

LOST REPUBLIC

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At the Constitutional Convention, Independence Hall
September 17, 1787

“Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?”
– Elizabeth Willing Powel

“A republic . . . if you can keep it.”
– Benjamin Franklin

On the road to Richmond:

Grant Woodford looked in his rearview mirror at the strobing blue lights of a police cruiser and took his feet off the gas pedal. His ancient Ford F-100 slowed quickly and rattled to a halt as he pulled off onto the shoulder. He took a deep breath and prepared himself for what he knew would be a life-and-death moment. Either he would convince this officer to let him proceed on his journey, or he would have to kill him.

His gut twisted into knots, Grant rolled down his window and waited as the patrol car pulled up behind him. Minutes passed; he knew the officer was inputting his license plate into SkyNet and an AI was checking for his travel permit. Which was a problem, as Grant didn't have one. He flipped a switch on the underside of the steering column and placed his hands on top of the steering wheel, resting his right index finger on a recessed trigger, praying he wouldn't have to use it—the anti-personnel mine on the other side of a one-inch steel plate embedded in the door would make for a gory and unnecessary death—not to mention, any investigation would inevitably lead back to the farm, putting him and everyone there in mortal jeopardy.

Grant kept his gaze fixed on the rearview mirror, his fingers playing across the top of the wheel. He let out a nervous huff. Finally, the cruiser's door opened and the officer emerged, headlights illuminating his hulking form—black uniform, brown jackboots, combat vest, holstered revolver and a visored helmet. The radio crackled with indistinct chatter from the patrol car. Grant kept his head facing forward, hands on the wheel where the officer could see them.

He heard the crunch of gravel under the officer's boots, then felt his presence at the window. "Citizen Woodford, what brings you out here in the middle of the night without travel authorization?" said the officer in a sonorous voice that carried a lick of Virginia country drawl. To his relief, Grant heard more curiosity than menace.

"Officer, I apologize for inconveniencing you at this late hour. I was summoned to the Richmond Penitentiary on short notice—I didn't have time to get a travel permit, but I assure you I'm on authorized business."

It was a lie. In truth, Grant's business with the warden was off the books and there could be no record of his travel. He was to report at the gate at precisely three a.m. Their business would take place in darkness, with the fewest possible number of prying eyes.

"Oh really?" said the trooper in an incredulous tone. "What possible business would you have at the penitentiary at this hour of the morning?"

"I have an appointment with the warden," Grant replied, turning his head to make eye contact. "Sir, may I ask your name?"

"State Trooper Milford," the officer replied matter-of-factly. He cleared his throat. "Now I'm going to have to ask you to step out of the vehicle."

Grant had rehearsed this moment a dozen times. "Of course, officer. Before I step out, may I tell you why I was summoned?"

A long pause. The trooper's curiosity got the best of him. "Okay, tell me."

"My wife."

"Your wife," Milford repeated back, his tone sharp with disbelief.

"Yessir . . . my wife. She's being released to my custody . . . that is, if I pay the required penalties and fines owed to the government."

"That's a SuperMax prison," Milford scoffed. "No one gets out of Richmond—ever."

Grant nodded in agreement. "Yessir, normally you'd be right. However, my wife was transferred from the Las Cruces Internment Camp specifically for this release. Are you interested to know how much it's going to cost?"

Grant watched Milford's eyes intently, hoping to God he was bright enough to see his opportunity. Bribes were the lubricant of every transaction between government and citizens these days—if Milford heard how much he was paying to spring Elizabeth, he might be open to a bribe. Not that they would call it that.

Milford's eyes narrowed. "How much?"

"One Bitcoin."

"*One Bitcoin!*" Milford scoffed in disbelief. "No fuckin' way. That's twenty-one million bucks—I mean, bits. No one has that kind of money."

Grant held his eyes. "Well, it just so happens I do, sir. And if you will be so kind as to escort me to the penitentiary, wait while I collect my wife, and see us safely home, I'll gladly transmit a generous sum to your account to thank you for your trouble."

Grant saw greed smolder in Milford's eyes. "How much?"

Grant smiled. "How does point-one sound?"

The trooper's eyes widened. He lifted an eyebrow. "As in, two million bits?"

As bribes went, it was a doozy. It would set up Milford for life.

"Yep," said Grant evenly. "Two million bits and change."

"Where'd you come into that much coin?" the trooper asked suspiciously.

Grant knew he had the man now; it was just a matter of greasing the wheels of greed with some truth-based lubricant. He shook his head and chuckled. "Well, when I got back from Afghanistan in 2020 and retired, I used my combat bonus to buy Bitcoin at \$10,000. To be honest, it seemed like kinda a sketchy investment at the time—" Grant laughed for effect "—but it sure paid off."

"What branch did you serve?"

"Air Force. I was a pilot. Flew F-16s."

"No shit? Well—thank you for your service. How many coins did you buy?"

"Five. Held onto them all these years. Haven't much use for them until now."

Milford gave Grant a quizzical look. "What did your wife do to get in trouble?"

"You ever hear of 'Never Go Back'?"

"The women's rights organization?"

"Yep . . . that's the one," Grant said.

"She made herself a nuisance, did she?"

"Sure did," Grant sighed, feigning disappointment. He elaborated, "She was out west giving talks . . . and then she disappeared. Didn't hear from her for years. Then last week, out of the blue, I got word she was at the Las Cruces Interment Camp. Made some inquiries about what it would take to get her out . . . and so here we are."

Milford nodded. "Here we are indeed. Well, citizen, I tell you what . . . if everything you told me is true and you have the bits . . . I'll escort you to Richmond and back for that point-one." He stuck out his hand. "You got yourself a deal."

Grant sighed with relief. He carefully lifted his fingers off the steering wheel, took the trooper's gloved hand, and shook it, saying, "If you have your phone handy, I'll transmit half the bits now, the rest when you wave me and my misbehaving bride goodbye at the exit to Charlottesville . . . sound fair?"

Milford snorted. "Stay right here. I'll get my phone."

Richmond SuperMax Penitentiary:

"We keep all of the politicians here," said Warden Coughlin in a high, reedy voice as they walked down a green-tiled hallway illuminated with glaring LED lights. Doors were spaced every dozen feet on both sides. "These are isolation cells." Coughlin gestured to a door stenciled **49**. "Wanna guess who's in that one?" he said conspiratorially.

"Uhhh . . . I have no idea," said Grant.

"That bitch Harris."

Grant's eyes went wide. "Seriously, *Harris*? . . . As in *Kamala Harris*?"

"Yep," Coughlin replied with a malevolent grin.

"I thought she was dead . . . I heard she died of Covid back in 2025."

"Nope. Trump liked keeping her alive, knowing he owned her ass, caged like an animal for life. Righteous retribution and all that . . . don't know what will happen to her now that he's passed."

"Maybe President Vance will show mercy on her."

Coughlin harrumphed. "Not likely."

Grant nodded in agreement, his blood running cold, thoughts spinning in his head. How many others – senators, congressmen, cabinet members, military leaders – were still alive, held in these cells?

Coughlin casually waved his hand at a door numbered **66**. "Buttface's in that one."

"You mean Pete Buttigieg?"

“Yep. That’s him alright, commie faggot. Convicted of sedition and sentenced to hang. Gonna happen any day now.”

Grant forced down the bile rising in his throat and held his tongue. His mission was to get Elizabeth out of this hellhole and take her home to the farm. Yes, he would report what he had learned to Intel, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

Besides, he thought, there was no way they could ever break into this fortress short of a tactical nuke – which the resistance had, but held for deterrence – easy to lob one at the White House – a stalemate that kept the civil war from escalating beyond the savagery that had already defined it – over a half million slaughtered on both sides.

“I appreciate the tour,” Grant said, thinking that for one Bitcoin, he probably could get steak and eggs for breakfast if he asked for it. But he wasn’t hungry. He was sick to his stomach. *How had it come to this?*

Warden Coughlin took a left at the next cross hallway and led Grant to a door with a sign above it in the same blocky stencil as the cell doors: **TRANSITION ROOM**.

“This is where you’ll wait for your wife. My staff is collecting her now. As we agreed, you’ll transmit one-half a Bitcoin upon taking custody of Mrs. Woodford, and the other half before you exit through the gate.”

Grant didn’t trust Coughlin as far as he could throw a rock and had already prepared a counteroffer. “I’m grateful for your mercy towards my wife, warden, and would like to thank you with a bonus . . . if you would be interested.”

Coughlin, a weaselly man with slicked-back strands of grey hair over a balding pate, looked slyly at Grant. “A bonus, eh?” He blinked once. “So pray tell, just what did you have in mind? Someone else you’re interested in getting released?”

Grant shook his head. “No, sir, nothing like that . . . I was thinking you might welcome five hundred thousand bits per month as a guarantee of my wife’s good behavior while she’s in my custody. Consider it a surety bond – strictly between us.”

It was the only way he knew that would keep Coughlin from reneging on their deal. Otherwise, there was nothing to keep him from having them both arrested as they exited the gate, charged with attempted escape. If not at the gate, then on the way home. Or the Stapos would arrest them tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that.

Coughlin’s expression betrayed that this was exactly what he had intended, but now he had an offer he couldn’t refuse: One BTC up-front, and then 500,000 bits per month – it was a *lot* of money. Blood money, but Elizabeth’s freedom was worth every bit.

“Sounds like you thought this through, Woodford,” Coughlin said with a toothy grin. He pulled out a tablet. “Now let’s see if you have the coin you say you have.”

Twenty minutes later, Grant wondered if he had made the biggest mistake of his life. He was locked in the Transition Room and might as well be a prisoner himself. But then he heard footsteps in the hallway and the lock beeped. He stood as the door swung open and there was Elizabeth, flanked by two female guards. Grant winced inwardly, seeing

she had aged a decade in five years. She looked frail, her face painfully gaunt. She wore an orange shock collar around her neck. Her eyes flared with surprise when she saw him.

Coughlin came into the room. Behind him, two armed guards stood in the hallway. The female guards released Elizabeth's arms. Grant strode forward and embraced her. Clothed in threadbare grey polyester prison garb, she felt like a scarecrow in his arms. "Can we take the collar off now?" Grant said, his eyes fixed on Coughlin.

"At the gate," the warden replied in his nasal voice. "Let's go."

Grant searched Elizabeth's eyes, knowing she was wondering if she was dreaming. "Grant, how did you –" she started to speak, but he shushed her with a finger to her lips. "I'll explain later. I'm taking you home."

Her eyes welled with tears. He took her hand and led her out of the room.

At the gate, Grant transmitted the second half of his payment to Coughlin's phone. The guards removed Elizabeth's collar. They passed through a door and stepped outside. Officer Milford was waiting. Behind him, the sky paled with the first light of dawn.

Peaceful Acres:

"What's with the tents?" said Elizabeth as they crested the last hill on the long drive up from Charlottesville and caught sight of Peaceful Acres – the Woodford Family name for a farm that went back three generations. It wasn't much of a farm by rights – six acres of sloped pasture, a half-acre pond, and a clapboard-sided farmhouse. The pasture was lined with rows of green army tents, making it look like a military encampment.

It was the first thing Elizabeth had said since they left the main highway and started the long climb into the Blue Ridge Mountains – a silence that they both needed after an hour of frenzied conversation as they drove away from the penitentiary in Richmond, following Milford's patrol car on their way home. Grant was still processing some of the things Elizabeth had told him about life in the internment camps, and he knew it was the same for her. America had become a nightmare – inside the camps and out – a hellscape of marauding gangs, militias, warlords, the resistance, the One State Army, and of course, worst of all, the Stapos – State Secret Police.

"Farm laborers," Grant explained. "We're working the land for about a mile in every direction – the Sheffield, Harper and Collins farms – about six hundred acres in all."

Elizabeth didn't seem to register his explanation, her attention fixed on the pasture. "I don't see Julie's horses."

Grant sighed. "I'm sorry, babe, they're gone . . . we had to put them down and eat them a few years back . . . the winter of '27." He shrugged an apology. "It was the only meat we had." He glanced over to see tears streaming down her face.

They pulled up to the house. Grant led Elizabeth by the hand inside, taking her upstairs to the master bedroom. He gestured to the closet. "Still a bunch of your clothes in there." He inclined his head to the bathroom. "I'm sure you'll want to shower first."

Standing like a zombie, Elizabeth stared blankly at the bed, a four-poster queen with a quilt Grant knew she would recognize as her own. He excused himself, "I'll just head downstairs and leave you to it. I'll make us coffee."

Elizabeth fixed her gaze on him. "You didn't say how you did it, Grant. How did you find me? How much did it cost to get me out? You bribed the warden, didn't you?"

Grant nodded. "There's a guy, Valentine Payton – a bona fide genius – he found you. I'll introduce you later. He hacked into SkyNet and found you in the prison registry. And yes, I bribed the warden. As for how much –" Grant shook his head ruefully. "Let's just say you're an expensive piece of ass, Mrs. Woodford."

Elizabeth flashed the first genuine smile Grant had seen, her brown eyes luminous, crow's feet crinkling the outside corners. Those were something new. It didn't matter; all he could think of was how beautiful she was, how good it was to have her home.

"I'm going to shower now, Mr. Woodford," she said affectionately. "When all the hot water has run out, I'll get dressed, come downstairs, and take you up on that offer of coffee. I haven't had real coffee since . . ." her voice tapered off. "Remind me you tell you about it . . . my last cup of coffee."

Forty-five minutes later on the screened-in porch, Grant sat facing Elizabeth across a dinette table. She wore a loose cotton frock with a floral pattern, her hair still damp, draped across one shoulder. She held a steaming cup of coffee in her slender hands and took small sips, joy spreading across the almost translucent flesh of her face.

"You said you had a coffee story," Grant invited, his eyes taking in the scene behind her – workers going in and out of the communal bathroom – a white structure made of two-by-fours and plywood, a hose running across the lawn from the well to supply the showers and sinks inside. He needed to get the hose underground before winter.

"Oh, yes . . . my last coffee. I was in a Starbucks in downtown Albuquerque. I was scheduled to give a talk that morning. That's when they came for me – the first time I'd ever seen Stapos. They arrested me and put me in a black van with a bag over my head. They took me to an interrogation facility. I was there about a week . . . I lost track of time. Eventually, I was bussed with illegals to the Internment Camp at Las Cruces."

"And you haven't had coffee since," Grant surmised, knowing there would be plenty of time to learn more awful details about life in the camps.

Elizabeth sniffed. "Well, you know I like my coffee strong. We made pretend coffee, but it was just hot water poured over chicory or anything else we could find. Sometimes people smuggled tea into the camp. But I hate tea."

Grant nodded. He wanted to ask her about evidence of the death camps – facilities that looked like AI data centers, powered by SMRs – small modular nuclear reactors – industrial incinerators so powerful they cooked their victims down to a handful of ashes.

Intel reported there were no old people in the internment camps. No one who wasn't able-bodied. Those who weren't were taken away to "special camps" for the infirmed and elderly. It was the new Social Security, as the dark saying went. The other expression

for it was “being raptured.” Surely Elizabeth had noticed the absence of elderly people in the camps. But now was not the time to delve into such horrors.

Instead, Grant posited, “Is it as bad in the camps as they say?”

Elizabeth put down her cup. “Yes and no,” she replied. “Some of the guards are sadistic assholes, and there’s never enough to eat. It’s a work camp and the inmates are slave labor. But inside the camp, it’s . . .” she swallowed the lump in her throat. “I saw the most amazing kindness. Black, white, brown . . . it didn’t matter. People looked after one another. A situation like that brings out the best or worst in humanity. What I saw was the best. I worked in the maternity ward of the camp hospital. Oh, my god, the babies. If Trump wanted more white babies, his plan backfired—those camps are breeding grounds for mixed-race romance and the inevitable babies that come with it.”

Grant chuckled. “Unintended consequences. It’s the same here—not babies—but the kindness. This camp—” he waved his hand toward tent city “—these people are good to each other. They’re all citizens third-class: doctors, lawyers, plumbers, technicians, housewives, you name it—all people who voted for Harris, but here, inside the camp, their common humanity shines.”

“I’d like to go out and meet them,” Elizabeth said, picking up her cup and taking a long swallow. She let out a satisfied *aaahhhh*. Just then, raucous honking filled the air, and a moment later, a formation of geese caromed into the pond. “Still have geese living on the pond, I see,” she said with amusement. “I don’t suppose one of them is Emmy?”

Grant smiled. “Actually, yes—she’s the matriarch now.”

“Ha. And they get along with the workers? No complaints about goose poop?”

“Live and let live,” Grant chuckled. “The geese were here first.”

Elizabeth nodded, her expression thoughtful. She gazed down at her cup for a minute, and then said, “I can’t believe I’m home. I never thought I would ever be back.” She looked in the direction of the towering sycamore that stood at the near end of the earthen dam forming the pond. “I see Majesty is still as majestic as ever.”

“She’s 255 years old this year,” Grant remarked, his eyes following Elizabeth’s gaze to the tree, admiring its canopy of leaves fluttering in a breeze. “Older than the United States. Well—we didn’t even make it to 250 years—but you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Grant got up and refilled their cups. He returned and handed Elizabeth her coffee. “There’s bacon and eggs in the fridge. You must be hungry. I’ll make breakfast.”

“Real bacon? I’d like that very much, thank you. But not just yet. This is so nice, just sitting here with you.” Elizabeth sipped her coffee, looking out on the pond, watching the geese paddle about. Grant studied her face, seeing her eyes cloud over with what looked like melancholy. “You okay?” he asked.

“What happened, Grant?” she wondered. “How is it that a sycamore tree lasted longer than our country?”

Grant shook his head. "That's a good question . . . I don't know."

"I still remember when I visited you here . . . after Julie died." She swallowed a sob. "Do you remember? You had me sit in that Adirondack chair on the dam and let me read your diary – your letters to Julie. You told me how you saved Majesty."

Grant remembered well. Their beloved daughter had been killed in a mass shooting at her high school in McLean, Virginia. He returned from Afghanistan for the funeral and they grieved together, but their marriage fractured under the weight of their mutual grief. Elizabeth became the star of NeverMore, a national gun-control organization, traveling the country and giving impassioned speeches. He turned to alcohol to numb his sorrow. Eventually, she left him. An ugly DUI forced him to retire early; fortunately, he was given an honorable discharge.

When he moved back to the farm to sober up, he found the majestic old sycamore in mortal peril – infested with vines, some thicker than his arms – they tugged on its limbs like Lilliputian ropes on Gulliver. All it would take was a gale and the tree would topple. Another indignity: somewhere along the way, someone had wrapped barbed wire around the trunk to anchor a fence . . . a rusty iron girdle that cut deeply into the bark.

One day, in a moment of inspiration, he gave the tree its name – *Majesty* – and decided to save it. Not that he had any fondness for monarchy, but *God Save the Queen*. He set to work. Freeing the trunk of the hateful barbed wire took the better part of a day, but when he finished, he swore he heard Majesty groan with relief.

The next day he climbed up into the tree with long-handled loppers and a handsaw. Some of the vines were poison oak, forcing him to wear goggles, gloves, and a facemask. It was miserable work, yet with every gnarly vine severed and dropped to the ground, he imagined Majesty's gratitude. He knew he was projecting his feelings onto a tree, but it was therapeutic for him to free her of those parasitic vines.

"I guess our republic was like Majesty," Grant said. "She was girdled with barbed wire and a tangle of horrible, choking vines. She needed saving. But we were too lazy or stupid to realize just how perilous things had become. People voted for Trump because it was good for their stock portfolios, or because they believed his false promises that he would make their lives better. Instead, the republic fell and we got a prison nation."

Valentine Payton:

They were eating their breakfast when a tall, slender young man with angular features and a ropey ponytail climbed the porch steps and knocked. Grant waved him in.

"Babe, this is Valentine Payton, the fellow who hacked SkyNet and found you."

Elizabeth rose and extended her hand. "I can't thank you enough, Valentine. Grant tells me you're a genius."

Payton blushed and took her hand. "Please, call me Val."

"Would you care to join us for breakfast?" Elizabeth invited, gesturing at their plates. "There's plenty more in the kitchen."

Payton gazed at their breakfast longingly and long enough to see that he was hungry. "You've just got home. I don't want to intrude," he said.

"Val—please," insisted Elizabeth. "The least I can do for the man who found me is make him breakfast. Would you like coffee?"

Payton grinned. "Sure, if you have some. You sure I'm not intruding?"

"Absolutely," said Elizabeth, squeezing his arm before she headed off to the kitchen.

"How did everything go?" Val inquired of Grant once they were alone.

"Good. Thank God that trooper was smart enough to take the money and run."

"I saw the transaction. And the two with Coughlin . . . an expensive morning."

Grant nodded. "Actually—it was more than you know. I had to bribe Coughlin with monthly payments or he would've double-crossed us."

"How much?" Val asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"500,000 bits a month."

Payton let out a low whistle. "Well, it's worth it to keep the Stapos from visiting the farm. Anyway, Intel is asking for a report. You learn anything interesting?"

"Yes. First, the place is a fortress. Second, the warden is a braggart. Third, he told me they keep all the major political and military prisoners there, supposedly including Kamala Harris. Pete Buttigieg, too—convicted of sedition and sentenced to be hanged. The warden implied it could happen any day."

"*Jesus.*" Payton rubbed his chin. "I thought Kamala Harris was dead."

"The warden told me Trump liked keeping her alive, her knowing she won the election and imprisoned for life. 'Righteous retribution' he called it."

"*Sheez* . . . when Director Kelly learns this, he's going to order a raid—fortress or not."

"I hope so. But it's going to take a tactical nuke or something like it."

They discussed prison break scenarios for fifteen minutes until Elizabeth returned with a plate of bacon, eggs, toast, and an urn of coffee. "Sorry I didn't think to ask you how you like your eggs," she apologized. "I hope scrambled is okay?"

“Cooked is okay, thanks,” Payton grinned, taking the urn while Elizabeth set his plate on the table. “Eat,” she ordered.

While Payton ate, Grant found his thoughts returning to Majesty. “We were talking about the giant sycamore down by the pond when you showed up,” he said. “Did you know it’s 255 years old this year?”

“Majesty?” Payton said after he swallowed a mouthful of scrambled egg.

“You know her name?” Elizabeth remarked.

“Everyone does. And the geese. Emmy’s the matriarch, right?”

“How do you know all this stuff?” Elisabeth enquired with genuine curiosity.

Payton gave a grin. “Let’s just say I know everything about everything around here.”

Grant snorted. “There’s truth to that.”

“Well,” said Elizabeth, “since you know everything and you hacked SkyNet, answer me this. In the camps, all we ever got was propaganda. They said after the Supreme Court ruled Trump the winner, they went back and counted all the votes again, state by state. They said Trump won by three million votes, and was rightfully elected president.”

Payton laughed. “No – it was the other way around – absolutely. Harris won by three million votes, 280 to 258 electoral votes. It was close, but she won.”

“I thought so,” said Elizabeth, “but ‘TRUMP WON!’ is all we heard for years.”

“It *is* a shame,” said Payton thoughtfully. “If it hadn’t been so close, it probably wouldn’t have gone to the Supreme Court. Imagine if a million more people had voted for Harris . . . democrats, independents, maybe even some Republicans.”

“I think more people would’ve voted if they had known how bad it would turn out,” said Grant. “Especially the Republicans who stayed home. Imagine if a million of them had said ‘Enough is enough – saving our republic is more important.’”

“Like that Republican politician – what was his name?” Val tilted his eyes upward, scrolling through a mental database. After a few seconds, it came to him: “Geoff Duncan,” he proclaimed with satisfaction. “Former Lieutenant Governor of Georgia, a Republican. I imagine he’s dead, or in one of those cells at the SuperMax in Richmond. He begged his fellow Republicans to vote for Harris to save the republic, then spend the next four years rebuilding their party . . . GOP 2.0, he called it.”

“Too bad they didn’t listen,” said Elizabeth.

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“Yeah,” Grant agreed bitterly. “It comes down to the Republicans had the power to save the republic, and they did nothing . . . they stood by and let it fall.”

Payton nodded. “Benjamin Franklin warned about that back in 1787. Something about having a republic – but only if we could keep it.”

“You don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone,” Elizabeth sang the lyrics from an old Joni Mitchell tune.

“If only we could somehow send a message back in time to 2024 and warn everyone,” said Payton. “Show them just how much was at stake in that election . . .”

“Do you think they’d listen?” Elizabeth wondered.

“I don’t know,” said Grant. “But it would be worth a try.”