

CHAPTER 16

by

A.R.R. Ash

SITTING AT HIS OFFICE DESK, WARD “RUMOR” DREW QUADRUPLE-CHECKED THE TIME FOR THE meeting in the email he’d received from a source calling herself or himself Whistling Virologist. Three-fifteen. It was now 3:47 PM, and no word from this supposed source.

He swiveled in his chair to look out the third-story window. No pedestrians walked the sidewalks. Though some cars were out and about, the streets were eerily quiet—no incessant honking or shouts to hurry up or get out of the way. After a year and a half of near-quarantine conditions, most of the storefronts were shuttered.

“And in other news,” came the anchor’s voice from the flatscreen on the wall, “another state has filed for bankruptcy.”

Ward swiveled to face the television and shook his head. “How’d it come to this?”

The anchor continued in his practiced cadence, “Ever since Congress passed the States’ Insolvency and Bankruptcy Act three months ago, five states have filed for Chapter Sixteen bankruptcy protections—Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Kansas, and, now, Georgia.”

Well, there goes the neighborhood.

Ward said aloud, “I’ll give ’em until four, then I might as well call it an early day.”

Chapter 16

Crossing his legs at his ankles, Ward put his feet on his desk, crossed his arms over his chest, and closed his eyes.

A soft beep from his laptop roused Ward at 5:00 PM. He yawned, wiped his eyes, and looked at the newest entry in his inbox from WhistlingVirologist@SecureMail.com. Sitting up straight, he clicked on the message.

Ward, if you're reading this, something's happened to me. This message was set to send automatically, and the link below will lead to a file that contains all the proof I managed to gather that COVID-19 was manufactured by my employer, BioPharma Research, Inc. The link will expire after a single use. Please don't let whatever happened to me be for nothing.

Constance P. Hobbs a/k/a WhistlingVirologist

Ward leaned back in his chair, let out a breath, and ran a hand over his face. His heart beat in anticipation.

Could this be for real?

He'd once been a respected investigative journalist with an enviable career—a hardworking, pavement-pounding reporter like the early muckrakers. But his pursuit of a story about a secret lobbying campaign to pass a Constitutional amendment granting corporations the right to vote ultimately led to his disgrace and left him with his epithet. He'd done his due diligence, spent years tracking leads—everything seemed to check out. However, when the story fell apart in a spectacular way, he was discredited and ostracized from the reporting community.

A.R.R. Ash

If I were paranoid, I'd say that the entire amendment story had been fabricated with the sole purpose of discrediting me. Well, it worked.

Now, the only stories that found him were about lizard people infiltrating world governments or the U.S. government making secret deals with aliens or an uncharted island where Elvis, Princess Diana, Tupac, and Amelia Earhart sat drinking piña coladas together on the beach.

Could this be another one of those stories? Is this Constance the WhistlingVirologist just another crank?

Taking a deep breath and looking around the room as if spies or thugs from BioPharma might be lurking in his office, Ward clicked on the link and downloaded a .zip file.