pop, he knew what I meant and he made it happen.

Then, when all the songs were done, someone said, "What else can you do? Do you want to dance now?"

I said, "Do I want to dance? Hell yeah, I do!"

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

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

The director for the video, Nigel Dick, was open to my ideas. In addition to the school bell cuing the start of the dancing, I added that it was important that there be cute boys. And I thought we should wear school uniforms to make it seem more exciting when we started dancing outside in our casual clothes. We even got to cast Miss Fe as my teacher. I found it hilarious to see her in nerdy glasses and frumpy teacher clothes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

concerned, but I knew that I wanted to work with David LaChapelle again.

Every day was new. I was meeting so many exciting people! Right when “Baby” came out, I met singer-songwriter Paula Cole at a party in New York. She was about fourteen years older than me. Oh my God, I looked up to her so much—at first, just based on her appearance. She was the smallest thing, with the curliest brown hair flowing down her back. I had no idea who the hell she was, only that she was beautiful, with this incredible look and energy.

Years later I figured out that she was also the singer of songs I loved. When I first heard her voice, I thought she looked completely different than she actually did. Putting her angelic face to her super-dirty words on “Feelin’ Love,” her tiny body with the strength of her voice on “I Don’t Want to Wait,” I realized how powerful it can be when women defy expectations.

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

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

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

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

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

That was the trip where he got his first necklace—a big *T* for Timberlake.

I had a hard time being as carefree as he seemed. I couldn’t help but notice that the questions he got asked by talk show hosts were different from the ones they asked me. Everyone kept making strange comments about my breasts, wanting to know whether or not I’d had plastic surgery.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trying to find ways to protect my heart from criticism and to keep the focus on what was important, I started reading religious books like the Conversations with God series by Neale Donald Walsch. I also started taking Prozac.

When *Oops!... I Did It Again* came out, I was a household name and in control of my career. Around the time of my first world tour for *Oops!*, I was able to build my mom a house and settle my father's debts. I wanted to give them a clean slate.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

intelligently done those commercials were.

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

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

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

I ended up walking differently, carrying myself differently, talking differently. I was someone else for months while I filmed *Crossroads*. Still to this day, I bet the girls I shot that movie with think, *She’s a little... quirky*. If they thought that, they were right.

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

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

Then I was pissed.

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

That was pretty much the beginning and end of my acting career, and I was relieved. *The Notebook* casting came down to me and Rachel McAdams, and even though it would have been fun to reconnect with Ryan Gosling after our time on the *Mickey Mouse Club*, I’m glad I didn’t do it. If I had, instead of working on my album *In the Zone* I’d have been acting like a 1940s heiress day and night.

I’m sure a lot of the problem was that it was my first experience with acting. I imagine there are people in the acting field who have dealt with something like that, where they had trouble separating themselves from a character. But I feel like they keep perspective. I hope I never get close to that occupational hazard again. Living that way, being half yourself and half a fictional character, is messed up. After a while you don’t know what’s real anymore.

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

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

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

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

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

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

They were shrewd about how they presented me as a star, and I know that I owe them. The way they captured me showed they respected me as an artist. The minds behind that tour were brilliant. It was by far my best tour.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I probably could have found ways, gotten training, to keep from *becoming* a *Chicago* character the way I had with Lucy in *Crossroads*. I wish I'd tried something different. If only I'd

been brave enough not to stay in my safe zone, done more things that weren't just within what I knew. But I was committed to not rocking the boat, and to not complaining even when something upset me.

In my personal life, I was so happy. Justin and I lived together in Orlando. We shared a gorgeous, airy two-story house with a tile roof and a swimming pool out back. Even though we were both working a lot, we'd make time to be home together as often as we could. I always came back every few months so Justin and I could be together for two weeks, sometimes even two months, at a time. That was our home base.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

we'd only been together for a year.

Another time, we were in Vegas, and one of my dancers who'd been hanging out with him told me he'd gestured toward a girl and said, "Yeah, man, I hit that last night." I don't want to say who he was talking about because she's actually very popular and she's married with kids now. I don't want her to feel bad.

My friend was shocked and believed Justin was only saying it because he was high and felt like bragging. There were rumors about him with various dancers and groupies. I let it all go, but clearly, he'd slept around. It was one of those things where you know but you just don't say anything.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the appointed day, with only Felicia and Justin there, I took the little pills. Soon I started having excruciating cramps. I went into the bathroom and stayed there for hours, lying on the floor, sobbing and screaming. *They should've numbed me with something*, I thought. I wanted some kind of anesthesia. I wanted to go to the doctor. I was so scared. I lay there wondering if I was going to die.

When I tell you it was painful—I can't begin to describe it. The pain was unbelievable. I went down to the ground on my knees, holding the toilet. For a long time, I couldn't move. To this day, it's one of the most agonizing things I have ever experienced in my life.

Still, they didn't take me to the hospital. Justin came into the bathroom and lay on the floor with me. At some point he thought maybe music would help, so he got his guitar and he lay there with me, strumming it.

I kept crying and sobbing until it was all over. It took hours, and I don't remember how it ended, but I do, twenty years later, remember the pain of it, and the fear.

After that, I was messed up for a while, especially because I still did love Justin so much. It was insane how much I loved him, and for me it was unfortunate.

I should have seen the breakup coming, but I didn't.

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