

# *A Country Girl Can Survive*

By James W. Fried

“Margaret French?” I asked her. “Are you alone in that house trailer?”

She smirked, holding the glass door ajar with her foot. “It’s called a manufactured home. Only a moron would still call it a house trailer.”

I backed down the porch steps onto the gravel path, then looked up at her leaning against the door jamb. Hooking a thumb inside the belt of my jeans, I pushed the front brim of my palm-leaf cowboy hat up so I could get a better view. She was one hell of a specimen: wide green eyes, tanned skin, silky-smooth face. She had stuffed her firm body inside a t-shirt and skin-tight shorts. Her damp blonde hair lapped over her shoulders and told me that she’d just stepped out of the shower. What was she—twenty, twenty-one? Half my age.

“Didn’t mean to offend you,” I said, returning to my house trailer comment.

She asked if I had a name.

I scraped the toe of my boot through loose gravel. “Keshawn Jackson.” The boiling sun stung my skin. A line of sweat ran down my throat and under my open-collared shirt. Despite the heat, I wore a blue jacket to hide my sidearm.

She giggled. “Keshawn. You black dudes have all the good names.”

I ignored it. “Tell me, does Dobie ever come over here to your...manufactured home?”

The corners of her mouth eased up. “Ain’t none of your business now, is it?” She stepped out onto the porch and put a hand up to block the sun, buying time while she decided how to play it.

“It’s Dobie I’m looking for,” I said. “He wouldn’t happen to be inside, would he?”

She wrinkled her nose, took a step forward, and placed her hands inside her back pockets, thrusting her chest out. “Dobie who?”

The inside of my arm nudged the holster, and I wondered if I should show her the badge. Probably not...it might provoke her, make her say she wanted an attorney or something stupid like that.

“Dobie Freeman.” I put my hand on the iron railing beside the porch.

She was checking me out. Fifteen years as a Fulton County Deputy Sheriff had taught me how to read people, and I knew she was debating whether she should continue the conversation or end it now and retreat inside. But she didn’t turn away and that was a good sign. Instead, she stepped down from the porch and came up close enough that I got a whiff of lavender shampoo. I put her at five-eight, which meant I could stare down at the dark brown roots against her scalp.

She cocked her head and said, “What’s your interest in Dobie?”

I leaned on the railing, removed my hat, and wiped sweat from my brow. “I need to talk to him, that’s all. Nothing for you to worry about.”

The smirk returned as her eyes followed my arm down to my thick ebony hand, then back up to my face. “You one of those brothers that likes to harass whitey?”

“I don’t give a damn about the man’s skin color.”

“Dobie ain’t exactly the kind of guy you’d wanna be messing with.”

Now it was my time to smirk. “I hear he likes to knock the ladies around. That’s why I’m looking for him. See if maybe he wants to try knocking *me* around a little.”

“You’re saying Dobie beats on women?”

I pulled my jacket open to reveal the gun and took the badge from my inside pocket, flipping it out, holding it at eye level.

She scoffed. “Deputy Sheriff. Big deal. Who’s the *real* sheriff?”

“An old fart that sits behind a desk all day. You wouldn’t know him.”

“He black too?”

I didn’t smile.

She hopped back up the steps to the porch and turned around. “You got Dobbie all wrong. He hasn’t touched any of the girls. He treats us all with respect.”

I put a foot on the second step and folded my arms across my chest. “Try telling that to the body we found last night in a dumpster three miles down the road.”

Her eyebrows arched, and a blush covered her face. “You’re blaming Dobie? He wouldn’t kill anyone.”

When she opened the glass door, I figured the conversation was over. So I jumped up the stairs, took a card from my pocket, and handed it to her. “Call me if you ever need help.” I tapped the brim of my hat and gave a final nod.

After I’d descended the stairs, I turned in time to see her move back inside the glass door and stare out at me. I noticed how her shirt had pulled out of her shorts enough to reveal a nice, tight stomach. My eyes scanned her tan legs and bare feet. She knew

what I was doing, but her expression said she'd seen that look before. There wasn't anything unusual about it at all.

. . .

Dobie Freeman had been an offensive tackle for the Georgia Bulldogs back in the day. Helluva player. Twice been named first team All-SEC, he made All-American his junior season, then got drafted in the first round by the Raiders. He earned All-Pro honors twice before a series of failed drug tests chased him out of the League. He was only twenty-seven. Having burned through his signing bonus and contract money, he came home to Atlanta as a washed-up has-been and pretty much disappeared for a time. He next emerged as a suspect in a growing drug and prostitution ring in greater Fulton County. Rumor had it that he was pimping a stable of multi-racial young women who were servicing the upper echelons of the city's elite: a decent living for the girls, a mint for him. Now his business had expanded into full-fledged drug-pushing. He used street thugs and rural good-old-boys to distribute his stash in Atlanta and surrounding county.

With his weight ballooning close to four hundred pounds, he had become an even more imposing figure. His temper was legendary. Several pushers had felt his wrath, and more than one of his working girls had been punished for unforgivable indiscretions. That was what brought him to our attention. The Atlanta PD alerted our office—"Watch out for the big son-of-a-bitch"—suspecting he would move to a remote area of the county after things got too hot inside the city's borders.

My radar rarely tracked a punk drug-pusher, but I got interested when a couple of local girls turned up in hospitals with broken bones. Then we found the body of a pretty, little redhead. She was no more than eighteen. Word spread that Dobie had confronted

her at a joint called The Wayward Dog a few nights prior to her murder, screaming at her in front of everyone, telling her he would “kill her sorry ass” if she ever skimmed from his share of the earnings again. When she showed up dead, I got a call from an anonymous source, telling me that Dobie was the man we wanted to see. I reported all that to the sheriff.

“Okay, Jackson,” the sheriff told me, “I want you take to the hunt like one of my old bird dogs.”

I scouted every beer joint on the west side of the county, going in for a drink, asking questions, and learning what I could, which wasn’t much. Dobie wasn’t a man folks liked talking about. Most of what I learned didn’t help a lick, but there were a few things: Dobie had a favorite girl by the name of Margaret French, who lived alone in a little aluminum house trailer out in the country, far away from any other human being. It was said that Dobie liked staying there because it was private, and he could see a man coming up the quarter-mile gravel drive in plenty of time to react...maybe even take someone out with the Winchester he liked to carry.

. . .

After leaving Margaret French, I headed out on the Tom Murphy Freeway, in the direction of Six Flags over Georgia. There was a string of bars along Riverside Parkway where I’d heard that Dobie often hung out. I pulled into a dive called Captain Cool’s a little after midnight. From the look of the folks entering the bar, I had a feeling that my black face wouldn’t be a welcome sight. Inside, booths and tables against all four walls surrounded a long double-sided bar in the middle of the room. A pine ramp with a silver

pole sat on one side of the bar. That's where the girls danced. Lots of bubbas were in the place.

I took a stool and ordered a beer, then focused on one of the bartenders, a young Asian-American woman with a shaved head and enormous gold earrings. I watched her serve drinks and wash glasses. After I downed my beer, I raised my empty bottle, and she brought me another.

I read her nametag. "Tell me, Alina, you seen Dobie tonight?"

She placed the bottle on the bar and stared. "You outta your mind, mister?"

"I'm just wanting to talk. Nothing else."

She looked around the bar. Several of the customers were giving us the eye. "You know what's good for you, you'll finish your drink and leave. Your kind ain't gonna find nothin' but trouble here."

"My kind?"

"You know what I mean."

I swiveled on the stool to survey the room, then swung back toward her. She started to say something but stopped, her gaze going over my shoulder. I turned and found myself staring into the face of one of the largest men I'd ever seen. Dobie in the flesh. Three other huge dudes stood at his side.

"You looking for me?" Dobie asked.

"Depends on who you are."

Dobie moved close, his chest now inches from my face. The music stopped and the room grew silent.

“This ain’t the best place to go looking for trouble, mister. Man could find hisself lying in a ditch...if’n you know what I mean.”

I glanced back at Alina, who had moved a few steps away, as if expecting a fight.

“I ain’t looking for anything but Dobie, and I’m guessing I found him.”

He wasn’t laughing. “Maybe you did, and maybe you didn’t. Either way, you might be close to an ass-whipping.”

I shook my head. “Now ain’t you the tough guy.” I turned back toward Alina, making sure she wasn’t getting ready to break a bottle over my skull. “What’s with this place? A man can’t ask a question without being threatened?” I pushed myself off the stool and turned around, my eyes now level with Dobie’s flat nose.

“What’s you wanting with me, boy?” he said as his bodyguards closed around me.

“Just wanting to ask a few questions.”

Dobie noticed all the eyes in the room locked on us and said, “We’ll be moving to a booth, keeping this private.”

I followed him to a nearby booth, where we sat down opposite one another. His bodyguards remained standing, blocking my exit.

“Okay, you’re looking for me, you found me. What’s on your mind?”

I turned a ring on my finger. “What’s on my mind is the body of a little girl we just found in a dumpster. I’m wondering if you might know something about it.”

Dobie shook his head slowly from side to side. “You got some nerve coming into a place like this, boy—asking questions, thinking I’m gonna give you something.” He looked up at one of his goons, then stared back at me. “You got credentials?”

I pulled my jacket open to let the gun show and flashed my badge.

Dobie squinted at the shield, looked at the others, and chuckled. “We got ourselves a two-bit deputy.” He put his face close to mine. “We could remove your ass right now, and nobody’d ever know you was even in here. Or maybe you’d be one of those brothers needing my boys here to take you out back and get medieval on you.” He looked up at the bodyguards. “Maybe teach the black deputy a lesson.” They smiled, itching to do the deed.

I leaned closer until our noses nearly touched. “Your sisters here are gonna’ learn that I’m not some little teenage girl.”

I figured the guards wouldn’t act unless the big man gave the order, and Dobie was sizing me up, analyzing the situation. Then he leaned back and grinned. “Got you some back-up, do you?” He looked around the bar. “Want ole’ Dobie here to make a mistake?” He laughed and leaned forward, put his lips by my ear, and whispered, “You’re gonna walk outta here, Deputy, but you might not be walking for long.” He stood. “You need to think about that.”

I shrugged. “I guess dinner and drinks are out of the question then.”

Dobie glared. “Come on,” he barked, and the four men walked out the back door.

I returned to the bar and dropped a twenty. “Keep the change, Alina. And don’t get too close to Dobie. The next time I see that fat bastard will be when I take him in.”

I walked out, my gun hanging from my hand, and headed home with thoughts of Margaret French hovering in my mind.

. . .



My body jerked awake at six o'clock on a rain-swept morning, and I noticed a call on my cell that had come in the middle of the night. No message had been left, but I recognized the number. Margaret French.

It had been a month since I'd first met her and encountered Dobie at Captain Cool's, and in that time, I had neither seen nor heard from either one. I'd made little headway in my investigation but had continued asking questions. Word was that Dobie and his boys didn't appreciate my efforts one little bit. That didn't matter to me. I was determined to flush the fat man out and take him in when he crossed a legal line. Now this: a phone call from Margaret French in the dead of night.

I dialed her number, and she picked up on the fifth ring. Her voice was soft; she sounded tired.

"Margaret French?" I said. There wasn't a reply, but I could hear her heavy breathing. "This is Deputy Jackson. I see you called last night." Still no response. I imagined her wearing that tight t-shirt she'd had on the day we talked on the steps of her manufactured home. "You need something?"

There was a muffled sound, as if she were changing positions, maybe rolling over in bed. "Can't talk right now," she whispered. She wasn't alone.

I started to say something, to tell her to call me later, but before I could finish, I heard a deep voice in the background: "Who's that?" Then the phone went dead.

I tried to imagine what she was saying at that moment, wondering how she was handling the situation, hoping that Dobie wouldn't discover who had just called. I cursed myself for being so careless; I'd put her in a real bind. Damn, that had been a bad move.

I stewed about it for the rest of the day and eventually made my way to the vicinity of the house trailer, though I was careful not to get too close. I drove slowly past her winding gravel driveway but couldn't see anything. Later, after making my rounds at various bars, I landed at Captain Cool's again, where I plopped down on a stool and ordered a drink from Alina. She gave me the beer, but that was all. She wasn't talking.

The place was dead, with no sign of Dobie or his stooges, so I drank the beer and walked out toward my car.

"Deputy!"

I turned to see Alina motioning for me to step to the side of the building. She grabbed my arm when I got there and pulled me close to the wall. From that vantage point, I could see the front and back of the building. Alina glanced from side to side.

"Are you looking for Margaret...or for Dobie?"

"Either one, I guess."

"You're not going to find them tonight. Leastways, not here."

I didn't speak. She hadn't followed me outside just to tell me that.

"I'm worried about her," she went on. "She was supposed to be on stage tonight...her time to dance. Only she never showed up."

I looked at my watch. Half past nine. "It's still early."

"She was supposed to dance two hours ago."

I wondered if I was missing something. "You got any other reason to worry? Anything more than her not showing up on time?"

She looked down, hesitant to speak. “She called earlier. Sounded nervous. Said Dobie was all jacked up. He was screaming and cussing and carrying on.” Alina’s eyes were wide. “She sounded scared, Deputy. She said she didn’t know what to do.”

I stepped back, thinking it over. “Where was she?”

Alina shrugged. “Home, I guess. She didn’t say.”

“Is that all?”

She nodded. “Just thought you might want to know.”

Just then a car pulled up and a group of men went inside.

“I’d better go, or they’ll start wondering about me,” she said, her voice shaking. She stepped around me and started for the front of the building.

I put my hand on her arm. “I’d appreciate a call if you hear anything else.”

“You just help her, Deputy.” It sounded more like an order than a request.

. . .

I called the sheriff and told him I was going after Dobie; if I waited it might be too late.

“What do you know about that bartender, anyway?” the sheriff said. “Could be a set-up.”

That thought had occurred to me, too, but Alina’s concern had seemed genuine. “I know, but I’m the one who got Margaret French into trouble by returning her call. I’m going in.”

“It’s your funeral, but I’m sending back-up. You just wait till they get there.”

“Can’t risk it. If he sees a convoy of squad cars, he’ll have time to get out. And he might hurt her before he leaves. I’m going on my own. I’ll park down the road a bit, sneak up through the trees.”

The sheriff knew there wasn’t any point in trying to talk me out of it. When I made up my mind, I didn’t change it. I was stubborn that way. So he said that he would position a couple of cars on a side road close by. If there was trouble, I had orders to call.

A cold drizzle was falling by the time I drove a half-mile past Margaret French’s driveway and pulled off onto a dirt trail. Darkness had settled in, a perfect cover for what I had in mind. After parking the car behind a low-hanging elm, I got out, opened the trunk, and retrieved a pump-action shotgun. My .45 ACP was in a holster under my arm. I stuck a small .22 pistol in my right boot, then started walking through knee-high weeds toward the trailer.

I visualized what I might find—Margaret French in the front room or in the kitchen, Dobie lounging on the sofa, half-falling off it. Or he might be snoring in bed. I might even get lucky and find the fat man sitting on the pot. I laughed, then stopped when I considered another scene. What if they were in bed together? The thought turned my stomach, so I shoved it out of my mind, put my head down, and trudged on with the shotgun pointed at the ground.

I moved through the trees until I came to high grass, then got down on my hands and knees and crept closer to the house, staying low in case someone was looking. When I was about twenty yards away, I raced to the trailer, my body bent at the waist. I leaned back against the rear wall and slid slowly toward a window with a half-open shade. I heard a loud slapping sound as I moved...the sound a whip would make.

“Get it on,” I heard Dobie shout. “Harder!”

What the hell?

“Come on, bitch!” Dobie yelled. “What’s the matter? Too rough for you?”

I listened for Margaret’s screams, imagining her lying over the bed, being beaten by the monster. It made my skin crawl. I put my finger on the gun’s trigger, then moved closer to the window, getting up on my toes. Just one look was all I needed—just one look, and I’d blow the bastard away.

Again, I heard the unmistakable sound of leather striking skin, then the voice of Dobie screaming. With each slap I moved closer to the window, and when I finally got there, I stood on my tiptoes and looked inside.

It was Dobie all right, but he was the one draped over the bed, his hands cuffed to the bedposts. Margaret French stood with her back to the window, and in her hand was a leather paddle with holes punched through it. When Dobie yelled, she raised the paddle high over her head and swung it through the air until it landed hard on the big man’s naked white butt. He cursed and told her to bring it on harder. It was an unbelievable sight...a little blonde beating the hell out of that hulking blob of a man.

I watched for what seemed like an eternity until Dobie screamed for her to stop. Margaret French laid the paddle down and walked quietly from the room while Dobie lay whimpering on the bed. After a minute or two he pulled himself up, slid his hands from the loosely fastened handcuffs, and limped into the bathroom. I pressed my back against the trailer and stared into the rain-soaked sky. “Damn,” I said under my breath, thinking that I should have used my phone to video it all.

There wasn't much more to do. I took slow, uneven steps back around the trailer, not caring if I was seen, and walked through the grass to my car. I checked in with the sheriff, telling him about what I'd just witnessed. Then, too stunned to figure it all out, I drove to the first bar I saw, a place called The Metro Male. It was a gay dive, and I was just a dumb deputy sheriff in a cowboy hat, searching for a drink.

. . .

The Good Book tells us there's nothing new under the sun, and I suppose that's true. But what I saw that night through the bedroom window of Margaret French's little trailer was a first for me.

And here's the kicker: six months after the incident, Dobie's body was found in a ditch not far from a double-wide manufactured home on the outskirts of Macon. He had been bludgeoned to death. "Multiple blunt force trauma to the head" was the official cause of death. I had no idea who had done it and didn't care. Dobie had a million enemies. Any one of them could have dished out the punishment.

As for Margaret French, I drove back out to her trailer after receiving the word on Dobie, but she was long gone. A Latino family lived there now. I figured I'd seen the last of the sexy woman with wet blonde hair.

. . .

I was wrong. I ran into her one more time, on a blustery day in Atlanta, after I had delivered papers to a judge in the Fulton County courthouse. I stepped into an elevator on my way to the ground floor and there she was. I did a double take, thinking my eyes were playing games. She was dressed professionally—dark blue jacket, pleated skirt, white blouse. A string of pearls encircled her neck, and her hair—now dark brown—hung over

her shoulders in bouncy waves. The hair was different, but it was Margaret French, all right. Looking down, I saw that she carried a fine black leather briefcase. I examined her hands and found a wedding band. Beside her stood a short, well-dressed man who looked to be about her age. From the way he leaned into her, I could tell they were more than business associates. Sure enough, he wore a gold band that matched hers. She looked at me in surprise, then locked her eyes on mine in a way that said, “Don’t even think about messing with me.”

The elevator bumped to a stop and the doors parted. I let the pair exit first, then followed them outside onto the busy street. They turned left; I turned right. I stopped halfway down the block and looked back. Margaret French had paused at a traffic light, letting her companion walk on so that she could glance back in my direction. A second passed, then two, just long enough for me to tilt my hat back and smile. She brushed a strand of hair from her face, turned, and walked on.