

BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL

*Brothers and
Sisters*



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August 1995

BROTHERS AND SISTERS



ALSO BY BEBE MOORE CAMPBELL

Your Blues Ain't Like Mine

Sweet Summer: Growing Up With and Without My Dad

Successful Women, Angry Men: Backlash in the Two-Career Marriage

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SISTERS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

New York

G. P. Putnam's Sons
Publishers Since 1838
200 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10016

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Published simultaneously in Canada

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Campbell, Bebe Moore, date.
Brothers and sisters / Bebe Moore Campbell.
p. cm.

ISBN 0-399-13929-X (alk. paper)

1. Afro-Americans—California—Los Angeles—Fiction. 2. Los
Angeles (Calif.)—Fiction. I. Title.
PS3553.A4395B76 1994 94-14196 CIP
813'.54—dc20

Printed in the United States of America
13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

This book is printed on acid-free paper.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Lots of people helped me. I appreciate my husband, Ellis, for rooting for me while I was down in the trenches and for helpful criticism. Thanks to my mother, Doris C. Moore, for her insightful first read. Thank you, Delia Fance, for all your help. And thank you to my agent, Lynn Nesbit, and my editor, Stacy Creamer, for hard work and support.

*To the healing of Los Angeles
and all of God's wounded children*

BROTHERS AND SISTERS

The flames of April came out of season.

There is a time for burning in Los Angeles, months when devastation is expected and planned for, and blazes attack with the power and cruelty of old enemies. August. September. These are the city's appointed months of conflagration. But the fires of April were not weather. They chose their own time, creating destruction that spared no one. Long after the flames were quelled, the city was still smoldering, and even those whose lives were cooled by ocean breezes felt the heat.

CHAPTER 1

When Esther Jackson looked up from the stack of slick new hundred-dollar bills she was counting inside the tellers' cage of the downtown branch of Angel City National Bank and glanced out the plate-glass window, the black woman inhaled sharply. "You're out of balance," she said woodenly to Hector Bonilla. Her English was clipped, as precise and well enunciated as that of any television news anchor.

The quiet teller standing next to the thirty-four-year-old regional operations manager watched her with eyes that slowly widened as he saw her begin to squeeze the bills in the fist her hand had become. Esther was looking beyond the short brown man, across the downtown street. Three of the Los Angeles Police Department's finest, all white, stood in front of two black boys, who were sitting on the sidewalk. Esther felt a quickening in her chest as she watched the scene. *Better not touch them!* The words roared through her body. The diction in her head was as slurred and textured as the South Side Chicago neighborhood she'd grown up in.

Hector saw her lips become a thin, dangerous line.

Cops just stopped them for nothing, she fumed. But of course there was a reason. The usual reason. *Better not touch them!* She wanted to shout the words across the street, even though the youths in question looked like gangbangers. She could see their baggy pants and earrings, their hardened faces and snarls. But so what? If they were white and dressed like that, the cops wouldn't have bothered them. They have a right to look angry, the way the police hassle them every damn minute, she thought. If this weren't broad daylight, damn cops would probably drag those boys off somewhere and beat the hell out of them. Beat them like they did Rodney.

Esther felt her chest tighten as her mind replayed the infamous video and she envisioned the circle of white men in uniform, their batons swinging viciously against the black man cowering on the

ground at their feet. She let the money fall on the counter as her hands began to shake above the pile of bills. For a moment, she wanted to do what she'd felt like doing only five months earlier. When she heard the not guilty verdict in April and saw those four grinning white faces on her television screen, she'd wanted to smash them and anyone who looked like them. And now here it was September, and she still felt so overcome with rage that she couldn't breathe.

White folks.

"Whatsa matter, Esther?" One glance across the street and Hector knew precisely what was bothering Esther, but it was after five o'clock. He wanted to go home.

Esther looked at him without appearing to understand what he was saying.

Hector brushed his thin black mustache with his index finger, a distracted, nervous gesture. He moved closer to his boss. "You look very angry." His Salvadoran accent made his words soft and musical.

Esther closed her eyes, trying to calm herself by forcing the air in and out of her lungs. When she looked through the window again, the policemen were gone and the black boys were swaggering down the street, their hard lopsided gait made up of equal parts youthful bravado and simmering rage. The setting sun's rays glinting off the large picture windows of the neighboring skyscrapers flashed and flickered like the conflagration that had raged in parts of the city five months earlier. But this time the flames were inside Esther's head, and the truth was, she didn't know how to extinguish them.

"I'm okay," she said. She shook her head quickly, as if the anger she felt was just so much soot caught up in her hair, then she smiled quickly at Hector. "Let's tally this again and see if we can get you in balance." Work always soothed Esther. Her efficient fingers flipped through the bills. As she counted rapidly and accurately, she felt herself calming down. "We'll find it," she said, her head bent over the money as Hector hovered above her. Tellers were always out of balance. There was often missing money to be accounted for. For Esther, discovering the error was as exhilarating as working a challenging crossword puzzle. The reward was in the completion.

But determined as she was to focus only on the money, her anger seemed to seep inside her fingers, knotting them like ropes. In frustration, she yanked each bill from the pile and slammed it down on the counter: *nine hundred, ten hundred, eleven hundred . . .*

"Are you still here?"

Hector and Esther looked up simultaneously at Mallory Post. She smiled at them both, but the longer she looked at Esther, the fainter her smile became, until at last it disappeared. Esther's frown was like a flashing yellow light. Seeing the anger in Esther's eyes, the thirty-six-year-old white woman hesitated, then, almost involuntarily, took two steps backward. But I haven't done anything, she thought.

Esther could see the warmth in Mallory's eyes, could feel the sticky Valley Girl sweetness radiating from her. She looked in her face and saw an easy childhood: all smiles and lemonade and green lights. Her mind drifted; she thought of her own Chicago youth and the daily drive to the very white North Side, to a place where ivy clung to bricks and old traditions died hard deaths. "You children are going to have opportunities your father and I never had," her mother had promised her and her brother.

Facing Mallory, she thought of the girls at the private school, the ones who didn't give her the silent treatment or steal her homework that first hard year. She remembered the ones who were always full of friendly curiosity and wide smiles like Mallory's. Every time she opened her mouth to speak, a look of amazement crossed their faces. In the schoolyard one day, a girl had asked her, "Can you sing like Diana Ross?"

She had trembled in front of that pale child, not knowing what to say. Only when Esther saw her walk away did the venomous retorts begin to gather in her mind. They gathered for years. Now, as she faced Mallory, the hateful accumulation was overflowing inside her.

Blazing dark-brown eyes glared angrily into pale-gray ones. Esther didn't know why, but just looking at Mallory intensified her anger. The women's contrasting moods only underscored their physical differences. Esther was tall, with heavy breasts, slim hips, a behind that jutted out into a rounded curve, and long, muscular legs. Tina Turner legs. She was a voluptuous Beauty of the Week, more suited for a red rhinestone string bikini in the centerfold of *Jet* than for a bank. Standing next to Mallory, the dark-skinned woman seemed strong, and even her clothes—the carefully blended ensemble of Anne Klein II skirt, Ellen Tracy jacket, and Jones New York silk blouse, the plain black Ferragamo pumps with leather soft as a baby's bottom—made her look coordinated and powerful.

Esther was a woman whose beauty hinged on her state of mind: the happier she felt, the prettier she became. Under certain circumstances, her face took on a look of incandescent radiance, but at that moment,