

Marked For Life

By Sandy Dahlhofer

As the money floated down stream, snagging the edges of the riverbank, gathering bits of green moss and tiny twigs, Purvis Brown figured the gods were punishing him for his way of life. The smell of moist earth and honeysuckle hung in the air like wisps of the past and hints of the future. But Purvis wasn't feeling optimistic about his future since discovering the loot he had stolen was all in marked bills. He got a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as he dumped the last of the cash over the embankment into the swirling water below. He had spent the better part of his life in and out of jail, and each time he got out, he vowed to change his ways. But as the saying goes, *once a thief, always a thief*.

As the last bill caught a puff of wind and drifted skyward, Purvis reached out with gnarled fingers. He yearned to grab the greenback while at the same time ached to let it go when he heard the faint sound of yelping bloodhounds and muffled voices in the distance.

"I ain't going back to the slammer." Purvis swore under his breath as he hightailed it into a nearby corn field, disappearing as quickly as a snake in a tangle of weeds. He ran, zig-zagging between the rows, ignoring the stalks scratching at his arms and the mud clinging to the soles of his prison issued sneakers. By now, every cop in Buncombe County was likely on the lookout for the bank robber and checking all the places they expected the perpetrator to break a hundred or pass off a twenty. Purvis was a thin man. His awkward gait made him appear as if the small frame he was strung on had collapsed and the stuffing had shifted. A bar room brawl in his younger days left him with one eye that didn't quite look at you and a puckered scar that ran across his pale forehead. He was not a pretty sight.

Bobby Rubble sat on the three-legged stool daydreaming of pirates and swashbucklers. He gripped the cow's swollen teats, slid his hands downward in a pulling motion the way his real Dad had taught him, and a stream of warm milk splashed into the galvanized bucket at his feet. Without warning

the barn door banged open. A wild looking old man, all bony and dirty, hurled himself inside. The boy jerked around causing the startled cow to kick over the bucket of milk. Spotting the lad, Purvis stopped short. Man and boy faced off like two prizefighters, neither knowing what chance he had against the other. Bessie bellowed and Bobby realized his hold on the cow's udder had tightened into a death grip.

Bobby stood up, knocking over the stool and inching his way behind the cow in case the crazy looking old geezer did something....crazy.

The disheveled man wiped a crusty hand across dry lips, cocked his ear toward the door, then pulled it shut. "Sure could use a drink." His good eye stared at the foam of white cream on the dirt floor while the other scrutinized something in the hayloft.

Bobby grabbed the overturned bucket, offered what little milk was left in the bottom. Purvis snatched it and drank thirstily.

"Who are you?" Bobby asked.

The old man held out his hand and chuckled, revealing a few missing teeth. "Purvis..Purvis Brown, man about town."

The old guy seems friendly enough Bobby thought shaking his hand. "I'm Bobby Rubble and I'm in big trouble." The boy hooked a thumb at the milk on the floor. "My stepdad's gonna kill me."

"Guess it's my fault your cow knocked over the bucket." Purvis reached for the stool, sat it upright, plopped himself down and stuck the bucket beneath Bessie, milking her as if he had milked cows all his life.

"Wow, I'm impressed." Bobby said, crouching down beside Purvis. "Are you that escaped convict I heard about on the news?"

Purvis paused in mid-stroke. Turned his head in slow motion, zeroed in on the boy's face with his one good eye. "Don't you go telling your Pa about me, you hear boy?"

Suddenly, Bobby didn't feel quite so confident Purvis was just some harmless old coot. A driblet

of fear bubbled in his chest. He stood quickly, tripping over his own feet. Purvis was fast for an old guy. The milk bucket caught the side of Bobby's head with a sickening thud. He collapsed as black spots darted in and out before his eyes.

Bobby felt as if he were drowning. He coughed and spat out a mouthful of water from the hose his stepfather was squirting in his face. Shaking his fist in disgust at the lump on the kid's noggin and the wasted milk seeping into the barn floor, Leonard Wilkes shouted. "Get up you idiot." He jerked Bobby to his feet by one arm. "You're dumber than that cow. I told you a hundred times Bessie's gonna kick the crap out of you if you get behind her." Leonard kicked at the empty milk pail. "Clean up this mess and you better figure out a way to get some milk on the table before your Ma gets home." Leonard stomped from the barn, tossing a final warning over his shoulder. "No supper for you tonight either you stupid little shit."

Bobby's head throbbed. He gingerly touched the lump on his forehead. He thought of trying to milk Bessie again but he was shaking uncontrollably and the poor cow was so spooked she wouldn't let him near her. He should have told Leonard about the convict. Bobby sighed out loud. "Yeah, like he would believe me. No one ever believes anything I say." Bobby shivered and glanced toward the dark stalls wondering what happened to Purvis Brown. He eased open the barn door, cautiously peaking around the corners, scouting the yard for any sign of bad guys. He whistled for Toby who immediately bounded to his side.

"Where the heck were you when I was getting clobbered over the head?" The yellow lab licked his master's hand, let out a woof. "Yeah sure, now you bark." Bobby stroked the dog's head and together they headed for the river. It was if a sign from God told Bobby to look down into the gorge. He could barely believe his eyes! A whole mess of soggy bills floated on top of the water. Fives and tens and twenties were stuck to the side of a log. A bunch of hundreds were caught in a tangle of fallen branches. Bobby let out a war whoop, scooted down the muddy bank on his behind so fast he

practically tumbled into the rushing river. He grabbed handfuls at a time and stuffed the bills in his shirt and the pockets of his jeans. Bobby couldn't get over his luck. It was more money than he had ever seen in his life. Probably more than Leonard made in a whole year. Bobby ran home, hid the bulk of the money in the barn, jumped on his bike and pedaled as hard and as fast as he could to Conrad's Market. He rushed to retrieve a gallon of milk from the cooler and a Hershey bar from the candy rack. Slapping a five on the counter, he winked at 14 year old Janie Conrad and told her to keep the change. Bobby dashed home, full of hope that maybe this time Leonard would be proud. He slipped unannounced into the dimly lit kitchen. A broken plate of food lay upside down on the linoleum. Angry voices resonated from upstairs. The sound of a hand striking flesh permeated the air. He heard a scream and his Mother's sobs. He wanted to grab the shot-gun, race up the stairs and shoot his stepdad square between the eyes. Instead he opened the refrigerator door, stashed the milk inside and hurried out to the barn to count his windfall.

It was simple the way things ended. Not long after Bobby paid for the milk, the cops showed up at Conrad's Market. They went through all the money in the register and came up with the marked five dollar bill. Janie Conrad admitted the money was given to her by Wilkes nine-year-old stepson, Bobby. Early the following morning, Leonard Wilkes was arrested for robbing the local credit union two towns over. Three thousand seventy-five dollars in marked bills were found hidden in an old saddle bag inside Leonard Wilke's barn. Bobby watched the arrest from his hideout in the hayloft. He thought about telling the cops what really happened but they were too busy handcuffing Leonard who was too busy wailing his innocence at the top of his lungs. And why bother, no one ever believed him anyway.

The End