My Last Name

by

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“I never figured on getting married. For one thing, it would involve finding a man I was willing to tolerate for more than a night, and that seemed about as likely as talking mice. Guess the joke’s on me.”
--Frances Brown

*A small survivalist compound about an hour’s drive east of Portland, Oregon*

Now

The mice were singing a hymn to the forest when we pulled up to the compound. Trees hid most of the fence that surrounded our property, along with all of the pit traps and other “discouragements” that we had in place, but they couldn’t do anything about the driveway, or the eight-foot tall iron gate that kept us from going any further.

Dominic looked at the gate with all the enthusiasm of a man being dragged to his own execution. “Is this our destination, then? A mansion in the woods?”

“It’s not a mansion. It’s a house, with two outbuildings and a barn. Oh, and a workshop that was originally a stable. We don’t keep horses anymore. Haven’t since before I was born. Even if we wanted to, Alex would flip. My brother has a thing about horses. Not a fan.” I was babbling. I knew that I was babbling. Sadly, that didn’t seem to help me with anything as complex as “stopping.”

The mice weren’t stopping either, although their hymn had shifted into a minor key as they sang about the Spooky Old Owl that lived in A Very Tall Tree, and had once carried off a novice who wandered too far from the house. As always once they started a ritual, they were ignoring anything that didn’t immediately apply, which in this case meant the two of us. It was the closest thing we’d had to privacy since leaving Las Vegas.

“It’s large and isolated,” said Dominic. “I doubt anyone would hear me screaming.”

“Oh, absolutely not,” I said. “We have no neighbors. We had neighbors, about ten years back, but they had a mysterious accident and had to move away.”

Dominic gave me a stunned look. I paused, reviewing what I’d just said, and grimaced.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, yes, they had a mysterious accident, but we had nothing to do with it. These woods aren’t safe if you’re going to have a heart attack over a simple little Cerberus wandering into your yard. It was better for everyone when they went back to the city.”

“A Cerberus,” echoed Dominic. “As in, the three-headed dog?”

I nodded.

“Verity, those are extinct.”

I gave him my brightest smile. “And once again you prove that the Covenant doesn’t know everything.”

Dominic snorted as I pulled out my phone, dialed, and raised it to my ear.

As I had expected, my father picked up on the second ring. “Where did you get this number?” he demanded.

“Daddy, it’s me.” Blocked numbers had their disadvantages. Being yelled at every time I called home was one of them. “I’m outside the gate. What’s the current code?”
His tone lost much of its irritation, replacing it with wariness. “How do I know you’re really my daughter?”

“Well, first, I’m pretty sure that’s one of those things you’re supposed to ask Mom, not me. Second, I guess you could turn on one of the cameras and see my pretty face for yourself.”

“What makes you think I don’t already have them turned on?”

“You haven’t asked about the man who’s sitting next to me in the car, and I’ve met you, Daddy. I love you very much, but your first response when I bring a boy home isn’t going to be calm acceptance, it’s going to be brusque and brutal and maybe violent. I don’t know, though. I’m a lot more worried about Mom.”

There was a long pause before he asked, “You have someone with you?”

“I do. You read my reports, right? Well, Dominic, from my reports, is out here with me, listening to the glory and delight that is one of our phone conversations. One-sided, though. I didn’t think it would be very nice to put you on speaker without your permission.”

“Verity, if you’re in danger, just work the phrase ‘happy to help’ into your reply to me. I can change my approach.”

That confirmed what I had already suspected: that my father didn’t have me on camera because he was coming to the gate himself, presumably to check me out before he let me in. It was a good precaution. In a world where anything from a Pitsen to a swarm of Apraxis wasps could potentially emulate my voice and even my shape, getting a good look at me when I’d been gone so long and had arrived without warning only made sense. Dominic was the wrinkle. His presence made this a whole new situation.

“I’m not in danger, I’m not being held hostage, and Dominic isn’t here to hurt me or anybody else,” I said. “The mice have even accepted him. I can put them on the phone, if you’d like, but you should be aware that we’ve just passed the owl verses of the ‘yay, we’re almost home’ song, and you might have to listen to a few verses of ‘The Wheels on the Bus.’”

“I’ll be right there.” The connection died.

I lowered my phone as I turned to offer Dominic a cheery smile. “So the good news is that my father is coming out to meet us,” I said. “The bad news is that he may be intending to straight-up murder you when he gets here, so you should probably try to look harmless and cute and not like a former member of the Covenant of St. George.”

Dominic stared at me. Finally, with a degree of care that was honestly impressive, he said, “Verity, I’m not sure how to break this to you, but I am not harmless, and while you seem to find me reasonably attractive—”

“You know you’re hot. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t spend so much time on your hair.”

“—there’s nothing I can do to make myself not look like a former member of the Covenant of St. George. I am a former member of the Covenant of St. George. No matter what I do, for the rest of my life, that’s what I’m going to look like.”

“Okay, point, but you can try to look like you’re not here to murder my entire family while they sleep, okay?” He gave me a baffled look. I beamed. “See? You’re doing it already!”
The mice stopped singing and began to cheer. I looked toward the gate, and there was my father, a shotgun slung lazily over one shoulder, like it was the accessory every man was toting this season. His face was set in a neutral mask, giving nothing away.

Maybe it was the distance, and maybe it was how long I’d been gone, but I found myself looking at my father like he was a person, and not just, you know, Dad, the man who taught me how to field-strip a rifle and milk a bloodworm without piercing its exoskeleton. He was a little under six feet tall and solidly built, with a small belly that he liked to attribute to long hours spent sitting on his ass doing research, and pizza, in that order. His hair was still mostly the sandy brown that I remembered from my childhood, although it had become increasingly streaked with white in the last few years, and his eyes were blue. Like my brother, Alex, he wore glasses for reading and fine work. He wasn’t wearing them now. Between his jeans, his flannel shirt, and the shotgun, he looked more like someone who was preparing to hide a body than a cryptozoologist.

Which was probably the point, all things considered. “Wait here,” I said to Dominic, before twisting to stick my hand into the back of the U-Haul’s cab, where the mice were gathered. A warm, furry weight promptly settled on my palm as the colony’s high priest responded to the summons. The other mice erupted into renewed cheers. They knew what all this meant.

“Believe me when I say that I wouldn’t dream of moving,” said Dominic. He had placed his hands on the dashboard at some point, keeping them plainly in view. It was a smart move. I should have thought of it. In the excitement of getting home (and the anticipation of keeping my father from killing my husband), I’d allowed myself to get distracted.

“Be right back,” I said, and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek before opening the door and sliding out of the U-Haul.

The fallen leaves that blanketed most of the driveway crunched under my feet when they hit the ground, and the air had that unique evergreens-and-petrichor scent that screamed “welcome to the Pacific Northwest” to the part of me that had been homesick every minute of every day since I’d left home. I felt some small, almost undefinable degree of tension leave my shoulders. I was here. I was back where I belonged.

My father was almost to the gate. I hustled over to meet him, sticking out the hand that held the mouse like a shield. Upon seeing my father, the mouse went wild, sinking into a paroxysm of religious ecstasy.

“HAIL! HAIL THE GOD OF DECISIONS MADE IN NECESSITY, SON OF THE PILGRIM PRIESTESS AND THE GOD OF EMPTY ROOMS AND COLD REGRETS, FATHER OF—”

“Let’s stop for right now, okay?” I said, pulling my hand back a little. “I need to talk to my father.”

“Woe!” wailed the mouse, instantly contrite. “Woe betide me, for I have Prevented Reunion! I am not worthy to speak the catechism! I shall be Banished to the Basement, to dwell amongst the rats and centipedes!”

“Which you would promptly kill and eat, so chill, okay? You can totally worship Dad to your heart’s content once he believes that I’m really who I say I am.”

The mouse brightened. “Am I to Verify your Identity?” it squeaked.

“Please.”

“It Shall Be Done.” The mouse turned to my father. “Oh God of Decisions Made in Necessity, I am the
acting high priest of the church of the Arboreal Priestess, may gravity continue to be kind. I do solemnly attest that She stands behind me in all Her Glory, and that She has not been replaced by anything that would need to be killed with a shoe.”

“Well, thank you,” said Dad, offering the mouse a solemn nod. “I appreciate you bringing her home safe.” He switched his gaze to me. “What’s your middle name?”

“Alice.”

“Why?”

“Because you wanted to name me after your mother, and Mom balked, since Grandma Alice is sort of a total weirdo.”

“What is hanging on the left wall of the upstairs hallway?”

“I have no way of knowing that, I haven’t been home in more than a year.”

“How did you find this house?”

“I grew up here.”

The quiz went on for a good fifteen minutes, ranging from basic facts about the family and my childhood into more esoteric things, like “what did Grandma Alice draw in the margins of Grandpa Thomas’s first field guide?” (a tailypo) and “what does Aunt Rose like to drink?” (basically anything alcoholic). Finally, just about when I was starting to seriously consider throwing a rock at him, he stopped, and smiled.

“Hello, Very. Welcome home.”

“Hi, Daddy.” I looked pointedly at the gate. “It would be easier to hug you hello if this thing weren’t in the way.”

“It would be easier to open the gate if you hadn’t decided to bring a stranger home,” he said, and looked—equally pointedly—at the U-Haul where Dominic was waiting. “What were you thinking, Verity?”

“That he didn’t have anywhere else to go, since he quit the Covenant and they think he’s a, a traitor, and b, sort of deceased, so it’s not like he could go back if he wanted to. That he helped us. I would probably be dead if he hadn’t gone with Sarah to raid the building where I was being kept. And that he’s family.” I held up my left hand, showing the plain gold band on my ring finger. Sheepishly, I smiled. “Um. Surprise.”

Dad’s eyes widened. He looked at the ring, then at Dominic, and finally back to me. “Your mother’s going to bury him in a shallow grave somewhere on the property. You understand that, don’t you?”

“I figured she’d try.”

“I mean, I’m the father figure holding a shotgun, so you’d think I’d be the one screaming about despoiling my little girl, but really, I want to go ask the man if he’s considered going into Witness Protection before your mother gets her hands on him.”

I grimaced sympathetically. “I’m sorry to deny you the sitcom stereotypes you so clearly desire.”

Dad gave me a sharp look. “Don’t kid.”
“I’m not kidding. Really.” Dad was the descendant of ex-Covenant cryptozoologists—only one generation removed, in the case of Grandpa Thomas. He understood that members of the Covenant were still people, just like us, and more, that they could grow and change and come to see the error of their ways. Mom, on the other hand, was the daughter of two cryptids, and the sister of a third. Being raised by non-humans had left her with a very different perspective on the Covenant of St. George. None of us liked them, but Mom? Mom despised them. They had been responsible for the deaths of her friends and loved ones for as long as she could remember, and forgiveness wasn’t really part of her emotional makeup.

“You honestly went and married him?”

“I did,” I said. “The mice were there, as witnesses. They do a pretty credible Elvis impression now.”

Dad raised his eyebrows. “Uncle Al?” he guessed.

“Helped me get Dominic set up with a new ID that the Covenant wouldn’t be looking for. The actual ceremony was performed by a chupacabra dressed, as I think I just implied, as the King of Rock and Roll.”

“Well. All right, then.” Dad leaned over to tap something into the keypad on his side of the gate. The doors began sliding open, following the tracks receded into the wall and leaving the driveway clear. “I suppose it’s time for me to meet the new son-in-law.”

“You’re going to love him, Daddy,” I said, and hoped with all my might that I was telling the truth.

Dominic sat very still on the living room couch, his hands resting on his knees, looking at my father with an expression which seemed neutral, but I had come to recognize as the face he would probably wear if he ever had to face a Covenant firing squad.

“Sorry about the mess,” said Dad, sweeping a dozen throwing knives off the coffee table and into the laundry basket he’d been using to collect weapons from around the room since we walked inside. “Verity didn’t tell us she’d be arriving today. You can tell from the absence of a six-course dinner taking up most of the kitchen.”

“He’s exaggerating,” I said, giving Dominic’s shoulder a reassuring pat. He didn’t look reassured. “Mom’s probably just going to make spaghetti and maybe bake a cake. Unless she gets home super late, and then we’ll have takeout. Where is Mom, anyway?”

“She’s working,” said Dad, with a pointed look at Dominic.

I swallowed a sigh. Mom was sort of a cryptid field medic. She wasn’t a doctor; she couldn’t perform surgery or anything like that. But she knew more about non-human biped physiology than anyone else I had ever met, and her “folk remedies” could often accomplish things that actual medicine couldn’t, at least when the patient was a harpy with mites or a bogeyman with a skin condition. Sometimes her work could take her away from home for days at a time. There weren’t many people, cryptid or otherwise, who could do what she did.

Maybe it was petty of me, but there were times when Mom would be away on work and I’d wonder if Dad realized that he had taken his model for the ideal woman from his own mother, my Grandma Alice: pretty, blonde, occasionally violent, and almost never there. I never said it out loud, of course. I loved both my parents very much. I wasn’t looking to make trouble.
Even though I never said it, sometimes I thought Dad already knew what I was thinking. He looked at my face, sighed, and said, “She’ll be home tonight. It’s a local client, not one of her distance jobs.”

“That’s good,” I said. “Annie?”

“Roller derby practice. Elsie picked her up about an hour before you got here. We’re expecting her before midnight, but not by much.”

It was oddly disappointing to hear that my sister wasn’t going to be home any time soon. We didn’t always get along—we didn’t usually get along—but she was my sister, and I loved her. It would have been nice to have her there to welcome me home. “Well, I guess I could show Dominic to my room—”

“No,” said Dad hastily, cutting me off before I could go any further. “I don’t think that’s a good idea just yet.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Price, but have I done something to offend you?” asked Dominic. “I thought Verity had informed you of our relationship.”

“She did,” said Dad. “She told us when she met you, and when she started dating you, and when you left the Covenant. She didn’t tell us you were traveling with her.” He gave me a sharp look.

I fought the urge to squirm. “I told Alex,” I said. “He agreed with me that it might be better to beg forgiveness than ask permission. Dominic didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Nowhere. In all the world. Only with you.” Dad shook his head. “Please forgive me for being cynical, but that doesn’t sound exactly realistic.”

“Oh, because you were totally willing to not hook up with Mom because of who her family was, right?”

“That was a completely different situation, and you know it.”

Dominic stood up. We both stopped talking. I moved to stand, but he motioned for me to stay where I was, and I subsided, waiting to see what he was going to do.

“I am terribly sorry to have inconvenienced you, Mr. Price,” he said. “I know that every human tradition says I should have asked your permission before marrying your daughter—although I also know that those traditions are outdated and unnecessary. No one could give Verity permission to marry except for Verity. She gave her consent when I asked for her hand. I have no intention of deserting her. But I will also not force you to accept me as a part of your family. If this means our marriage is untraditional, well. I suppose some things can’t be helped. Now, if you’ll both excuse me, I will be out at the truck waiting to hear whether or not I’m to be asked to leave.”

He turned on his heel, shoulders tight, and practically marched to the front door. He managed to ease it gently closed behind himself. I would have been slamming things if I’d been in his shoes.

Dad paled as I turned, slowly, to look at him. I didn’t say a word. I just stood, shaking my head, and started after my husband.

I almost made it to the door before I started running.
Dominic must have done some running of his own, because he was already at the U-Haul when I got there. He had the back open, and was sitting on the bed of the truck, one knee drawn up against his chest, one foot dangling. His hands were empty. His eyes were fixed on the horizon. He looked, for a moment, like a sketch from one of my cousin Artie’s life drawing classes, the ones he’d started taking back in high school during his “learn how to co-exist with human girls without running away” phase. The phase hadn’t lasted, but the interest in art had managed to take root. Life drawing was often the only thing that got Artie out of his basement—and since he was still concerned about the effect his powers could have on women, he mostly attended classes with male models. In that moment, in that pose, Dominic could easily have been one of Artie’s beautiful boys.

(No one really talked about it, partially because it was none of our business, and partially because everyone under the age of thirty knew that Artie was hopelessly in love with our cousin Sarah, but I was pretty sure that Artie’s mother—my Aunt Jane—thought he was gay, at least based on the comments she made every time she leafed through one of his sketchbooks. Things like “I love the way you drew him, there’s love in the lines” and “Oh, did you get his phone number after class?” No amount of pointing out that his sister Elsie was gay, openly so, and hence he probably wouldn’t have felt the need to stay in the closet, seemed to get through to her. She was a mother and she wanted her son to be happy. She just didn’t realize she was barking up the wrong tree, in terms of both gender and species.)

I didn’t make any effort to muffle my footsteps as I approached. Dead leaves crunched underfoot, and Dominic raised his head, turning a blank stare in my direction. I forced a thin, strained smile.

“Hey,” I said. “You okay? I mean, that was better than it could have gone. No one went for their knives…”

“Were we fools to think, even for a second, that this could work?” There was a deep wound in his voice, like he was bleeding somewhere deep inside.

Maybe he was. Dominic had always been a man without a family. His parents had died when he was young; he had no siblings, no cousins, no weird grandparents who popped in whenever they felt like it. He’d been raised by the Covenant to be the perfect soldier. Maybe if they’d been smart enough to make him feel like someone—anyone—actually loved him, he would have been what they’d wanted. Instead, he’d been lonely and ready to be led astray by the first person who actually listened when he spoke.

Lucky me. “No,” I said firmly. I walked over to the U-Haul and boosted myself up next to him, so that our hips were pressed together, leaving not even a whisper between us. “We weren’t fools, and this will work. If we have to, we’ll get an apartment in Portland for a few months. Things will work out.”

Dominic’s eyes widened in obvious horror. “Verity, no,” he said. “I refuse to… I won’t be the thing that comes between you and your family.”

“Oh, as if?” I socked him lightly on the arm before leaning in and resting my head on his shoulder. “Families fight. It’s sort of what we’re designed to do. Mom says it’s training for the rest of our lives. And you’re my family now too. If they want to be shitty about you, they can deal with us living somewhere else until they calm down. I love you. I married you because I was planning to stick with you. I’m not going to let a little snottness on my dad’s part be the thing that breaks us up.”

“How about a bullet to the forehead?” asked a sweet female voice.

I didn’t lift my head. “Hi, Mom. Mom, this is my husband, Dominic. We’re pretty sure he’s going to take my last name, for simplicity. Dominic, this is my mother, Evelyn Price.”
“Charmed, I’m sure,” said my mother, stepping around the corner of the van and into view.

Most people, upon meeting my mother, can’t avoid the visions of 1970s sitcom housewives, complete with pantsuits and pearls. She’s a little taller than I am, with short blonde hair that never seems to shift from its perfect Carol Brady bob, and a grasp of casual daytime makeup that is just shy of supernatural. She was wearing bellbottom jeans and a loose blouse when she met Dominic for the first time; the outfit is seared into my memory, along with the small, ladylike pistol she was holding gripped tightly in one hand. In my family, we liked to say “hello” with firearms.

Mom’s eyes were fixed on Dominic. Dominic, for his part, wasn’t moving. I’d always known that he was a smart one.

“Verity, dearest, when you say ‘husband,’ do you mean…?”

“I mean I married him, Mom. In Vegas. Because I was sort of afraid that if I didn’t, you would make him disappear forever, and I would miss him a lot if that happened.”

“Don’t be silly.” She lowered her weapon, eyes still on Dominic. “Your young man impressed my mother with the way he took care of you and Sarah. He impressed her even more with the way he let Sarah into his mind.”

“How is Sarah?” My telepathic cousin—legally my aunt, and Mom’s sister, thanks to them having both been adopted by the same family—had been severely injured in the process of getting the Covenant out of Manhattan. The last time I’d seen her, she had been in a coma. According to Alex, she’d improved somewhat since then, but nowhere near enough. She was broken. Not everything that has been broken can be fixed.

“She’s getting better,” said Mom. “She still can’t use her telepathy without hurting herself, which makes things a little hard on her. She doesn’t know who anyone is most of the time.”

Cuckoos, like Sarah, like my Grandma Angela, were completely face-blind. What was the point in learning those little details when you belonged to a species of psychics? Without the ability to read minds, she wouldn’t be able to “see” the differences between people. For right now, she was moving through a world of strangers who loved her desperately, and only time was going to bring her back to the world where she belonged. Time, and maybe a miracle.

“Artie is driving your grandmother up a wall with his demands for information,” Mom continued. “I think she’s afraid he’ll hop on the next flight to Ohio if she stops talking to him, so of course she keeps taking his calls, but the recovery is slow.”

The image of my cousin Artie on an airplane full of other people, many of whom would be female, was both amusing and disturbing. I shook it off. “Mom. Why are you staring at Dominic?”

“I’m trying to decide what to think of him,” she said. The corner of her mouth curved upward. “I thought you liked taller boys.”

“I like this boy.”

Dominic, wisely, didn’t say anything.

“I never expected you to be the one to elope. I thought you’d be demanding the laciest dress and the biggest cake.”
I shrugged. “Elvis was good enough for me.”

“All right, then.” Mom holstered her gun, smiled, and offered Dominic her hand. “Welcome to the family, Dominic.”

Dominic blinked. I blinked.

“That’s it?” I demanded.

“That’s it,” she said, hand still outstretched. “Do I like that he’s ex-Covenant? I do not. But your grandmother would give me a lecture that lasted for weeks if I let that be the reason I rejected him. Your grandfather, your great-great-grandparents, all ex-Covenant. He chose you over a way of life. That makes him smart, in my book.”

“Does she realize I can hear her?” asked Dominic, glancing at me as he took Mom’s hand and shook gingerly.

Mom laughed. “I do, and that’s why I’m saying these things. If you hurt my little girl in a way outside the normal bounds of matrimony, I will break you. Your body will never be found. But apart from that, eh. My little girl got married. When are you going to make me a grandmother?”

“Mom!” I said, scandalized.

Dominic stared at my mother, mouth hanging slightly open. Then, slowly, he started to laugh. She joined in. The two of them were still laughing when I started to unload the U-Haul. There’s nothing in the world like family. And thank God for that.