

A Failure to Communicate

by Toni McGee Causey, ...

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Only the South could've produced Bobbie Faye Sumrall. Maybe only Louisiana. The distinction's too fine for me because I'm not from the South, but I can tell you that Bobbie Faye could not have been born on the laconic plains of the Midwest, or the cold streets of Boston, or the freeways of the San Fernando Valley. She is a heat-seeking missile, a Technicolor heroine rising out of the humidity with a vocabulary as explosive and a past as checkered and abilities as stunning as any you'd find in Marvel Comics. The same can be said for her creator, the extravagantly talented Toni McGee Causey. In *A Failure to Communicate*, a motley trio of bad boys picks the wrong Feng Shui Emporium to hold up and discovers that Bobbie Faye is the last woman on the planet you want on the other end of a gun.

—Harley Jane Kozak, author of *Dating Dead Men*

One hour and forty-five minutes ago...

If she got out of this one alive, he was just going to fucking kill her. It would be much easier that way. She was his ex, she was a raving fucking loon, and here she was, holed up inside Ce Ce's where she worked (an outfitter store, with the dumbass name of Ce Ce's Cajun Outfitters and Feng Shui Emporium, though he was surprised Ce Ce didn't include the whole voodoo aspect of her business—probably couldn't cram that on the small wooden sign).

Bobbie Faye Sumrall, who was supposed to have been his wife by now, was a hostage. God help them all. And he was the fucking detective who had to somehow get her to come out and quit terrorizing the hostage takers so they could end this standoff.

This was not going to go well.

He knew it, he could feel it in his bones. He hoped like hell she didn't blow something up. Again. Especially not while she was in there.

„Detective Moreau?“ a rookie cop asked.

„Cam.“

„Uh, Cam, the newspeople are asking—“

„Quit talking to them. Do not speak to them again. And move the perimeter back five more feet. If they ask you another question, move it back another five. Got it?“

„Yessir.“ The rookie cop ran off.

Media helicopters jockeyed above them. The news was all over this—because of course, she was the Contraband Days Queen. Unofficial, but you'd swear she was fucking royalty, the way their little industrial city of Lake Charles, Louisiana, treated her. If one freaking hair on her head was injured when all of this was done? He would have death threats.

Her future ex-fiancé (if Cam had anything to do with it) approached, stripping away the firefighter gear he'd borrowed: Trevor Cormier, FBI, former government-sanctioned mercenary and clearly as insane as she was. Trevor was older than Cam's thirty years by about six, though maybe more. Cam wasn't sure. He had Trevor on height, but then, he usually had most people, at six four. Trevor was a measly six foot.

„She's not coming out,“ Trevor said, pissed off, which satisfied the hell out of Cam. Not that she didn't come out, but that she didn't listen to Trevor any more than she'd listened to him.

„She's still armed?“

„Yes.“

Fifteen minutes ago...

„Get down get down get down!“ she shouted, sliding along the aisle like she was heading into home plate, rolling onto her side as she slid, sweeping the aim of her compact Glock across the counter, hoping like hell the customers would listen to

her before they got themselves killed. The fat one called Avery—twenty-three, he'd told her—blubbered into a cell phone, begging the cops to just take him away, anything to get him away from her.

He wasn't the problem.

The other two were. Kip, blond mop top, raggedy jeans drooping off his skinny hips, and Van, the so-called brains behind this operation.

Kip had lost his mind, the pressures of being made to take hostages when all he really wanted was Romy. Kip, who screamed obscenities even Bobbie Faye hadn't used or heard, and that was a new record. He waved around a Sig he'd gotten from the broken display case, loaded, she knew, by the rounds he'd found there, intent on shooting Mr. Maynard, the balding, bandy-legged old man standing between him and Bobbie Faye. Mr. Maynard's arthritis meant he moved so slowly, Bobbie Faye didn't know if he could hit the floor fast enough to avoid being shot. Romy stood where she'd left her, frozen, paralyzed by fear and, if the flat, resigned look in Kip's eyes was anything to judge by, if he made it past Mr. Maynard and her, Romy was dead.

Which meant she had to take the shot.

The real problem was Van. Older, scarier. And nowhere to be seen.

Kip made a decision, tears streaming down his face, shouting at Mr. Maynard that he would kill him, too. He aimed.

She aimed better.

Kip saw her Glock at that last second, his eyes going wide, and he turned into the shot as she chanted, „Get down!“ and Mr. Maynard slowly dropped to his right, crashing one knee into the floor.

And then Van stepped up behind her, put a gun to her head, and laughed.

Five and a half hours ago...

Ce Ce waddled around to the gun counter, her long chocolate braids swinging against her honey skin.

„I'm taking this.“ She nodded toward the bank bag. „You got the place?“

„Sure, Ceece. It's a Monday; it's usually pretty slow.“

„Yeah, but you're still recuperating from that last thing. You're looking kinda pale.“

„I'm fine, really. Go on.“

„I've gotta run a couple of errands. I'll bring you back some lunch.“

„Rosie's?“

„You betcha, hon.“

Five hours ago...

„Where did all these people come from?“ Allison, one of the identical nineteen-year-old twins working the front counter, asked. „We don't usually have this many on a Monday.“

Bobbie Faye shrugged, wishing Allison hadn't streaked her jet-black hair. Until she had, Bobbie Faye had been the only one who could tell her and her sister, Alicia, apart, and they'd had fun messing with some of the more pain-in-the-ass customers. Drove Ce Ce right up the wall, though, so Allison had obliged.

„I think Ceece's been talking up those crystals,“ she answered. „I've had at least six people ask me for the *sale* rack because they're too embarrassed to admit what they really want.“

„Think she's been telling 'em they're great for sex again? She's still got at least two dozen crates in the back to move,“ Alicia said, joining them.

„She didn't do so good using the whole *peace and harmony* thing,“ Allison added.

„Kinda hard to sell that idea while you have a gun and knife counter, too,“ Bobbie Faye said.

„Yeah.“ Alicia grinned at her. „Especially when the woman behind the counter has blown up half the state.“

„Only parts of it, smartass. Look, you have a customer.“

„Oh, that's Romy,“ Allison said. „Girl we graduated with. You need anything back here?“

„Nope, got it, go visit.“

Bobbie Faye leaned on the gun counter, her particular special area of the store. She knew the weapons and taught firearm safety and marksmanship at the firing range Ce Ce'd had constructed out back behind the store. Well, old ramshackle Acadian-style-house-turned-store; with so many add-ons that made no sense, it looked like an architect had hiccupped and scrambled multiple plans into one old place. She watched as the twins wove through the precariously stacked merchandise, everything from cammo to scented candles to board games to deer scent, and they greeted their friend, a slip of a girl who had the saddest eyes Bobbie Faye had seen in a long time.

„Is this a good gun?“ a blond mop-topped boy asked her. Technically, a young man. She was twenty-nine and probably only four or five years older than this kid, but he looked so lost in his baggy clothes, she had to quash the need to see how on earth he had them held up on his body. He tapped on the glass countertop, pointing to a double-action Sig Sauer on the top shelf.

„Sure,“ she said, and she began explaining the handgun to him.

Two hours and fifteen minutes ago...

Trevor stood there with a gun to his head, suited up in firefighting gear, dirt and sweat smeared on his face as if he'd had a hard time with the burning car.

„Look man,“ he said to Van, who was shouting obscenities and pressing the .357 into Trevor's skull, „I just came in to see if the place was okay. I didn't know. Really.“

„You're lying!“ Van said. „You're a cop! You ain't fucking takin' me to jail, man.“

Bobbie Faye's entire gut knotted, and Adrenaline had not only woken up every single cell (not that they really needed further alerting, they were jangling so loudly, she was surprised she hadn't deafened everyone in a three-mile radius),

but Fucking Pissed Off knocked at the door, because if anything happened to Trevor...

„He’s just a fireman, Van,“ she said, as calmly as she could. „Cut the poor guy a break. If he was a cop, he’d have come in here armed or something. Let him go.“

„No, keep me,“ Trevor insisted. „Let the women go.“

„Nah, man, we gotta keep us some good hostages. I know how this works.“

„They’re going to get on your nerves,“ he said. „I have a crazy fiancée and, man, her head would be spinning about now.“

Bobbie Faye gave him a slit-eyed glare. „Probably because she’d rather you not be stupid and argue with the man with the gun at your head. I’m sure she’d prefer you to come home tonight and do that whole *happily forever after* thing, so don’t be an idiot.“

„I’m keeping the girl,“ Van said, pointing to Romy. „That bitch is the reason why I’m here.“

„Then give me the Contraband Days Queen,“ Trevor said. „Cuz man, they’re gonna go ballistic on you, if you hurt her.“

„Sure, take her. She’s driving me batshit anyway, always arguing.“

„No!“ Kip pounded his skinny fist on the counter. „She’s our ticket out.“

„Please take her,“ Avery whined. „Please? She scares the crap outta me.“ Avery had retreated to the farthest point in the room.

„She tends to have that effect on some people,“ Trevor agreed, and she rolled her eyes.

„I’m not going.“ Bobbie Faye could hear Romy sigh. „You can take the other women, but if Romy has to stay, I’m staying.“

„You’re only going to get yourself hurt.“ Trevor’s expression begged her to reconsider. „And I think you have a fiancée, too, right?“

„Holy fuck,“ Van said, „you mean there’s some moron out there who’s willing to listen to you argue with him for the rest of your fucking life?“

„Yep,“ Trevor said. „I heard he’s got it bad, too.“

„Geezus, point me at him and let me put a bullet in his brain and put him out of his misery.“

Three and a half hours ago...

Bobbie Faye saw the car, just like Romy had described it. A classic ‘69 Mustang fastback, and the car gods were soooo going to strike her dead for what she was about to do.

She didn’t have time to hesitate; she maybe had two minutes before they realized she was missing, had slipped out a door off the weird little bathroom she’d gotten permission to use. The car was out of the line of sight of the front windows, parked over on the side street, a potholed one-way affair that most people avoided. She slim-jimmed the lock, one of her talents learned when she had dated a couple of criminals. She wasn’t entirely sure if that was past tense or not, because Trevor skirted that fine line. From the little she really knew of him.

The door lock popped and she eased it open, placing the candle inside the Styrofoam cup she’d brought with her. She poured the Coleman fuel on the brand-

new carpeted floor, laid the fire wick against the seat, poured a little more fuel from it to where the candle sat inside the cup, now with an inch of fuel inside.

It was hard to light the small votive candle without lighting the fuel around it, but she had to—she needed the minutes. She carefully closed the door—it wouldn't really matter later if it had been open or closed, but she didn't want a random breeze blowing out the candle or, worse, setting the fuel on fire too soon.

There was a moment when she was finished that she knew she could run for it. Head to the right, to the busier street, go inside somewhere safe, make the phone calls that needed to be made.

But they were listening, and if she made that phone call, people might die.

She could walk away. Walk to freedom. Trevor would show up, Cam would show up, other people would take care of it, and she could just walk away, perfectly safe. Self-preservation shouted to go for it, Bravery whined in the corner that really, it had been on overtime for the last few months and fuck it, it was tired, and Common Sense begged her to listen, for once.

She turned back toward Ce Ce's.

Four hours ago...

„What do you mean, it's not here?“ the young guy the others had called Van asked.

„Pretty simple,“ she said. „It's. Not. Here. Means it's somewhere else.“

„You're supposed to have a lot of cash from the weekend!“ he shouted, pointing his .357 in her face.

„Yeah,“ the fat kid they'd called Avery piped up from behind Ce Ce's computer, „a lot of cash. Right?“ He turned to the mop-top blond. „You did the research, you said there was a lot of cash.“

„There is. There's always a lot after the hunters and fishermen come through here on the weekend.“

„Which is why,“ she tried to explain patiently, refraining from pantomiming and pissing Van off even more, „Ce Ce brings it to the bank on Monday mornings. She left a little while ago. It's probably already in the bank by now.“

„No!“ Van said. „You get her back here!“

„Uh, sure thing, I'll just get right on that.“

„I'm fucking serious, dude.“

„Well, gee, dude, I'll call her up and say, 'Hey, Ceece, we've got a couple of genius thieves over here whose timing kinda sucks. Would you mind terribly bringing the money back so they can have another try?‘“

Van cocked the Smith & Wesson, shoving it against her forehead as Romy and the twins screamed.

Eight hours ago...

She woke before the alarm, per usual, and she listened to his breathing, his arm curved protectively around her waist. She knew the change in her breathing alone

would wake him; Trevor was—almost impossible to believe—a lighter sleeper than she was. He tapped off the alarm before it had a chance to jangle loud talk-radio hosts who were trying too hard to be cheery in the morning. Then he did what he'd been doing every single day for the last three months: he brushed a kiss across the scars, three angry craters just above her hip, almost healed completely.

„I'm going to marry you,“ he said, for the hundredth or so time. She'd lost track.

„You're going to be late for work,“ she teased, still not having given him an answer. She wasn't trying to be coy, wasn't trying to torment him. She just didn't have an answer to give. „Besides, you have enough grief in your life.“

„One of these days,“ he said, „you're going to look in the mirror and see these and realize you stood in front of bullets for me. And you don't just do that for anyone, Sundance.“

But she had, she'd started to tell him. It was, actually, a lot easier than promising a heart. She'd take the bullets any day.

„One day,“ he whispered, teasing her body wide awake, the humming sensation in her skin almost loud enough to hear, „you're going to realize you want me as much as I want you.“

„Cocky bastard,“ she said, and he grinned.

Twenty minutes ago...

Van paced, his greasy hair having fallen out of its hair band, demented wings now flapping around his face.

„I'm gonna fucking kill her, man,“ he shouted at Kip, but pointed the .357 at Romy. Well, at Bobbie Faye, because she stood in front of Romy, and had made Romy stand behind a stack of metal deer stands; they weren't solid, but they might deflect a round or two. „You and your stupid ex-fucking-girlfriend: We were coming in here for money. We were gonna be set! The police are dragging around, they're waiting us out! They're not gonna give us another car or the money. I'm gonna fucking kill her.“

„You have me,“ Bobbie Faye said, „and they'll give us a car and we're going to leave and I'll take you to a friend of mine. He's a gunrunner, and he'll get you out of the state. You can let all of these people go.“

„I'm not going to no fucking gunrunner friend of yours!“ Van shouted, working up to a froth. „You don't think I know he'll kill us! We need money. Someone's gotta pay a ransom for you.“

„Sure thing,“ she said. „I'm sure the governor will pay you to get me out of the state. He's been kinda wanting me gone for a while now.“

Four and a half hours ago...

Bobbie Faye hadn't liked the look of the guy loitering just inside the front door, with his sneer and dark hair slicked back into a ponytail and unlaced army boots paired with tight jeans that showed off his entire package, as if he was the only man on the planet who had one. Everything she knew about reading body

language said *bad intentions* and she had the cell phone to her ear to call Cam. He always chewed her out for not calling him to help, and this time, she was going to do it.

She hesitated, mid-dial. She didn't know what she felt for Cam, didn't quite know what the hell to do about it, either. Best friends, almost enemies, then lovers, then definitely enemies, then a weird truce when she'd realized just what had happened between them, what he'd intended. That he'd wanted to marry her. That he'd been so stupid, he'd screwed everything up. Loyalty split down the line between him and Trevor and she couldn't think about it; it made everything hurt all over again.

It was the hesitation that cost her.

The guy loitering at the door drew a gun. She stood there, knowing her Glock was a mere two inches away, but he was watching her, shouting. He turned the lock in the door while the blond mop top ran to lock the back.

„Everybody down on the floor. And get your cell phones out, now!“ the guy at the door shouted. „If I find one on you, I'm shooting you, you got that?“

Mr. Maynard leaned a little toward her and whispered, „I can tackle 'im if you wanna shoot the other ones.“ Mr. Maynard was at least eighty-five and stiff as a brick from arthritis.

„Not just yet, Mr. Maynard.“

„You let me know when.“

She nodded as the fat kid—someone called him Avery—hacked into Ce Ce's computer.

„There,“ Avery said, „we're tied into the 911 computer dispatch. Anyone calls the cops, we'll know first.“

„Anyone here stupid enough to call anyone, like on some other phone somewhere, I'll start killing some of you.“

„He's done it before,“ Avery said to the crowd, and from the about-to-piss-himself expression he had, Bobbie Faye was pretty sure he was telling the truth.

Kip ran back in, sauntering past her and taking her cell phone out of her hands, then proceeded to scoop up the other phones and pat down every customer in the store.

„Everybody against the wall,“ the guy at the front door instructed.

„Everybody except Romy,“ Kip said, swaggering over to where Romy huddled with the twins. „She's mine.“

Two hours and forty-five minutes ago...

„Definitely arson,“ the fire chief said. „Unofficially, of course,“ he told Cam, who'd just arrived, „but they didn't bother to hide it. But you gotta see this.“

Cam followed the man over to the smoldering car, and, nearby, there was an arrow burned into the ground. Pointing at Ce Ce's.

Which, come to think of it, was dark, with not a soul moving around.

„Did y'all evacuate the store?“ he asked and the chief looked over there, scratching his head.

„No, as a matter of fact, it was dark when we got here. We had the fire contained, and there’s a sign on the door—*Closed for Lunch*.“

„Ce Ce doesn’t close for lunch.“

Cam looked at that arrow, then realized at the bottom, there were initials: „BE“—Bobbie Faye.

Oh, holy shit, this was bad. If she couldn’t call, if she’d had to do this?

Trevor appeared, just like that. Cam would have sworn under his breath that the man had Bobbie Faye tagged with some sort of electronic device, but she’d have killed Trevor if he even thought about it. Maybe the man had a finely honed sense of impending doom. The kind he’d developed when he’d dated her.

„I want you to keep up the fire fighting,“ Trevor said to the chief, an eerie calm to his voice. „Keep everything looking normal. I need to get into some fire gear—do you have an extra jacket or something?“

„I’m sure I can scrounge something up.“

„You’re not going in there until we know what the hell is up,“ Cam told him.

„Wanna bet?“

Twelve minutes ago...

„I’m not going with her,“ Avery whined. „She blows things up. I don’t want to be blown up.“

„You’re going with me,“ Bobbie Faye said to him like she would a third-grader, „because if you don’t, Avery, I will make sure the nice cops outside shoot your ass.“

Avery started crying and Van kept pacing.

„And we’re taking that fucking bitch, too,“ he said about Romy.

Bobbie Faye heard Romy gasp.

„No, Van, you’re not. You try to take Romy, I’ll kill you.“

„You don’t fucking have a gun anymore!“ he shouted, stomping over to her. „Miz Fucking Big Bad, whatcha gonna do? Talk me to death?“

„No,“ she smiled sweetly. „I’m going to do this,“ and she moved, glad he’d finally gotten close enough.

Ten minutes ago...

SWAT and Cam and Trevor swarmed the place. A girl screamed incoherently on the other side of the room and two officers moved in her direction to calm her down. Two men down, a scrawny one over by the counter, bleeding, but alive, from what Cam could see, and a second, bigger guy, writhing and screaming in pain, holding his crotch. Bobbie Faye on the floor, sitting against a display case, looking completely exhausted. He wanted to go to her. Jesus, he wanted to go to her, but when she looked up at the two of them approaching, she focused on Trevor, who knelt by her side, checking her out, making sure she wasn’t hurt.

It was his own fucking fault, he reminded himself. It wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot. Not even if she thought it was, and he had a plan. Probably a stupid one, but he had a plan.

„Cam?“ one of the officers called him over to another young man, bawling his eyes out.

„Please arrest me,“ he said. „And take me where she can't get to me.“ He shuddered uncontrollably, barely able to bring himself to look in Bobbie Faye's direction.

„She's not that bad.“

Avery gaped at him. „Did you see where she put that fish hook?“

Cam flinched, glancing back at the man writhing, the paramedics having a rough time getting him to lie still on the gurney. „Well, if it's any consolation, I don't think she's real concerned about you right now.“

„I don't want to take any chances.“

Three hours and ten minutes ago...

„You did what?“ Van yelled, smacking Kip across the face with the gun.

„What in the hell is wrong with you?“

The entire storeful of customers inhaled and froze there as Kip pulled out the Sig he'd gotten out of the display case; no one noticed Bobbie Faye had slipped back in.

„Don't fuckin' mock me, man, you just don't know how bad it is.“ Kip practically vibrated in place with fury.

Romy hid as much as she could behind the twins.

„We said we were getting our big break,“ Van seethed. „Big score. Lots of money. I was gonna start out somewhere new. We didn't come here for no stupid fucking love potion that some ditzy stupid voodoo priestess sells for ten bucks.“

„It's not stupid,“ Kip said, „and it's real expensive. I couldn't afford it.“

„So you what? You set us up, man? You get us to break in here when you know the voodoo woman ain't even gonna be in here? Did you even think about the fact that she was taking the money to the bank this morning? Huh? I should fucking kill you right here!“

„She's powerful, and I didn't want her to do something weird to me, like turn me into some sort of warty frog or something. She can do that shit. But I looked back there and none of her stuff is labeled. I don't know which one is the love potion.“

„You're out of your fucking mind,“ Van said, tapping the .357 against Kip's chest for emphasis.

„I just want Romy back,“ Kip yelled, tears flowing down his scrawny, dirty face, and Romy hid even more behind the twins. „She broke up with me and she belongs to me. She's mine, and I'm gonna keep her.“

„Love isn't something you can buy, you fucking idiot,“ Van shouted. He waved the pistol and everyone flinched, ducking. „You think some lame potion is gonna make her love you? Are you sick? You think it's gonna make her love you enough to stand in front of this gun for you? Huh? C'mere,“ he shouted at Romy, and several of the customers stood in front of her, and Bobbie Faye in front of them.

„See,“ he said to Kip, „total fucking strangers standing in front of a gun for somebody they don't even know, and they don't love her. And she don't love you enough to come out from behind there and stand in front of this for you,“ he said, tapping the end of the gun barrel. „You gonna get shot for her stupid ass? You gonna get killed for that shit?“

„Yeah,“ Kip said, with a little too much bravado. „I'd take one for her.“

Van kicked over a tall rack, smashing it, and the sinkers and fishing tackle and artificial baits scattered. „That ain't nothin', man. Hell, that ain't even hard.“ Spittle formed in the corners of his mouth and he paced, his movements jerking with each syllable as if the muscles were determined to independently express the pain. „People out there, they'll use you for the stuff they can get, like flowers or jewelry or stupid curtains with big pink teapots on 'em that don't go with any of your shit, and then one day, there ain't nothing else big you got, you can't do nothing big enough and then, bam, they're gone and you got to stare at them fuckin' curtains. Goddamned fucking teapots!“ He raked an entire shelf of kitchen supplies onto the floor, his face red, tears staining his cheeks. Every customer shrank as far away as they could without moving, without attracting his attention.

„That real kind of love,“ he ranted, kicking the utensils out of his way, „that going home every day to the same person, wantin' them to come home to you for the rest of your fucking life? You can't buy that, man, not with your stupid fucking love potion. It ain't about the big things, it's about what somebody does, day in and day out, whether or not they stick. And she ain't gonna stick, man, not even with some fucking potion.“

„I needed that money,“ he shouted, wanting to aim at Romy and having to settle for aiming at Bobbie Faye. „I needed to start over, to get away from them fucking teapots!“

Bobbie Faye stared at Van, so into his rant that his face had turned red, his hair flapping with each word as he rocked his body hard, and it amazed her how even crazy people could have a moment of brilliant clarity. Why was it always the psychos who understood love best? The universe had a real perverse sense of humor sometimes.

The sudden, concussive whoomsh of the Mustang exploding outside rattled the windows, set off car alarms all across the neighborhood and Bobbie Faye knew that it would take exactly two minutes, forty-three seconds for the fire department to arrive (because, unfortunately, she had in-depth experience at this), and it would take longer than that for Van and Kip and Avery to wrap their minds around the fact that their getaway car just left.

Five minutes ago...

Trevor checked her over, making sure she wasn't hiding any wounds, and then he rechecked her.

„Quit,“ she said. „I'm fine.“ She was tired, but okay. „Let's go home.“ She opened her eyes to see him grinning, dead sexy, and she felt the humming in her skin again. „What?“

„You answered me, finally.“

„I’ve been answering you, you idiot.“

„I didn’t think you realized you were.“

„So much for you being the brilliant FBI man, huh?“ He didn’t need to know she’d finally figured out that she’d been answering him every time she thought of him as home.

„Am I going to have to make sure you’re taken hostage every time I want you to make a major decision?“ he asked as he stood and helped her up.

„Don’t push your luck, Butch,“ she said, grinning for the first time that day. „I still know where the spare fish hooks are.“

