

JENNIFER  
HUDSON

I GOT THIS

*How I Changed My Ways and  
Lost What Weighed Me Down*



DUTTON

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*Penguin is committed to publishing works of quality and integrity.  
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however, the story, the experiences, and the words are the author's alone.*

*To my cousin Angela White—who is the ultimate health fanatic, my workout buddy,  
and a huge part of my inspiration.*

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## INTRODUCTION

“ Jennifer! Over here!”  
J “Jennifer, look this way.”  
“Jennifer, Jennifer.”  
“Over here!”

“No, over here!”

“Jennifer, turn to the right!”

I always dreamed of someday walking the red carpet in Hollywood. Let’s be real. It’s fun. Everyone there is shouting out your name just to get a glimpse of what you’re wearing. The press asks you to pose, wave, and smile as they snap photo after photo, with flashes popping so bright you can hardly see. It’s a moment in time a girl feels truly beautiful. And on this particular night, I thought I was looking fierce.

It was one of my first red-carpet events. I was a contestant on *American Idol*, and was living my dream of singing for millions of people on the highest-rated show on television. I was a long way from singing in church and talent shows on the South Side of Chicago. I was excited, taking in the red-carpet finery for the first time. I felt on top of the world.

“Jennifer, are you insecure about being a ‘big girl’ in Hollywood?”

That is, until *that* question.

Oh, *hell* no. She didn’t just ask me that.

But she did.

It took me a minute to figure out who the reporter was actually talking to.

Who, me? I thought. Insecure?

Surely, she wasn’t addressing *me* that way. I had the height of a supermodel, breasts that were naturally big *and* real, and a God-given shape. Why would I feel insecure about that? I looked around hoping to spot another Jennifer—an insecure “big” girl, but there wasn’t anyone else there.

Nope.

Just me.

Like Randy Jackson said to me after my *American Idol* audition: “Welcome to Hollywood, girl!”

## CHAPTER ONE

### BELIEVE

I was born on September 12, 1981, in the Englewood area of Chicago. I am the third child of my parents, Darnell Hudson Donnerson and Samuel Simpson. My mama raised me, my sister Julia, and my brother Jason on her own as a single parent. We were a close family, surrounded by lots of aunts, uncles, cousins, and our grandparents.

I come from the South Side of Chicago, where a lot of the girls have curves. Most of the men there don't want their ladies too skinny. Oh, no. They want a little meat on the bones, and a little something to hold on to. Most of the girls in my neighborhood were built just like me—and that's what we wanted. Now, I don't know about you, but I'd much rather have my share of nice curves than no shape at all. That's not to say that I didn't know I was bigger than some girls—I just never really felt all that insecure about it.

My sister, Julia, has been a big girl for her entire life. My brother, Jason, was built exactly the same.

As for me?

Comparatively speaking, I was the skinny one in my family! In fact, I was so thin as a little girl that you could see my ribs beneath my shirts. My mama took me, not Julia and Jason—the heavy kids in our family—to the doctor. She thought something had to be wrong.

“My child must be very sick! I can see her ribs!” Mama spoke desperately to the doctor as if I was dying. I wasn't sick and I surely wasn't dying—I was just *thin*.

In my family, if you were too skinny, something *had* to be wrong. My family likes to see some shape, too, and if you don't have that, they'll feed you until you do. And trust me—when it comes to food, the Hudsons don't play around.

Like a lot of families in my neighborhood, food was a central focus for all types of gatherings, from family reunions to Sunday-night dinners. There were, of course, the exceptions, and I grew up knowing kids from school who were rarely served home-cooked meals—they ate TV dinners and frozen vegetables—but that wasn't our family. My mama would never allow that kind of food in our house. She loved to cook. I never knew times were tough or that money was short in our home because Mama always had a hot meal on the table. And if she cooked it, we ate it. My grandma and mama were the best cooks, and later, Jason became a good cook, too. Not me—I

didn't start cooking much until I got older and had a family of my own.

It gave my mama a lot of joy to make meals for her kids. She especially loved making hot breakfasts so we could start our days off right and nourished. Before school, we filled our plates with bacon, ham or sausage, pancakes, waffles, eggs, and biscuits. I said *nourished*...not healthy! But oh, that food was so good.

When it came time for dinner, meals were always prepared fresh and from scratch, too. We were a family of tradition and creatures of habit, so Wednesday was spaghetti night, Friday was always our fried fish night, and Sunday was strictly about praising God, spending time with family, and eating really good food. We'd all go to church in the morning and then stop someplace after service for a bite to eat for lunch. Sundays were the only day of the week that we ate out. It was a special treat I looked forward to every week. My grandma and mama loved to stop at Kentucky Fried Chicken, but we kids always wanted to eat at McDonald's. I usually ordered a cheeseburger with *no* onions—I hated onions as a kid and still do. If my burger came with onions, I'd sit there, cry, and refuse to eat it until my mama picked the onions off—or my brother ate my burger for me.

Whenever we ate out, I nitpicked my meal so I could make it last longer, and I was a slow eater, anyway. Eating out was that much of a treat. We weren't allowed to order a drink because it cost too much money. Mind you, this was before the days of value meals, so everything on the menu was à la carte. Jason told my mama that if he didn't have a drink he'd throw up his food. That was his way of being slick to get himself a drink. It worked every time, too.

Sunday nights were full-on family-style dinners with all the fixings. Those meals were like a traditional Christmas dinner at my mama's house every week, with most of my favorite foods being served—collard greens, creamy mashed potatoes, pork chops with heavy gravy, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken with biscuits, and more. Just talking about those meals takes me back to the days of mindless eating without a care. And when it came to dessert, Mama made the best peanut butter cookies and pound cake on the planet. Everyone loved her pound cake. It tasted like she used at least two pounds of butter. For that reason alone, we should have called it “two pound cake.” All that butter made it taste so much better.

One thing is for sure: We ate very well seven days a week. It wasn't just at my mama's house that we ate this way. It was at Grandma's house and our aunts' houses, too. I always ate my fill, but I hardly ever finished all of the food I piled on my plate back then. My brother didn't mind, though, because he got to eat all of my leftovers.

When we weren't eating those delicious meals, my granddaddy used to spoil us with goodies from the gas station where he worked. He frequently brought home chips, candy, and other special treats. On payday, he gave each of us some money to walk to the store and pick out all of the junk food we wanted. We loved when Granddaddy got paid because Mama only gave us a quarter when we wanted to buy something special. If I asked for fifty cents, it was as if I was trying to rob a bank.

“Mama, it's only fifty cents!” I'd plead.

“Jenny, money doesn't grow on trees!” And then she'd send me off to ask my granddaddy for the money.

Now, *he'd* give us three dollars—each! It felt like I could buy up the whole store with that money. I have always had more of a taste for salty treats than sugary ones, so

as a kid I preferred eating pickles and potato chips over candy and cakes. The saltier the better for me.

As I got older, all of those big meals and all that junk food began to catch up with me. I went from being a skinny chicken to a round and robust young woman. I wasn't fat, but people were no longer seeing my ribs. I was starting to look like the rest of my family.

As I gradually gained weight, I started to develop my own way of dressing. I liked to call it "free style." I chose clothes I liked, not things that were trendy or name brands, which is what my brother and sister always went for. I chose to accentuate my curves, or to just show my personal flair. Some might have thought my outfits were a little weird—but I liked to think of them as unique. I didn't care what size I wore, I just wore what I liked. One of my favorite outfits included a pair of overalls, which I wore to high school at least once a week. I was establishing a personal style...and flair, in lots of different ways, something my mama started to notice.

For example, I have always signed my name with great flourish. Even as a child, I made big swoops and grand letters.

"Jenny, you have an artistic signature. I think you can draw!" my mother said with great enthusiasm.

"Whatever," I said.

At the time, I had no interest in drawing. But then, one day, I gave it a try and I've not put my pencil down since. My whole bedroom was covered in my sketches. I have an uncanny ability to draw whatever I see. I always tell people that I got my grandma's voice and my mother's artistic talent.

Then my mother came to me and said, "Jenny, you're such a prankster, I think you might be able to act. I really believe you will be an actress someday."

It's true that as a kid, I was a real practical joker. I loved (and still love) to play tricks on my family and did so whenever I had the chance.

"Whatever," I said.

Do you see a pattern? My usual response of "whatever" turned out to be quite appropriate because *whatever* my mama spoke of *inevitably* came true.

My family always says my voice is a gift—a precious jewel I inherited from my maternal grandmother. My grandma's name was Julia Kate Hudson. My sister and I used to joke that the Kates in our family got all the talent. (My middle name is Kate, and one of my names in my family is Jenny Kate—which I call myself when I'm just being me, hanging out and doing ordinary things.)

People often spoke about how beautifully my grandmother could sing. She was also the sweetest, kindest, most loving, and giving woman. I absolutely loved spending time with her, and especially listening to her sing. She loved to sing hymns and praise God with her voice.

Grandma's house had high ceilings and hardwood floors, which resulted in amazing acoustics. The openness created a sound as if I was singing into a microphone. I would sit on her stairs and just sing my heart out. We have a lot of great singers in our family, so my voice wasn't all that unusual, but some of my older family members told me I had "the gift." They also often said I reminded them of my grandma. I loved to sing and perform. People responded to my voice when I started singing in church or at local talent shows. People would come from all over Chicago just to hear me sing. I became

aware that I could move them with my music and I liked the way that felt. There was a certain sense of power that came with capturing my audience that left me wanting more. They say that most performers live for the applause. Even as a little girl I understood what that meant, and the more I got, the more I wanted.

Even though Grandma had a beautiful voice, she used to tell me that she never wanted to become famous because she'd have to move and perform on demand even if she didn't feel like it—what we would call being “on” today. There are plenty of days performers need to be lifted up and are expected to have the energy to do the lifting. Grandma was perfectly content singing for the Lord. As long as she was reading her Bible or singing in church, she was happy. I remember being mesmerized watching her sing in our church choir. She did more than one hundred solos in that church. Grandma taught me her favorite gospel songs, which I loved to sing. They were powerful and emotional, and everything I thought a song should be to evoke those same reactions from the audience. Grandma's love for gospel is the reason I make sure to have at least one inspirational song on my albums. It is my way of keeping her close, even now.

Around my thirteenth birthday, Grandma had her first stroke and then started having seizures. I never wanted her to be alone so I spent most of my free time keeping her company. I was always quick to volunteer to spend the day at her house so she wouldn't get lonely. There were some good days when Grandma would be up and well, shuffling her feet, singing her hymns; but then there were days when she couldn't get out of bed. Those days were my inspiration to write my first song called “To Love Somebody,” so Grandma would know how much she meant to me. I sat on the side of her bed and sang it to her.

*“It feels good to love somebody, but it hurts to let them go. And it hurts to love somebody when you know you have to let them go.”*

Grandma passed away when I was sixteen years old. Since then, I've carried a heart-shaped stone with me wherever I go, as a way to connect to my grandma. I inherited her gift, and I try to keep her memory close.

After Grandma died, instead of wallowing in my sadness, I vowed that I would go on with my life, follow my dream, and make good decisions along the way so I would make her proud. My grandma and mama were the two most important women in my life because they showed me that with the faith of a mustard seed, anything was possible.

**I**n high school, I wasn't what you'd call a typical teenager. I didn't hang out much with girlfriends, other than my friends from choir. I spent most of my free time with my family. I did have a boyfriend, but he went to a different high school and we only saw each other in the neighborhood. My life wasn't full of the typical teenager things like movies and parties and dances and things like that. I was focused, even then, on my music.

I still love spending time with my family and old friends from home. Being with these familiar touchstones helps me to stay grounded. I am still the same person I've always been, which I think surprises people. I remind them that my career doesn't

define me. Sure, it's a part of who I am but it doesn't determine how I act.

I do.

I've never forgotten where I came from, so when it comes to family and good friends, bring it on. The more the merrier. That is why my cousin helps me with my son and one of my brothers works security for me. Even my best friend from middle school, Walter Williams III, works for me as my executive assistant. He's my gatekeeper, and my best friend in the whole world.

Walter and I met in the sixth grade and have been best friends ever since. Even though Walter is slightly older than me, he is still the same height as he was on the day we met—meaning short. I was unusually tall for my age back then. We were quite a pair. We still are.

I will never forget when Walter and I truly connected. There was a new music teacher at our school who wanted to hear each kid sing. I guess she wanted to know what she had to work with. All of the kids in the class pointed toward me, saying, "Jennifer should sing first!" I really had no choice but to do my thing when the teacher asked me to get up to sing.

Up to this point, Walter had never heard my voice. But when I finished, I could tell that he had fallen in love with what he heard. He became my number one fan that day and we've been inseparable ever since. He decided that he would make it his business to make me a star, and I am being honest when I say that I wouldn't be where I am today without his help and support.

Although I had a desire to perform in those early years, I was sometimes shy. It was Walter who eventually helped me to come out of my shell. He encouraged me to sing wherever and as often as I could. When we graduated eighth grade, I was asked to sing a solo during the ceremony. I did my own rendition of "Wind Beneath My Wings," and cried through the entire song. Walter and my mama were mad at me for blowing that big moment. In fact, Walter got so upset that he decided he was done with trying to promote my career right then and there. This would mark the first of many times to come that Walter would fire himself out of my life.

After that, Walter and I ended up attending different high schools, but we still saw each other almost every day. We'd go shopping after school, work on music, talk about whom we had crushes on, and just hang out like typical kids our age. We even went to my high school prom together. Walter was my date—he had a car and could drive to the dance. My boyfriend at the time didn't have a car, so he was out and Walter was in. I wore a long cream-colored gown. Every year I have a favorite color, and that year I was in love with anything cream or brown. (This year I'm all about purple, by the way.)

During high school, I took my first job. At the time, my sister was the queen of our local Burger King. Although she wasn't the manager, it was as if she worked that whole place by herself. My sister suggested I come to work with her as a way to make some extra money to support my retail habit—it took money to develop my "free style." I gave it my best shot, but I wasn't cut out for it. The grill was too hot for me! Plus, the manager was not very nice and talked to everyone with disrespect. She may have intimidated the other employees, but not me (or my sister, for that matter). Shortly after I started, I looked at the manager square in the eyes and said, "Honey, I am only sixteen years old. I don't need this job! I quit!" My sister gave me a hard time

about giving up so quickly, but I knew it was the moment to get serious about what I really wanted to do.

Walter was happy that I quit—and started to work even harder to help me launch my career.

Somewhere around the end of my freshman year of high school, Walter phoned me up and said that he wanted to be my official manager. My first response was a gut-busting laugh, and one of my classic “Whatever”s. But then I said, “All right. You wanna be my manager? Fine!” I figured he would last about a hot minute. Much to my surprise, Walter took his new position very seriously. He started booking shows for me almost right away and escorted me to all of my events. Neither of us could afford to buy the fancy dresses I needed to wear for my gigs. He used his credit card to buy them, and I would wear them once. Walter would then return the outfits for a full refund. Oh, some of those outfits were something else. Walter did the shopping, and because of my curves we were limited in where we could shop. One outfit that I may never forgive Walter for was an orange suit consisting of a jacket and capri pants. I believe there was some gold trim involved. It was definitely more of something a grandmother would wear. A very stylish grandma, but a grandma nonetheless.

Walter even had business cards printed up that read, “Weddings, funerals, and church functions.” It also listed my rate of \$25 per song in the upper-left corner. Walter’s name and number were on the bottom right as my booking contact.

I’d do my events, get paid, and promptly give Walter his 10 percent. Then we’d return whatever dress we had chosen for the event. We were making money! For a couple of kids, we thought we had a pretty good idea of how show business worked. Boy, we had a lot to learn.

Although I did lots of private parties, my real moneymakers were competing in talent competitions. There were many talent shows around Chicago that I could enter. I sometimes wish I could go back and watch myself onstage. I was pretty confident by this point. Both Walter and I knew that if I entered, I’d win them all. We’d look at the prize money and base our decision on which shows to do on how much money we could make.

I will admit, however, that winning wasn’t always easy. You see, talent shows are a lot like beauty pageants. I felt like I was under a microscope sometimes, and the atmosphere could be intense and really competitive. There was so much backstabbing, politics and dirty tricks going on behind the scenes of those things that I learned to anticipate the *worst* every time we went to a show. I once sang in a competition where another contestant hid my music so I wouldn’t be able to perform. This type of sabotage went on all the time. I learned to brush it off and remembered to carry a spare tape.

When I was seventeen, I entered a gospel singing contest at the mall in Evergreen, Chicago. This was like a local gospel version of *American Idol*. It was one of the biggest competitions in the area. The organizers of the contest had made hair and makeup people available, but Walter had arranged for my own personal glam squad to be with me that day, including a wardrobe stylist, a hairstylist, and a makeup artist. Walter thought it would be better if I showed up with my own team. It wasn’t that we were pulling a diva act. He wanted me to have my own glam squad so I would look the part of a star. My dress that day had been made especially for me by one of

Walter's friends. It was a dramatic, black velvet gown, complete with a train and long-fitted sleeves lined with silver fabric.

In an ironic twist of fate, one of the makeup artists provided by the contest organizers is now one of my personal makeup artists.

"I remember you back when you thought you were too good and had your own stylist and hairdresser." She still teases me to this day every chance she gets!

Round one was held at the Evergreen Plaza Shopping Center, and I won. I also won the second round. Like I said, I usually won whatever talent show I entered, and this time I was hoping for the same result.

Round three was held at Salem Baptist Church led by the Reverend James T. Meeks, in Chicago. The church was massive and was by far the largest venue I had ever played. In addition to coming down with a terrible cold, for whatever reason, I switched my song for this round. In the end I don't think I sang the right song to win that contest. I ended up placing third. No matter how big the glam squad, or how dramatic the dress, sometimes things just don't work out.

**W**alter was always incredibly passionate about ways to move my career in a forward motion. He had the highest expectations for me and would stop at nothing to help me get to the top. One thing I know he wasn't expecting was that I would ever go back to work at Burger King, something I could do only because it was, as they say, "under new management."

This time, I worked the drive-through window. You didn't hear, "Welcome to Burger King, may I take your order" when you drove up to my window. Oh, no. You heard my big ol' mouth singing whatever came to mind. That window had a microphone and I couldn't resist. I have never met a microphone I didn't like—even if it was at a Burger King. I especially loved singing songs from commercials like "... Always, Coca-Cola..." and even jingles from competitors like McDonald's. That drive-through was my stage and I made sure to entertain our customers as they came by to pick up their Whoppers and fries.

It turned out the new manager of that Burger King was a club promoter on the weekends at a local nightclub called Mr. G's Supperclub & Entertainment Center. Mr. G's was a big deal in Chicago back then. My Burger King manager asked me if I wanted to come down to the club and sing a set or two. He said he could only pay me a hundred and fifty dollars.

*Say what?*

That was a lot more money than I was making working the drive-through or singing at weddings.

I was all over his offer like white on rice.

At the time, I loved listening to Whitney Houston and Destiny's Child, so I figured I could sing a few of their songs and just do my thing. Much to my surprise, the club turned into a regular gig. And just like that, I was done working at Burger King, much to Walter's satisfaction. I made up my mind then and there to make a living by carving out my career using my talents and doing the one thing I love. Working at Burger King was the first and last nine-to-five job I've ever had. I was nineteen years old and have never looked back.

I took general courses while attending college, and naturally, music was one of them. My teacher there was a gentleman named Rufus Hill. On the first day of class, he made each of the students get up and sing for him. I felt like it was grade school all over again! When it was my turn, I sang “His Eye Is on the Sparrow,” which was a traditional gospel song I knew I could handle. By the time I finished singing, Mr. Hill was practically on the phone to his friend, a well-known theater coach. He called to have her come hear me sing.

The following week, she came to our classroom so I could sing for her. At the time, I had no idea why, but if someone asked me to perform, I was always happy to oblige. Turns out that she was looking for people to audition for the musical *Big River*. It was being staged at Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire, about an hour and a half outside of Chicago. I was going to try out.

Mr. Hill and his friend spent the next several weeks helping me prepare for my audition. They worked with me and helped me learn the music and lines. I practiced “How Blest We Are,” the most important song from *Big River*, until I knew it cold. I got the part and finally had my first real *professional* singing job.

From that point forward, Walter and I knew we’d ultimately take this journey together. I have always called Walter my life partner because we have been through everything together from the start. He knows me better than I know myself, and he’s always believed in me. I personally think every girl ought to have herself at least one gay man in her life because he will always tell you if your shoes are so last season, your outfit is not working for you, your hair is a total wreck, or to get rid of that man you are dating if he isn’t treating you right! I always tell people that if they don’t like Walter, there isn’t something wrong with him—there’s something wrong with them!

## CHAPTER TWO

### INVISIBLE

**B**y the time I was in my teens I was aware that I had become a plus-size girl. C'mon, I wasn't blind. I may never have called myself "fat" but I still knew that I couldn't shop where other girls shopped. I just felt confident that I could work with the body God gave me. I wasn't insecure—I had all the great curves that a lot of women have to pay for!

When I was fourteen years old, I was in a group called Final Notice. The other two girls were a little older than me and comparatively speaking, they were petite. I was younger and, well, not as delicate. I wasn't overweight, and because of my five-foot-nine frame, I was able to carry a few extra pounds—and carry them well. Even though I didn't fit the look they were going for, they kept me around because I had the most talent. Image was always the bigger issue with the girls in that group. The other girls didn't want what I wanted—which was to sing. They wanted to wear skimpy little outfits so they would look hot. I wanted to choose costumes we could all wear to *entertain*.

The girls from Final Notice and I would go to pick our outfits together, and this was often a frustrating experience. We'd go shopping and I'd try on matching jeans that were supposed to be in my size. While they always fit the other girls perfectly, mine were never quite right. Since I am so tall, I'd usually end up with jeans that were tight in the waist and far too short. If I went up a size, they were baggy all over and made me look even bigger than I was.

Many studies claim that approximately 60 percent of the population is considered overweight. If half of the population is women, then roughly ninety-three million are female shoppers in the double-digit size range. That is a lot of women. Those women are the average, not the exception. I've been one of those women, and I've had many times in my life when I felt like I was not going to find the right things to wear. That's why I got the idea of opening up a clothing store of my own and calling it Average Sizes, because the average woman in America wears a size 14. If the average American woman is a size 14, wouldn't it stand to reason that a size 14 would be the most common size sold? It's not. It seems like sizes 12 and 14 are in fashion hell because manufacturers can't figure out how to make clothes that really appeal to women who are that size. I always hated that most stores carried clothes in small, medium, and large or sizes 0 to 14. If you didn't fit into those sizes there was a

separation that suddenly made you “plus” size and forced you into shopping at places like Fashion Bug and Lane Bryant. I had nothing against these stores. In fact, I was grateful for their existence. I just didn’t want to feel different for having to shop there. There was a store near us called 5-7-9, and my sister, Julia, and I used to joke that if you combined those sizes, *that* was a size that would fit us!

There are more options now than there used to be, but there is still some stigma attached to shopping in the plus department or at plus-size stores. And don’t get me started on some of the things that designers think plus-size women want to wear. It seems as if they think that the bigger you are, the more sparkles or prints you want on your body. I’m sorry, but why would that be true? Why can’t plus-size women just have a nice pair of jeans that fit well, and a great black top that hugs in all the right ways? (This is my note to designers out there—do right by the average woman!)

***Why is it so hard for an average-size woman to find clothes that fit? According to Women’s Wear Daily women who used to be a size 8 or 10 and have gained weight often don’t want to shop for a size 14 or 16. They end up making do with the clothes they have. Interestingly, women sizes 20 and up, many of whom have likely been plus size their entire lives, seem to be more likely to have accepted themselves physically, and shop as frequently as single-digit-size women.***

Julia once came to a Final Notice show and overheard people talking in the audience, saying, “She can sing but her clothes are too small!” Now, Julia has always been a big girl herself, so she didn’t understand why these girls in the audience were commenting on the size of *my* outfits. I was only wearing what the group put me in. The bigger dilemma for me was that I had to conform to their image or I’d be out of the group. We were definitely at a crossroads. Even though I couldn’t fit into the clothes they wore most of the time, I was still expected to do all the work in pants that were too tight, too short, and, truthfully, really uncomfortable. The other girls had the look but couldn’t sing. This didn’t make a lot of sense to me. I moved on.

The next group I was in was called Fate’s Cousins, a group I was in with two of my cousins. We picked the name as our way of paying homage to our favorite group at the time, Destiny’s Child. Ironically, I was the *smallest* girl in that group. We didn’t last very long, but after my experiences with Final Notice, I made sure Fate’s Cousins were about one thing and one thing only. *Singing.*

There were plenty of times I auditioned for other groups and didn’t get the job because I didn’t fit the image. I didn’t see this at the time. Then I was just confused, and hurt. I honestly thought that my talent was the thing that should, or should not secure jobs for me. I didn’t fully grasp how important image was in show business. One such experience really sticks out in my memory—when I auditioned to be a backup singer for Barry Manilow. I was nineteen years old and probably at my peak weight of around 236 pounds.

I had never been on an audition where I would have to sing *and* dance. I’ll dance if I have to and sometimes when I perform, but I don’t necessarily think of myself as a dancer. Still, I’m a professional, and I’ll do what is required when it is called for.

The audition went amazingly.

I performed a gospel song called “Silver and Gold.” All of the casting people there, including Barry Manilow himself, absolutely loved what they heard. They were crazy excited when I finished. Where I come from, people will throw things at you when they think you did a great job. And when I finished singing that day, everyone in the room was throwing things my way. They picked up whatever they had nearby and tossed it at me so I would know they thought it was great. People in the hallway still waiting to audition were saying they didn’t want to follow me. “What’s the point?” I heard one girl say.

Oh yeah. I killed it.

I waited in the hallway for someone to come tell me a start date.

“I’m so sorry, Jennifer. We don’t have anything for you.”

You read that right.

That’s exactly what they said.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked.

You could have knocked me over with a feather. Turns out, I didn’t have the look so I didn’t get the part. I was extremely disappointed. I was dismayed. I thought I had nailed it and the job was mine. It took me years to realize that I didn’t get the job because of my size. At the time, I was just upset that I wasn’t going to get a chance to share my talents with a larger audience.

The thing I got from these experiences was that not everyone has the same values and focus. My focus has always been on talent over looks. This theme of people putting an emphasis on looks first has been a constant reminder throughout my life that most people don’t see things in the same way that I do. Looking back, I realize that it has always been my appearance that I have been judged on first. It made a difference whether I was fat or skinny. This is something I never totally accepted but was learning that I had to deal with.

Coming off of the Barry Manilow disappointment, I was given a challenge. At the time, I was signed to a record deal with a Chicago-based independent label called Righteous Records, headed by a man named David Johnson. He created a contest for me to be inspired to lose the weight, pitting me against another girl on the label who was much smaller than I was. David said we both needed to lose weight and whoever lost the most would win money. I am the type of person who doesn’t like being told what she can and cannot do. And if you challenge me, I will accept. And don’t expect to win, because I will crush you.

Let me say that I’ve always been a real girl. If I can’t do something naturally, I won’t do it at all. Period. So I knew that if I wanted to win this contest, I’d be doing it the old-fashioned way—by working for it.

So I started exercising every day. I’d get up in the morning and do my DVD workouts, first with Billy Blanks’s Tae Bo and then aerobics with Denise Austin. Next, I’d go jogging around my neighborhood. I heard that people used to look out their window and ask, “Who’s that girl running around out there?” It didn’t take long for everyone to figure out it was just me. Next I’d then run up and down some local stairs for fifteen minutes and then jog back home. When I wasn’t working out around my house, I’d head to the gym.

I started watching what I ate for the first time in my life. I stopped eating fried

foods, red meat, pizza, carbonated sodas, and ice cream (all foods I would avoid, as a rule until I started Weight Watchers). I went on a total meat-tox, cheese-tox, and sugar-tox. I ate grilled chicken, brown rice, and broccoli—straight-up diet foods. All the time. And nothing else. I did this same exercise routine for the first half of my day—every day—until I lost sixty pounds and got down to a size 10.

To me, being a size 10 was perfect. I thought, surely I could become a star looking like this. Who would have ever believed that size 10 is still considered plus size in Hollywood? Really, I just didn't get it.

Shortly after this first weight loss, Walter came to me and said, "The world needs to hear you, Jen, and I'm going to make sure they do!" God bless Walter because he would go around finding anything I could sing for or be a part of. Walter found out that Disney was holding auditions for cruise-ship singers at a theater school on the northwest side of Chicago. I hadn't sung for anyone in a while. I had been so focused on losing weight and getting myself in shape. To be honest, I wasn't very excited about the audition but I reluctantly agreed to go. Really, I didn't love the idea of taking a job on a cruise ship and traveling so far from home.

But the audition was two days after my birthday, and I had just gotten a new dress I looked fab in. Since Walter was so insistent, I agreed.

Disney hired me on the spot. Interestingly, the casting director told me they would have hired me regardless of how much I weighed. Disney didn't seem to have the same hang-ups about weight and appearances as other entertainment companies I'd auditioned for in the past. They believed in my talent above everything else. I guess I finally fit the bill for that.

**I**t was around this time that *American Idol* was holding its auditions for its second season. Walter and my mama kept telling me I should try out this time. In the summer of 2002, *American Idol* made its television debut. It wasn't yet the phenomenon it is today, so I didn't pay much attention to it that first year. But my mama watched the show all the time. One day she came to me and said, "Jenny, I think you ought to go and audition for this show."

"Whatever," I said...again.

I'd already had my fill of talent shows, and truth be told, I wasn't the least bit interested in this one. But by the time Kelly Clarkson was named the first American Idol, I was stunned that something like that could actually happen on television. I was suddenly embarrassed that I had been so cavalier about this show, and started asking myself, "Why didn't I go?" over and over again. I was completely hooked from that point on.

Unsurprisingly, Walter was on me pretty hard about missing that shot at fame.

Even so, I wasn't so sure about auditioning for *American Idol* now. Since I had already been offered the Disney position, I knew that was a sure thing. If I gave that up to audition for *American Idol*, I'd be taking a risk even I wasn't willing to bet on. I figured that I better go with the sure thing. So, I skipped the second year of *American Idol* to work on the cruise ship.

Disney moved me down to Orlando, Florida, for two months of training before I spent the next six months performing on the ship. I was cast as one of the Muses in a

production of *Hercules the Musical*, and I also had a solo in *Disney Dreams*, which was a show made up of songs and clips from Disney classics. My song was “The Circle of Life” from *The Lion King*.

The shows were a lot of fun but definitely rigorous and grueling. I had to dance and sing all throughout the productions. Thankfully my weight was in a good place, which made it easier for me to keep up the pace than if I had been heavier.

Doing those shows was so energizing, and the audiences were amazing week after week. There’s something wonderful about entertaining people on vacation. Everyone is there to have a good time. Even though I loved performing each night, being on the ship, was a little boring, because we’d go to the same places over and over again. I never knew what day it was, because they were all pretty much the same.

I’ve always been a homebody and a mama’s girl, so being away from my family, stuck on a cruise ship, wasn’t easy. I’m going to be honest and tell you that two days into my contract I began counting down the days until I could get off the ship and go home. I genuinely missed my family. I lasted the eight months working for Disney, and then I went home. That was enough for me.

In the end, I was extremely grateful for the time I spent on the ship, especially because it gave me the opportunity to save up my pay. I have always been a saver, but living on the ship meant all my meals and living expenses were covered and I could save a lot.

As soon as I got back to Chicago, Walter surprised me with the news that he had arranged for us to go audition for season three of *American Idol*. He had already bought the plane tickets. There was no way I could back out. Just two days after my return from the cruise ship, he and I headed down to Atlanta, where I would audition among thousands of other hopefuls. And as fate would have it, this is really where it all began.