

Never Saw Me Coming

*“Powerfully
entertaining.
A true thriller of
resilience and
defiance.”*
—JANELLE MONÁE

How I Outsmarted the FBI and the Entire
Banking System—and POCKETED \$40 MILLION

Tanya Smith

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Banking System—and POCKETED \$40 MILLION**

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Little, Brown and Company
New York • Boston • London

This is a work of memory and reflection. I have described long-ago events to the best of my recollection and changed some names and dates to protect privacy.

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Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
littlebrown.com

First Edition: August 2024

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ISBN 9780316569194

LCCN 2024934386

E3-20240712-JV-NF-ORI

In memory of my dad, Ira Smith Jr., and my mom, Bennie Ann Smith.

To my daughter, Makala, who encouraged me to tell my story.

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People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.

—Maya Angelou

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PROLOGUE

I WALKED RIGHT OUT

*January 5, 1988
Federal Reformatory for Women, Alderson
Summers County, West Virginia*

I stood at attention outside my room. Two male guards—one tall and slender, the other medium-sized and mean faced—walked through the cottage where I was housed with fifty other women. I eyed the guards as they passed each room and dorm and started walking toward me, their eyes expectant, confirming what they needed to know: that I was present for the 4:00 p.m. inmate count.

As I waited, my heartbeat quickening and my palms moist with anxious sweat, I looked out the window. It was a gloomy winter afternoon. Puffy clouds blocked the sun from the sprawling campus. When the guards passed me and moved to the next cottage, I knew it was only a matter of time before they finished the count and sent the status report up the chain of command. After the guards confirmed they were not short inmates in the hours since the last count, it was back to business as usual.

Buzzzzzz.

The horn sounded, notifying everyone the head count was successful, and now it was time to head to the dining hall for dinner. But, for me, that meant it was game on. I exhaled deeply to slow my breathing and dried my hands at my sides. I needed to be in control, smooth and confident.

“She won’t even bring my boy to see me. What kind of shit is that? You volunteer to keep him and then you don’t even bring him here for six months?”

“Where’s his daddy? Can’t he bring the boy?”

“That fool’s locked up too. Part of the reason I’m here.”

“Mama, that’s all of us.”

The other inmates in my cottage chitchatted as they gathered to rush the dining hall to feast on what passed for food before it had been picked over. The food at Alderson wasn’t too bad, but it wasn’t Mr. Chow either.

I nodded, pretending I was interested in somebody’s child but hardly listened. When they started heading toward the dining hall, I stood back and looked to see if any eyes were on me. No one was paying attention, so I peeled off from the group and cut over to the administration building to the left of my cottage.

I slid into a cracked metal door and froze against a wall. It was an aging brick building with

murky sand-colored tiles covering the floors and walls. I listened and watched to make sure no one was around. By then, all hands were on deck in the dining hall as guards policed the inmates to put down inevitable mealtime skirmishes. I expected the building to be empty, but I was unsure. I waited a few more seconds in case there was a straggler running behind. There could be no mistakes. Not today.

When all was clear, I dashed into the bathroom, locked the door, and rushed to the last stall.

I looked beside the toilet, and a bulky black bag was on the floor. *Yes, it's here!* With a sigh of relief, I opened it and started pulling things out: a conservative blue blazer, a knee-length black skirt, a crisp white blouse, pumps, a briefcase, tortoiseshell glasses, and coral lipstick. I slid out of my inmate uniform and stashed it in the bag.

Everything fit perfectly. But when I slid my feet into the shoes, I quickly realized they were too small. When I had entered Alderson, I was a size ten, but now I could have used an eleven. Still, I crammed my big feet into those tight, pointed-toe pumps. They had to do.

Adrenaline flooded my veins. I rushed to the mirror, raked my hair into a bun, put on the lipstick, slid the glasses onto my nose, and picked up the briefcase. I stepped back and peered at my reflection. I was two years shy of thirty, but I still looked like I was in my early twenties. I had my mother's smooth brown skin and my father's purposeful chestnut eyes. In those clothes, with the bright lipstick on, it looked like I was already coming back to life—changing, melting away invisible layers of sorrow and confinement.

When I opened the bathroom door, it was showtime. I had a part to play. I was to imitate a distinguished lawyer who'd visited her client and was now leaving Alderson. I straightened my back, poked my chest out, and held my head high like my mom, Bennie, taught me. I strode out of the bathroom and navigated the halls of the administration building as if I'd done it countless times before. My heels clicked against the floor tiles with each step. Instead of playing small and trying to be invisible, I decided an air of confidence, privilege, and freedom would get me past anyone in my path. They were accustomed to seeing me as a bummy, docile, controlled prisoner, not a refined, successful young woman wearing nerdy spectacles and carrying a leather briefcase. I told myself to *slow down*. Calm every cell in my body. There was no rush.

As I exited the administration building, I passed a few inmates who hardly looked in my direction. If they had, if one peered close enough and realized it was me, they'd rat me out for sure. I hadn't told any of the inmates about my plan, because in prison information is currency. I didn't want to put anyone in a position to be forced to share intel that might hurt me, because it could help them.

One woman I didn't know walked near me as she headed toward the dining hall. She stopped in my path and scanned me from head to toe. My heart quivered. My jaws tightened with anxiety, but I kept walking.

When her hazel eyes reached my feet, she licked her dry-ass lips and slid her eyes back up to my breasts, her mouth curling into a devious, suggestive grin. "Damn, momma, you shonuff lookin' fine in that skirt. Wanna be my lawyer?" she flirted before exposing her wriggling pink tongue and worming it up and down to show what she'd do to me.

I gave no response. My mind was working overtime to stay focused as that initial adrenaline rush dissipated into a flood of self-conscious thoughts.

I kept moving, one foot in front of the other, my hand gripping the briefcase as I walked along the pathway from the administration building to the parking lot. With each step I wondered if any inmates had noticed me or if some random guard was trying to be the day's hero. The

pathway seemed to get longer, the length of a football field. I stayed smack in the middle, keeping my eyes fixed on my goal—the gate at the end of the pathway. The closer I got, the more those stupid pumps hurt. My damn feet started cramping and puffing up around the edges of the leather, like muffins rising in a pan. Chilling sweat rolled down my back. I reminded myself, *Keep walking like a queen. You can make it.*

When I reached the gate, I turned to the guard standing in the doorway and waved. He squinted as if he was seeing someone he knew. I was the lawyer who always walked by, right? I smiled and waved again. A heavy lump formed in my throat as I waited for a response. *Come on!* Every second counted. At any moment, someone could realize I was missing, and the alarm would sound. My plan would be a bust. *Tick... tock...*

After the longest pause in history, he nodded, returned my wave, and opened the gate. *Thank God!*

At the sound of the metal bars rolling up, my heart started pounding like a drum on a plantation, letting all the slaves know freedom was on the horizon. I wasn't nervous though. I wasn't afraid. I was prepared, acutely aware. My mouth started salivating. My fingers started tingling. I couldn't feel my feet anymore, but everything in me wanted to run across the freaking threshold into the world. I had to keep cool. *You got this. You got this.*

I kept walking until I saw my friend Wesley's old burgundy Cadillac Brougham parked a few feet ahead. When Wesley saw me in the rearview mirror, he exited the car and opened the back door for me while gesturing like he was my chauffeur. His jet-black Jheri curl was holding up a furry Kangol 504. He was tall and skinny, wearing creased blue jeans and a nice rayon shirt that made him look like he was in a nightclub—he was always dressed up nicely. I hugged him quickly, slid into the back seat, and kicked off those pumps with relief.

"Damn, sister, that's all I get for driving all the way from Minneapolis to pick you up?" Wesley joked, getting back behind the wheel.

His sister, Jackie, was beside me. Rob, a shorter guy I didn't know, was sitting in the front. They all looked happy to see me. Wesley and Jackie went to school with my older brother, Mason, and lived in the neighborhood. They'd watched me grow up. They liked the flyest clothes and cars and always needed money. That's why I was sure they'd say yes when I called offering cash if they'd drive down to Alderson to pick me up when I was released. For their own good, I didn't tell them I was escaping.

"My girl, you're out!" Jackie cheered, pulling me into a sisterly embrace. "It's so good to see you." She smelled like Carolina Herrera. Her hair was cut into an asymmetrical bob. Like Wesley, she had cinnamon-colored skin and a beautiful smile.

I returned Jackie's greeting but then I quickly turned to Wesley.

"Go! Let's get out of here!" I told him.

"Why? You in some rush?" he asked, starting the Caddie.

"Wouldn't you be if you just got released from prison?" Jackie asked, laughing.

"Right? Let's get her the fuck out of here before they change their mind about letting her out." Wesley took off down the long prison road that led back to society.

Rob turned on the radio and asked if I wanted to hear anything in particular.

"No. I'm fine," I answered.

He scrolled the channels, searching for the local R&B station. Whitney Houston's "So Emotional" started playing. Jackie sang along—*Every time I think of you-oo-oo*—and elbowed me like I should join in. I had no time for singing, not yet anyway. I kept my eyes peeled and

focused on the road. There weren't any other cars around us, just unending pavement ahead and tall trees springing up from the brush along the shoulder.

When we reached the highway, I said, "OK, we can slow down, Wesley. You're driving too fast."

Annoyed, he pointed out that he could drive his Brougham, "the smoothest driving car in the land," as fast as he pleased. Everyone chuckled.

"Whatever. Just slow down and be cool," I said, sounding calm but stern.

Just then a siren *whooped*. There was a police car coming up behind us with the quickness of a lion closing in on a gazelle. A voice shouted over the loudspeaker: "Pull over. Now!"

"What's he pulling me over for?" Wesley asked, annoyed.

"Were you going too fast? Over the speed limit?" Jackie asked.

Wesley pulled onto the shoulder and stopped the car.

"Just keep your composure. Everyone. Keep. Your. Composure. Smile, be polite, and say 'sir.' OK?" I looked around the car, and everyone, nervous and wide-eyed, nodded. "We'll get through. Everything will work out," I said, trying to sound calm and confident while peeking over my shoulder at the pudgy police officer approaching the Cadillac. I wasn't quite sure anything would work out. At that moment, with my freedom and sanity on the line, everything I'd been through, what I'd seen and done, survived and struggled through, flashed through my mind. I'd found myself in a ditch so deep it would take a miracle to climb out and set things straight. Escaping Alderson was supposed to be my chance to make things right, to prove I'd been wronged. With that police officer steps from the car, everything was in question. I looked at Wesley's glove compartment. I hoped he didn't have anything illegal in there.

"Roll this window down, boy," the officer barked at Wesley. "And turn off the ignition."

THE GIRL WITH THE BIG BRAIN

When I was thirteen years old, I fell madly in love with Michael Jackson and decided he was going to be my husband and the father of my children. Why not? I was young, Black, gifted, and fabulous—and so was he. To make it happen, we needed to cross paths, which was a major obstacle because I lived on the Northside of Minneapolis, and Michael was two thousand miles away in California and knew nothing about me. I just needed time to figure things out.

“Do you think Michael and I would make a cute couple?” I asked my mother one day as we listened to the Jackson 5 on the car radio on the way home from Cubs, Mom’s favorite grocery store. My mother, who everyone called “Bennie,” was a Dallas, Texas, beauty with buttery, light-brown skin and a flat, tear-shaped nose. She was whip-smart and the most loving person I’ve ever known. While she could’ve done anything with her intelligence and education, she prided herself on taking care of her children and keeping our home beautiful and neat.

“Of course. You working on getting a signed poster from him too?” she answered, bringing up my last heartthrob, swimmer Mark Spitz. After getting a peek at his “trademark” mustache as he competed at the 1972 Olympics in Munich and won seven gold medals, I figured out how to get his home telephone number from directory assistance and called him to confess my love. Unfortunately, while he was happy to get my call, Mark revealed that he was moving on from swimming and, worse, getting married. He agreed to send me an autographed poster even though we could never be. I was happy to get it and hung it up in my bedroom. But after I saw Michael Jackson do the robot while he sang “Dancing Machine” with his brothers on *Soul Train*, I tore Mark’s poster down and replaced it with a brand new pinup of the Jackson 5 taken from the latest edition of *Right On!* magazine.

“No, I don’t want an autographed poster of Michael Jackson,” I said with a slight attitude. It was December and cold outside, and I could see my breath materialize into a cloud as I exhaled. Shivering, I added, “I want him to, like, be my boyfriend.”

My mother smiled and nodded along to show support, but at thirteen, I could tell when she thought I was in over my head and was just being nice.

“That would be great,” she said. “But I’m sure you’ll have to fight a million other girls just to get to him. How are you going to do that?”

I peered at her. She had no idea about the skills I’d developed while cracking directory assistance to get to Mark Spitz. After requesting numerous transfers throughout the telephone company’s employee directory, I pretended to be from billing and requested a list of all the telephone numbers dialed by Mark’s coach from another employee. When that trick worked, I used the same system to get numbers for every celebrity my girlfriends and I could think of as

we hung out in my bedroom after school. We'd called everyone from Todd Bridges to Leif Garrett. Getting to Michael would require a little more work, but I was confident in my ability to get what I wanted.

"I'll find a way to get to Michael," I replied to my mother. "We'll be together."

The declaration set me in motion. When we got home, I took Black Power, our family dog, a loyal Doberman pinscher, up to my bedroom to figure out a way to get in contact with my future boyfriend. Imagining myself arm in arm with Michael in the centerfold of the next *Right On!*, I did my usual research. From articles in teen magazines, I learned that he lived in Encino, California, with his parents, Katherine and Joe Jackson. But from what I'd read, his dad, Joe, the group's manager, sounded too strict to approach.

"I need another way in," I explained to Black Power. Considering how I'd gotten to Mark using his swim coach, I decided to look for other people connected to Michael. I discovered that Samuel Jackson, Michael's grandfather, lived in Phoenix, Arizona. He had a listed phone number.

I waited until my identical twin sister, Taryn, came home to dial it. The youngest of the children, we were close, automatic playmates. Mom often dressed us alike, and we loved playing the classic twin trick of trading places at school and making our teachers guess who was who. No one could tell us apart. However, as we grew, we developed different personalities. While I was a precocious people person, Taryn was more skeptical and could be a loner. Still, like our other four siblings—sisters Barbara (Babs), the eldest, and Iris and brothers Ryan and Mason—we both excelled at school and were always at the top of our class. If I was going to meet Michael Jackson, Taryn, my right hand, was coming with me.

When we called Michael's grandfather, he seemed glad to talk. I think he was kind of lonely.

"I want to meet Michael," I told him. "Or even just get him on the phone. My sister and I"—I nodded at Taryn standing nearby and egging me on—"just love the Jacksons and would give anything to talk to them. Won't you help us?"

"Oh, darling, you sound like such a sweet girl. I sure wish I could. But I don't think Joe would allow me to do that," he said, his voice soft and a little shaky, aging him to his midsixties.

I wondered if he might be a little scared of Joe, though he never said anything explicit. It didn't stop him from freely gossiping about "the boys." After our first phone call got us nowhere, Taryn and I called him another time, and he told us, "Michael's on tour now." On a different call, he said, "The boys are recording a new album." Most maddening were the times when he'd say, "I just spent Thanksgiving with the boys," or, "Well, you just missed Michael. He was here."

Did you tell him about me? I wanted to scream. But I knew not to push him. I didn't want to upset my future grandfather-in-law. And if I did, he might tell Joe about our calls, and Joe would for sure change his father's telephone number.

I didn't want to lose contact. Though I wasn't getting what I wanted, the constant flow of facts from our nearly weekly phone calls made me feel close to Michael, like a family friend. I could scatter tidbits of information to impress my friends as we ate bologna sandwiches on the bleachers at school—"Michael will be in Chicago next week"—but I mostly basked in the illusion of intimacy.

Samuel, too, was enjoying our connection. Sometimes I'd call and he'd have nothing to report. "Tanya, I haven't talked to the boys for a day or two. I don't know what they're up to."

"OK, I'll try back tomorrow in case there's news," I'd say, watching a spring shower water our back lawn through my bedroom window.

“I look forward to that,” he’d tell me. “You make my day.”

He was a true sweetheart. But, much as I liked him, those calls were just a distraction from my real goal of meeting Michael. I soon reverted to my old tactics of calling the phone company and asking the operator for a random department and then having that department transfer me to billing or facilities to make my call look like it was coming from within the company.

Using that method, I got the address of the Jackson family compound—4641 Hayvenhurst Avenue—along with every phone number connected to the place.

With Taryn anxiously waiting beside me, I made a test call. I was sure I had the right number when a young woman with a soft voice answered the phone.

“Hi, LaToya. What’s up, girl?” I said, guessing who it might be and trying to sound nonchalant. Taryn nodded along. I was on the right track. We were almost in.

“Hey, who is this?” the woman said, sounding annoyed. I hung up immediately.

“We did it!” Taryn and I were high-fiving and laughing. “We found the Jacksons!”

Now we had to get Michael on the phone. To do it, I kept chatting with Samuel to keep track of when “the boys” were in California.

When Samuel finally tipped me off, I tried calling all the numbers for the house, one by one. When someone picked up, I’d ask for Michael, claiming to be a friend. After failing a few times, I started trying different voices and realized I could keep people on the phone longer when I used my “white voice.” I’d go up an octave to sound chipper and privileged. “Gosh, I’m grateful for this sunny day we’re enjoying in Encino. Hey, is Michael there? I can’t wait to see my guy.” The person answering would pass me on to a higher-up, who would then take the time to figure out exactly who I was and what I needed. If I was white, I had to be someone important. “What’s your name?” they’d ask before pulling in another person, who’d eventually turn me down saying, “Michael doesn’t know any Marys. Sorry.” They’d actually apologize like they were sad to let me down.

After all that, Michael never came to the phone. I was bummed but still persistent. Something had to work.

I figured he’d have to answer sometime and kept pushing, which is how I got cussed out by Joe Jackson.

“Where the fuck did you get this number?” he screamed.

“Michael gave it to me,” I said sweetly.

“Don’t you ever call here again.”

But I did, and he kept raging. “I’m going to put you in jail.”

“Just let me talk to Michael one time,” I pleaded. “Then I’ll never call you back.”

Slam. He hung up.

As I predicted, Joe changed the phone numbers, which, of course, didn’t faze me at all. I’d just make a few calls to the phone company and get the new ones from facilities. I felt sure I was close to catching Michael on the phone, even if I was driving his father crazy.

One day Joe picked up and said, “Tell me who the fuck you are!”

“I’m Michael’s friend. He told me to call.”

“That’s a lie! Michael doesn’t know this number. No one in our family knows it. This is a pay phone we had put on the grounds for construction workers,” he said and then he got very angry. “Who is giving you these numbers? I’m calling the police!”

I clicked right off.

Cuddling with Black Power on my bed, I admitted to myself that my scheme wasn't working this time. I became depressed and started moping until I came up with a plan B. I wasn't trying to get Michael on the telephone. That was small time. I needed the real thing, an in-person meeting that could lead to a real-life kiss.

Hoping to drum up support one summer morning, I drifted into the kitchen, where my parents were enjoying steaming cups of Maxwell House. It was where they commonly met to plan their day, which wasn't easy with multiple children who were always busy and into something. Babs, who was ten years older than me and Taryn, was still in high school and captain of the dance team, the Polarettes; on the yearbook staff and student council; and in Junior Achievement, Y-Teens, and a slew of clubs. My other big sister, Iris, a tall beauty with light skin and long, straight hair, was crowned Queen of North High. My brothers were sports stars: Ryan, the fastest in the state, was an acclaimed quarterback and running back, while Mason excelled at basketball and football. Taryn and I played volleyball, softball, basketball, badminton, and ran track in a park league. Needless to say, shuffling us around town to make all of our appointments was no joke. Those morning cups of Maxwell House in the kitchen were needed and earned. It was also the perfect time and place to get their attention.

I tried my mother first.

"Remember when you agreed that Michael and I would make a cute couple?" I probed.

"Michael?" she asked.

"Jackson. Michael Jackson."

"Sure, honey. Why are you bringing that up?"

"I think I'm ready to meet him," I said.

Having already endured the angst of four teenagers, my parents were sympathetic but distanced. "Well, maybe you will one day," my mother said, glancing at my dad for backup. Eternal sweethearts, they'd met while studying at Texas College, a historically Black, Christian, Methodist, Episcopal school in Tyler, Texas, in 1950. First-generation college students whose parents were one generation out of slavery, they fell madly in love and married young.

"Would it be OK with you if I met Michael Jackson?" I asked my dad. If my mother was the family's loving cheerleader, Dad was the ever-dedicated coach. Standing five foot eleven inches, Ira (Smitty) Smith Jr. was a former college basketball player who worked as a warehouse foreman at Ed Phillips and Sons, a family-owned high-spirits distilling company. He was an intelligent, socially conscious extrovert who never met a stranger and tried to help anyone in need.

"Of course you can meet Michael Jackson. Why not?" He agreed.

"I think I will go meet him," I said, hoping my soft declaration would sound like the only plausible conclusion to our exchange. All they had to do was cosign.

"OK, sure..." came their joint, distracted answer. It was exactly what I was looking for. Though they didn't know I was serious, they weren't the kind of people to go back on their word.

Dashing upstairs, I found Taryn in the bathroom applying way too much Maybelline eyeshadow.

"Get ready. We're going to California to see Michael Jackson," I announced like a game show host.

"What? Do Mom and Dad know?" Taryn turned to me with gobs of sea-blue eyeshadow over her eyelids.

"Yes, I told them I was going."

We invited our friend Shirley to accompany us to Los Angeles since she loved Marlon Jackson. When I called her, she said she doubted that her mom would let her go, but she couldn't miss an opportunity to meet Marlon and was game.

Pretending to be my mother, I called Dayton's department store, which had a travel department, and ordered three airline tickets to Los Angeles. I told them my daughter would come pick up the tickets and had full permission to use my credit card. "Sounds good. I'll see you in a bit, Mrs. Smith," the travel agent said.

I rode the bus downtown to Dayton's and went up to the fourth floor. I walked around for a bit to relax. I wasn't nervous. I just wanted to make sure I knew what I would say to the travel agent and that I didn't seem rushed or unconfident about the purchase.

"I'm here to pick up three tickets to Los Angeles," I said to the travel agent while handing over my mother's card. I made sure to make direct eye contact and smile, casually, not too big because then it would seem like I was hiding something.

The woman was petite with big gray hair and looked like she'd been working at Dayton's for twenty-five years.

"Her name is Mrs. Smith," I said, trying to distract the agent and keep her on task.

"Oh, yes," she finally responded, taking the credit card from me. "Your mother called not long ago. So good she has you to help her out."

"I try my best," I said.

After a few pecks at her keyboard, she handed over the tickets. As she slid the envelope into my hand, a high settled over my body. Any misgivings I felt about using my mother's card (I fully intended to pay her back) or flying all the way to Los Angeles to see someone who didn't even know I was alive dissipated to nothing.

On that adrenaline high, I rushed home, threw my cutest outfits into my travel bag, and called a cab. On the way to the airport, Taryn and I stopped at Shirley's house to pick her up. She was nervous about going. Her two younger sisters were there. They told her their mother would be upset if she went to Los Angeles and advised her to stay home. Worried we might miss our flight, I kept my response simple and to the point: "I'm going to Los Angeles to meet Michael Jackson. You can stay home and miss all the fun. It's up to you." Taryn and I started walking toward the door to get back into the cab. Seconds later, Shirley was heading out behind us.

Once we made it to the airport, Taryn, Shirley, and I rushed to the terminal to board our Northwest Airlines flight to Los Angeles. None of us had ever been on an airplane before, but we knew to get dressed up for the occasion. Taryn wore stylish denim bell-bottoms with a matching vest, and Shirley chose a striped, ankle-length maxi dress. I rocked a red miniskirt and a loose-fitting peasant blouse. I wanted to look mature for Michael.

"You guys ever hear about a plane crashing?" Shirley asked nervously as the plane started taking off. "I hope that doesn't happen to us."

"No. It's 1974. Planes are totally safe. They've even started using some computer technology in the cockpits. No need to worry," I said, trying to calm her with information I'd read in a magazine. It was only half true. Most planes didn't have computer technology. The article was just projecting how advanced avionics and digital flight-control systems could be used in the near future.

As the plane pushed through the clouds and started rocking due to turbulence, I wished it was

the future and a computer was piloting the vessel. I wasn't nervous at all, but the jerking movements made me feel like I was on a roller coaster, and I was sure my hairstyle was ruined. Plus, the air pressure had my ears popping, and it felt like my brain might explode.

Taryn anxiously clutched my left hand; Shirley clutched my right.

"Don't worry, guys. Everything will be just fine. In a few hours, we'll be poolside with the Jacksons," I said to them, but really, the vision was for me. I closed my eyes and imagined I'd made it to Encino, floated past Joe, and locked eyes with Michael, who was happy to see me and burst into song: "Got to be there... beeeee there in the morning..."

I was proud of the trip I'd orchestrated and confident everything would go off without a hitch. Before we left, I called Flo Jenkins, the editor of *Right On!*, to say I could get her an interview with Michael Jackson—all she had to do was meet us at the airport. "Oh my God, I'll be there," she promised. She must have assumed that I was a publicist who was dangling a rare opportunity.

Hearing that Flo would meet us at LAX was reassuring to Shirley and Taryn. Being a grown-up, she'd get us around the city and find us a place to stay—or so I told them. I gave myself an extra pat on the back for calling her. I deserved congratulations for pulling together such an excellent plan.

When I woke from my nap, the plane was circling, beginning its descent.

"We're almost there," I announced. "Soon, we'll meet our future boyfriends."

The three of us were giggling and dancing in our seats, unable to contain our excitement. As the plane touched down, we fell silent as if marshaling strength for the next incredible leg of our adventure. "Welcome to Los Angeles," the pilot announced.

We exited the plane single file with the other passengers and then clasped hands as we entered the jet bridge and began skipping like we were traversing the yellow-brick road leading to Oz. But then Taryn slowed her pace. I turned to see her eyes peering at something ahead.

"Why are *they* here?" She stopped walking altogether.

I looked at the end of our yellow-brick road and saw two police officers.

Nowhere to go but forward in the sea of people exiting the plane, we had to keep walking. When we reached the officers, they immediately pulled us to the side.

"Are you Tanya and Taryn Smith and Shirley Summers?" one of them asked.

I don't remember saying anything. In fact, I'm sure I didn't. Nevertheless, we were escorted down a long, winding hallway to a small holding room, where a cop explained that Shirley's sisters had squealed and told her mom that she was headed to California. Horrified, her mother called my mother, who was equally shocked. Hearing this, I glared at Shirley. If looks could kill, she would have been dead on the floor. I felt betrayed. Why had she told anyone about our plan? I learned a valuable lesson—be careful who you let in on the action. Some people just weren't built for it.

"Sir, I told my parents I was coming out here," I insisted to the cop who was interviewing us. "Let us go, and we can forget about all of this."

"I don't think so," he said, amused.

"You have the wrong people; you really must let us go." I pushed. "What's your badge number?" I asked, trying something I'd seen in a movie. "Can I speak to your captain?"

He didn't bother to answer. As he picked up the phone to call our parents, I wanted to argue, to prove him wrong. I knew in my heart that I'd vastly exaggerated a few careless words, but I couldn't bear to surrender my dream.

“What in God’s name were you thinking flying to California without even telling us?” Dad barked through the phone. He wasn’t one to raise his voice. Taryn was startled, but I kept cool.

“I did tell you. Remember? In the kitchen. You were having coffee,” I reminded him.

“Don’t play mind games with us, young lady,” Dad said. “You scared your mother and me half to death.”

“I’m not playing mind games. You said I could meet Michael Jackson.”

“That’s not what we meant and you know it, Tanya Marie Smith.” Mom jumped in. “Taryn, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’m sorry,” Taryn uttered. “It sounded like a good idea.”

“Whose idea was it?” Mom asked her.

“Both of us. We came up with it together.” Taryn looked at me. We were in this together. My sister wouldn’t rat me out.

Before hanging up, Dad told Taryn and me to wait until one of his two sisters who lived in Compton could come and pick us up.

“You wanted to be in California? Well, here’s your chance,” he said like being there would provide some kind of life lesson Taryn and I weren’t ready for. I wasn’t falling for that, though. Dad hadn’t taken us to meet our family on the West Coast—aunts Ada and Frances, uncle Louie, or cousins Cheryl, Lucy, and NaNa. But if staying with them meant I’d get to linger in California a little longer until I figured out how to get to Michael, I was up for it.

Shirley, who was sobbing, had to fly right back. She didn’t even glimpse Los Angeles outside the airport. Her mother had already bought the return ticket. As she headed to the gate, I thought, hopefully, she’d keep her mouth closed in the future.

Taryn and I waited to be escorted to Compton, which I was sure would be the cinematic slice of Los Angeles we’d seen on television—palm trees, sandy beaches, and celebrities galore. We were ready.

When we met Aunt Frances, she looked like my dad in a dress with a short, semicurl Afro. I wanted to laugh. Driving us back to her house in her Chevrolet Impala, Aunt Frances’s first words were, “What’s wrong with you twins? You scared Junior,” her nickname for my dad, “half to death running all the way to California like you ain’t got no home training. I won’t be having none of that silly business at my house. You can believe that.” Looks like Aunt Frances wasn’t to be toyed with. Taryn and I traded stares and looked out the windows.

I noticed the surroundings were changing outside the car. The whole neighborhood was covered in spray-painted graffiti. We also passed boarded-up shops and homes, trash-filled alleys, and random drunks begging for change on street corners. It was nothing like our upper-middle-class, mostly Jewish neighborhood.

“It looks dangerous around here,” Taryn whispered in my ear. I nodded in agreement.

Aunt Frances’s house was scrubbed to a shine—but it was tiny, with iron bars on the doors and windows.

“Now y’all girls listen here,” she started when we got settled in. “Don’t go outside alone. This ain’t Minneapolis. And don’t ever go out at night. And whatever you do, don’t wear the colors red or blue. We got these stupid gangs here that will kill you if they even suspect you might be repping the wrong set.”

“But I have a red skirt that I was going to wear to see Michael Jackson in Encino,” I said,

pointing to my red skirt, which was all wrinkled. “Can I wear my skirt in Encino?”

“Girl, you ain’t going to see no Michael Jackson in Encino. The only Jackson you’re going to see is Darryl Jackson up the street. He can sing and dance, though. He might even sing ‘Got to Be There’ if you give him a dollar. Dope makes people do crazy things,” Aunt Frances said, laughing and sounding happy to break my heart. “You in Compton now. Minneapolis is a whole world away from here.”

I came up with a plan to rope my cousins Cheryl, Lucy, and NaNa into my pilgrimage to Michael, promising gifts, even cash, if they could get me to Encino.

“The Valley? We don’t go to the Valley. Ain’t nothing there but white people,” Cheryl, the oldest, said bluntly.

“They’ll lock you up for anything,” Lucy added. “They don’t want Black people up there.”

NaNa nodded along.

“But the Jacksons live there,” Taryn pointed out, backing me up.

“They rich Black people,” Cheryl said. “White people up there accept rich Black people. But poor Black people? They don’t like us.”

I knew they weren’t lying. I’d witnessed some of what they were talking about—the division between the haves and have-nots. It got me thinking about money and how it impacted people’s lives for better or worse. My father worked two jobs to keep us in a middle-, upper-class neighborhood. He was a warehouse foreman by day and a bouncer at night, securing elite white socialites at private parties and clubs. He’d rub elbows with corporate lawyers, judges, financiers, and politicians.

From what I saw in Compton, it was clear money was a powerful thing that determined so much about a person’s life: where they lived and how they lived and what they could do about it. It seemed California was a place of extreme wealth and opportunity, but something was stopping it from flowing to the Black community in Compton.

As the days moved forward, I was having a good time bonding with my relatives. My cousins were incredible singers, and as we were mostly locked up in the house, we had elaborate talent shows where they sang Jackson 5 hits like professional performers. They had moves and could groove. Taryn and I had to keep up.

It was cathartic connecting with my family, people who looked like Taryn and me and had the same blood pumping through their veins. And in time, even Aunt Frances came around and admitted that she enjoyed our company.

“Junior sure made some beautiful baby girls,” she said, serving Taryn and me pork chops she had fried for us on our last night.

I didn’t give up on meeting Michael Jackson. Of course, I didn’t admit that to my mom and dad after Taryn and I arrived home in disgrace. My parents’ main attitude was relief, tinged with disappointment. While I was truly sorry for hurting them, my determination to meet Michael continued.

It took me a full year to finagle a return to California. I did it by convincing my parents that I wanted to form a singing group with Cheryl, Lucy, and NaNa. My parents were reluctant, but soon Aunt Frances also requested that Taryn and I return to Cali, saying, “Send them twins back out. I miss them.”

Taryn decided she didn’t want to go. I wasn’t surprised. As we approached our sweet sixteen,