

# Eminent Domain

Ronald R Johnson  
(Author of *Small World*)

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The Aubrey Family gratefully acknowledges their use of lyrics from the song “Let’s Get Together,” made famous in 1967 by the Youngbloods as “Get Together.” The song was written by Chet Powers (Chester William Powers, Jr.) © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Universal Music Publishing Group.

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## DEDICATION

To Emily...

who kept begging me to write more chapters.



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## 1 THE WATCHER

*“You don’t know meeeeeeee...”*

His voice is just a whisper. Very creepy.

*“...but I know youuuuuuuuuuu...”*

We see a variety of men and women on the screen, one after another. Not actors. Real people.

*“I’ve been watching you...”*

They’re totally unaware of what’s happening...

*“...and you didn’t even know it...”*

...minding their own business, doing things they don’t intend to make public...

*“...until it was too late...”*

I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

The next day at breakfast, I mentioned it to Jake. Every morning, Moth cooks for Jake and me. Jake’s the guy who rents a room in our attic, and Moth is my mom. Her real name’s Molly, but she won’t let me call her that. I’ve never been willing to believe that I’m her biological child, so I call her Moth as a compromise. It’s short for “Mother” but doesn’t sound like it. I’ve called her Moth for most of my sixteen years, and I’ve gotten away with it so far.

I’ve always preferred to think that I’m adopted. For one thing, we don’t look alike. Or I hope not. She’s pudgy, with hands shaped like mittens. Her eyes are always bulging, and her hair stands straight up on her head as if a bomb just blew up in her face. And that’s when she’s relaxed. You don’t want to see her get upset.

Jake is six feet tall, muscular, and in his mid-thirties. His hair looks white, although I guess it's actually a very light shade of blonde, and he keeps it cut short. It accentuates his bright blue eyes.

He regarded me with interest when I arrived for breakfast that spring morning. "What's wrong, Dawson?"

"You know how I hate TV, right?"

Moth sighed. "Not this again."

Everybody's got their thing. Some are vegans, others are against fur coats. Mine's TV. I refuse to go near it, and I think everybody else should, too. But Moth always has it on, even when she's too busy to watch it. That's why I don't like to hang out at home. One reason, anyway.

"I passed through the family room yesterday," I told Jake, "and I saw the opening credits of this show. It was the most disturbing thing I've ever seen on television, and that's saying a lot."

"What was it?" he asked.

I told him and he grinned.

"*The Watcher!*" Moth said, her eyes bulging bigger than normal. "That's one of my favorite shows!" She imitated the guy: "*I've been watching you...and you didn't even know it...*"

Jake smirked and turned back to me. "Not your kind of program."

"No TV show is. But that one... I just don't get it, Jake! Why would they even make a show like that? And why would people watch it? What's this society all about?"

Jake's cool. He understands me. He knows when I want an answer and when I just want to rant. Today I was ranting.

"Besides," I continued, "isn't that against the law? Putting people's faces on TV without their consent?"

"The world's changing," Jake told me. "Faster than you realize."

"Well, I love that show," Moth said. She stared out the kitchen window and added, "Just think! He could be anywhere..."

"That's what bothers me," I told her.

"I get goosebumps," she said. "Maybe someday..."

I stared at her. "What are you saying?"

She looked self-conscious and waved the thought away. "I'm just being silly."

"Moth! You actually want to meet that guy?"

She sipped her coffee, thought a moment, then answered me. "I just think... here we are, living our humdrum lives... and someday, without warning... it could all change."

"For the worse, you mean!"

She sighed. "I suppose."

I resumed my rant. I hate TV, especially Reality TV, but that *Watcher*

is a prime example of what's wrong with the world. You never see the guy himself. You just see everything *he* sees. And he sees it all.

"It isn't that I'm guilty of anything," I explained. "I just value my privacy. And I resent the fact that someone could come walking into my life and take it away."

Jake glanced at Moth. "Apparently, you and your mom are diametrically opposed on that subject."

"As we are on most subjects," I replied.

Moth scowled at me. "Dawson, don't exaggerate."

Jake studied her a moment. "I have to admit, though, that I've never heard anybody say they want to meet the guy from *The Watcher*. Most people are quite upset when they do."

"I know," she said. "I wouldn't mind being on a reality show of some kind, though. I think it would be fun."

Hardly a word was spoken for the rest of the meal, but occasionally Moth would turn and look out the window, then shake her head and sigh.

## 2 BROKEN GLASS

“I wouldn’t be able to do it,” Kendra was saying.

“Are you kidding me?” I replied. “The school’s burning down, and you’re the only one who can get to the fire extinguisher... and you *wouldn’t be able to do it?*”

“I couldn’t break the glass,” she said.

Her mom chuckled. “Kendra’s been afraid of broken glass for most of her life.”

“Is that a thing?” I asked. “Is there a broken-glass phobia?”

“There is for Kendra.”

I looked at Walter, then back at his sister. “Why didn’t I know this about you?”

For as long as I can remember, Kendra and I have pretended we’re married. She’s a few months younger than I am, and we’ve played together since we were little. We’ve just assumed we’ll always be together. Her parents have never teased us about it, never told us we’re cute together, and never said or done anything to embarrass us. That’s one of the things I love about them.

Kendra’s got long blonde hair. She’s always been pretty, but in the past year she’s become beautiful, just like her mom. They’re almost like twins, except that Mrs. Fox has shoulder-length hair and is twenty years older, of course.

We were in the Foxes’ backyard on this summer’s morning. Kendra was pushing Benny Venema on the swing set, and her mom was sitting in a lawn chair on their cement-slab patio, reading the news on her cell phone. Walter and I were doing our stretches on the grass, getting ready for our morning run. Benny’s older brother Landon was in the family room on the Foxes’ computer. There was a screen in the sliding glass door, so he could

be part of our conversation.

I couldn't let it go. "Do you have nightmares about this, Kendra?"

She nodded. "Sometimes." After a moment's thought, she added, "I probably will tonight."

Walter grimaced. "See what you've started, Dawson?"

"So if you're on the sidewalk and there's a broken bottle ahead of you..."

"I walk around it," she said. "And I try not to think about it."

"Wow. I can't believe this never happened while we were walking together."

"It probably has," said Mrs. Fox. "You just didn't realize it."

Landon called from inside the house, "Careful, Kendra. He'll probably dump you, now that he knows."

I laughed, but nobody else did. In fact, the Foxes all got quiet and raised their eyebrows at each other.

I broke the silence. "So when did you start feeling this way?"

Kendra looked guilty. "Feeling what way, Dawson?"

"Afraid of glass."

"Ohhhh!"

Walter rolled his eyes and Mrs. Fox shot him a warning glance.

"Since my cousin Alex was injured. We're the same age. How old was she, Mom?"

"Five, I think."

"She was running inside our grandma's house and didn't know about the glass front door. She ran right through it. They had to take her to the hospital. There were surgeries..."

"And you know what an empath Kendra is," said Mrs. Fox. "The next time she saw Alex—the bandages were off by then, but she had scars all over her body—"

"She freaked, of course," said Walter. "And she kept talking as if it had happened to *her*. And she's been that way ever since."

We all sat there a moment. Kendra stopped pushing Benny and looked off into space as though she were reliving the horror of it.

"Wow," I said.

Landon slid open the screen door and joined us. "The thing about Dawson is, now he's not going to let this go until he understands it."

"So what?" I said.

"So sometimes I wish you'd just take things at face value."

He turned to Mrs. Fox. "A couple of weeks before school let out, the sophomore class took a field trip to the Science and Industry Museum."

"I know," she said. "I was there as a chaperone."

"Oh... right... I forgot. It was a humiliating experience. That's all I

remember.”

“Because *I* got chewed out?” I said. “That was humiliating for *you*?”

“Well, yeah. I’m your best friend. If you get into trouble, it reflects badly on me.”

Walter interrupted. “What about all the times you’ve made snarky comments and Dawson was punished for laughing?”

“That’s not the same thing! That day at the museum... it was so embarrassing, Mrs. Fox.”

“I was there, Landon!”

“Yes, but you weren’t standing right next to him. He started interrogating that guy... what do you call him?”

“The docent,” she said.

“Yeah, *that* guy. He’s the expert. We’re not supposed to question his expertise!”

“Why not?” I asked. “If he’s the expert, shouldn’t he be able to answer my objections?”

“But he didn’t like it. Couldn’t you tell? He kept saying, ‘Keep your questions until the end.’”

“But he was contradicting himself,” I said. “I had to point that out before the moment passed.”

“Actually, you didn’t have to point it out *at all!* Didn’t you notice how uncomfortable you made the rest of us?”

Mrs. Fox interrupted. “Landon, you know how Dawson is. If he hears something that doesn’t make sense, he’s all over it. He *can’t* just let it go.”

“But that’s my point, Mrs. Fox. Why not? Why can’t he just tune out like the rest of us? He acts like he has a moral obligation to speak up—right then!”

“Maybe he does.”

Landon stopped. “Are you serious?”

“Very.”

“Why would *anyone* have a moral obligation to tell a docent that he’s talking bullsh—”

“Watch your language, Landon. And let me tell you something. Dawson’s got a rare gift. All the education in the world can’t give it to you. You’ve either got it or you don’t. And most people don’t. But he does.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What’s he got?”

“A BS detector. And if somebody’s been born with that, then maybe he *does* have a moral obligation to speak up—for everybody’s sake.”

I love Mrs. Fox, by the way.

Walter joined in. “Besides, Landon, *you* ask questions. All the time. And some of them are pretty annoying.”

“Yes, but I’m just talking. I’m not probing. I’m not trying to pin people to the wall. You should’ve seen that docent when Dawson was done with him.”

Mrs. Fox laughed. “He looked like he wanted to cry.”

“Why are you still upset about this?” I asked. “Ms. Ramelle took me off in a corner and lit into me. What more do you want?”

“I just wish you’d consider *my* feelings sometimes.”

“*Your* feelings!”

“Yes.”

I looked at Walter and laughed. “Poor Landon.”

“It’s always about him,” said Walter.

But Mrs. Fox’s mind had drifted to something else. Kendra and Benny were following a tadpole to the far side of the yard, and she was watching them. She spoke very softly, and I couldn’t tell if her words were meant for Landon or not.

“Dawson needs to be told the truth,” she whispered. “Even if it hurts.”

### 3 THE MYSTERIOUS MOUNTAIN

Walter and I walked around to the front yard and did one last set of stretches.

We live on Carson Street, a cul-de-sac that most people in our town have never heard of. Taking State Route 10 east out of town (that's Morrow Road to us locals), it's the last street on the right before you cross the Interstate. Since there are no other residential streets nearby, it seems like an afterthought, a last little settlement before you leave the town behind.

The Foxes' house is on the west side of the street and the Venemas live across from them on the east, the side that runs parallel to the highway. Miss Emma is next door to the Foxes, and Mr. Nemsmith is across the street from her, next to the Venemas. My house is at the end of the cul-de-sac, facing all the others.

It's a small street, and we're very close, both literally and figuratively. We're always there for each other. If somebody has a leaky roof, we all climb up and repair it. If somebody's dog escapes, we all go out looking for it. When there's a death or illness, everybody prepares dinners and brings them over to the family that needs it. If somebody can't mow their lawn, we make sure it gets done.

"Ready?" Walter asked.

I nodded.

Turning right on Morrow Road, we crossed the highway. The overpass was on an incline. On the other side of the bridge and off to the right was Victor's Summit, which was like a small mountain.

"So tempting!" Walter said, looking at the winding drive leading to the top.

"Yes."



But we stayed on the main road.

Walter and I train on inclines whenever we can, although he's much better at uphill running than I am. He holds the state record for the Mile and the Two Mile, and it's due in part to the fact that he seeks out paths that go uphill. I know it's hard to believe, but he actually runs faster when he's on an incline. And the road to Victor's Summit is the steepest path around.

For as far back as the establishment of our town in the early 1800s, the land on top of that hill has belonged to rich people. They never did anything with it, even though it passed hands for nearly two centuries. Recently, though, it was sold to some out-of-town developers, and they immediately got down to work on it. They had cranes and bulldozers up there; they even used dynamite. It was the biggest construction project I had ever witnessed, and it went on for years. We could hear it, but because the hill towered so high above Carson Street, we couldn't see anything.

"What could they be doing that would take so long?" Mrs. Fox asked one day.

Mr. Fox shook his head. "Nobody seems to know, and I get the impression we're not supposed to."

When the wall went up, our curiosity skyrocketed. It was made of black iron, two stories high, and it spanned the entire perimeter of the hilltop. As soon as it was finished, Walter and I decided to check it out. We were running one day, and as we approached the road leading up the hill, he asked, "Want to?"

"Of course!" I said.

We weren't supposed to be up there and we knew it. That's why we went.

The road was freshly paved. It started at the base of the hill then zig-zagged all the way up. It was a good workout, but the mystery of it was the real draw. When we got to the top, we were amazed at what we saw. Like the wall itself, the gate was a couple stories high, solid, and made of iron.

"Who's going to live here?" I asked. "King Kong?"

"An army wouldn't be able to get through that!" said Walter.

"Is that what they're expecting?" I asked. "To be attacked?"

"Look at this!" he said.

There was a tiny slot in the gate, at eye level. He started to slide it open and a man's voice yelled at us. "Step away from there!"

We whirled around and saw an officer getting out of his police car. We had been so intent on what we were doing, we hadn't even heard him approach. He made us show him our IDs and asked us a bunch of questions.

“This is private property,” he said. “Didn’t you see the sign at the entrance?”

We shook our heads.

He made us get into the back of his squad car and sit quietly while he scribbled on a clipboard and typed onto a computer terminal. After a while he spoke gibberish into the hand-held device on his dashboard, and the dispatcher said something incoherent in reply.

Then he drove us back down to the road and across the overpass to Carson Street. He made me stay in the car while he escorted Walter up to the Foxes’ porch, rang the doorbell, and explained to Mrs. Fox what had happened. Returning to the car, he drove me two doors down to my house and we went through the same thing.

Moth answered the door. The way she acted, you’d think I had robbed a bank. “I’m so sorry, officer... I’ve tried to raise him to obey the law... Yes, that’s terrible... Oh, that’s so generous of you for not prosecuting! We’ll make sure he never does it again, officer... Thank you, officer! Thank you! Thank you!”

When we were in the house, she stood at the window until he drove away. Then she stomped over to me. “You came *that close* to being arrested,” she said.

“For what! We were just looking around!”

She pointed her finger in my face. “Don’t you *ever* go up there again!”

When our gang was all together the next day, Landon and Kendra couldn’t believe that we were treated like criminals. Walter’s mom and dad weren’t upset with him, but they did speak sternly to him.

“Stay away from that place!” they told him. “It’s nothing but trouble.”

## 4 KENDRA

Today, like every day since then, Walter and I resisted the temptation to go up the winding drive to Victor's Summit. Instead, we kept running east on Morrow Road. As it rounded to the left, Ramath Rapids came into view.

The guys and Kendra and I had spent many summers on that river. It's great for inner-tubing but also dangerous because it's so fast. The river descends sharply at that point, and it continues downhill for the next few miles. A kid from school drowned in it a couple of years earlier; they found his bloated body far downstream. You've got to be a good swimmer if you tip over your canoe anywhere along that route. Fortunately, all of us in our gang swim well. But we're also good at canoeing and inner-tubing, so we usually don't fall out, even though we can get rowdy at times.

Walter and I ran alongside the river for a few miles. It gave me a chance to think, and I had a lot to think about.

It was a beautiful June morning, the second week of summer break. We all spend a lot of time together in the summer, since Mrs. Fox watches Benny—and, technically, Landon—while Mrs. V is at work, and I hang out at the Foxes whenever I can. The guys and Kendra and I are together year-round, but summers are the best. The Foxes and Venemas vacation together each year, and they always invite me. We're like one big family.

My relationship with Kendra is unique. When we were little, we talked openly about being married someday, but we became especially close when Mr. Venema died of cancer. We were both thirteen. It was devastating for everyone on Carson Street but especially for Kendra, because she's so tender-hearted. It was doubly painful for me to watch her work through her grief—a grief that I, too, was feeling, but not so intensely. For a while it seemed like she would never come out from the

cloud of depression. But then, together, we came up with a solution.

Benny.

We decided to put our whole focus on him. He was three at the time, and we both felt deeply sorry for him because his father had died, his mother had to work full-time, and his older brother Landon considered him a pest. So Kendra and I formed a pact: we would raise Benny as if he were our own child. It would help not only Benny but us, too. It would be our little secret—our together thing. That’s when the idea of us as a twosome really took off. We became like a married couple, with Benny as our kid. Minus the romantic part, of course.

Mr. and Mrs. Fox were kind of old-fashioned about some things, and dating was one of them. Kendra couldn’t go out with a guy until she was sixteen. We both took that in stride. She was an obedient daughter, and I respected her parents way too much to push it.

“I’ll wait for you,” I told her.

“You’d better!” she said.

She was protective of me all through middle school, making sure the other girls knew I was off-limits. And we waited.

Once we started high school in the city, though, the older guys noticed Kendra, and she liked the attention. I was uncomfortable because I didn’t know what I was supposed to do when they hit on her, so I just stood by and watched. That seemed to be what she wanted. When she became the star pitcher on the girls’ Junior Varsity softball team, her popularity increased.

By the time of my sixteenth birthday earlier this year, things had changed a lot between us. She didn’t seem to care that we were on the home stretch. And now that her birthday was less than a month away, I dreaded it.

After several miles, Walter and I turned back and headed home.

He and I rarely talk when we run. We just enjoy getting out together, and we do it almost every morning during summer break. We’re like brothers. He’s a year older than me.

A few miles before we got home, he kept looking at me funny and clearing his throat as if there was something on his mind. Finally, he spoke.

“Dawson...”

*Please don’t*, I thought. Then I cringed and waited.

“Do you want to go up to the park?”

Relieved, I nodded.

Riverside Park was a great place to run, with hills and winding roads.

We ran at an even pace most of the time, but at Riverside Park we went all out. Today, I was ready. As soon as we reached the entrance, he picked up speed and I did, too.

He noticed me keeping up with him and laughed. Then he turned on the rocket power and shot straight up the steepest road in the park. I fell behind slightly but stayed close.

*Maybe this time I can beat him*, I thought.

I ran my fastest, but when we got to the end I was several seconds behind. We both just laughed.

“I tried!” I told him.

## 5 AN ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN

“I’m not one to brag,” said Mr. Nemsmith, “but my hydrangeas are exactly the right shade of blue. Exactly! And that doesn’t happen all by itself!”

I had agreed to help him spread mulch this afternoon, and it was quite a job. Although his property was no larger than any of the others on Carson Street, he had turned it into a botanical wonder. From the road all the way to the sound barricade at the back of his property, there were flowers and shrubs and trees stretching sunward, with whole communities of happily buzzing bees, flitting butterflies, and chirping birds taking flight and landing within inches of each other. In the middle of it all, if you looked closely, you might be able to see his little house, but since it was decorated with hanging baskets and window boxes full of flowers, you might have to search a while. He didn’t have a thatched roof, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he had considered installing one.

It took us all afternoon to spread the red cedar mulch. He kept pausing to inhale its aroma. He had to pay extra for it, but he loved the look and texture of it, and the smell.

A delivery truck had unloaded the mulch onto his driveway earlier in the day, and I spent the afternoon shoveling it into a wheelbarrow and carting it to the spot where he was kneeling on a rubber pad. He pushed the mulch gently around each plant with gloved hands, speaking lovingly to each one.

It was a privilege to work with Mr. Nemsmith in his garden. I could sense the symbiosis between him and most other living things—not only his plants but also the birds and toads and even the snakes. I once heard him speaking kindly to an earthworm, thanking it for all it had done to prepare the soil. But he was no friend of rabbits.

Mr. Nemsmith had never been a young man, as far as I could tell. He was fifty-eight right now. He used to be an accountant, but he retired early. I had never heard him raise his voice, even when he stubbed his toe or hit his thumb with a hammer, which he did fairly often. He had accidents I never knew were possible.

Like that winter when a huge icicle hanging down from his roof broke off and hit him in the head while he was shoveling his driveway. It pushed him face-down into the snowbank so that only his legs were sticking out. Miss Emma saw it happen, fortunately, so she called on the phone and we all came running. His face was blue when we dug him out, but we were able to revive him.

Or the time when he was standing at the microwave, boiling a cup of water for tea and eating a bagel while he waited. Just as the water finished boiling—now this was a rolling boil—the bagel got stuck halfway down his throat and he needed something to drink immediately. Without thinking, he pulled the cup out of the microwave and drank it.

Or the time when he drove to the big city and parked his car on an incline, but when he came back it was gone. Walking down the hill, he saw a crowd around Kuhlmann's Furniture. When he joined them, he saw his car sitting in their window display.

Despite the dark cloud of misfortune forever on his horizon, Mr. Nemsmith was extremely good-natured. But he was also a bit fussy.

"That arbor," he said. "I just haven't been happy with it since we put it up last week. It's slanted. Can you tell?"

"Looks all right to me," I told him.

"Do you really think so?"

Then he walked around and viewed it from different angles. Before long, he got a mallet and a step stool.

"Better let me do that," I said, not wanting him to injure himself. "Which way do you think it needs to go?"

He cocked his head and held his hands parallel to each other at a diagonal. "That way. But just a little."

Climbing on the step stool, I quickly realized it wasn't the right tool for the job. I went back to his shed and returned with a step ladder.

"I honestly think it's good the way it is," I told him, "but I know how you are about these things."

"It'll bother me if we don't fix it. I know it will."

Mr. Fox drove up, got out of his car, and crossed the street to join us. Seeing him, Mr. Nemsmith asked, "Is it six already? I've been so preoccupied."

Mr. Fox looked around. "It's a nice preoccupation to have, Chuck. You've done it again. The summer's just begun and your garden is in tip-

top shape! Not a thing out of place. Not a weed anywhere!”

“That’s what the mulch is for, Will: to keep it that way. But there *is* something out of place. The arbor was slanted.”

I grinned at Mr. Fox. “Could you tell?”

He shook his head. “Only Chuck can see imperfections in this garden.”

“Well,” said Mr. Nemsmith, “at least I’ll feel better now that we’re straightening it.”

“We all benefit from the work you do out here,” Mr. Fox told him. “Alyssa and I love sitting on our porch looking at your yard.”

Mr. Nemsmith was touched. “Thank you, Will. I feel rather self-indulgent at times. I do it because I enjoy it. I never considered the possibility that others might get something out of it.”

“We certainly do,” said Mr. Fox.

There was a look of joy on the older man’s face as he surveyed his yard in light of this new information. “You know,” he said, “I do see the imperfections, but this year... I feel like this is the closest I’ve ever come to getting it right!”



## 6 WORRYING ABOUT THE WRONG THING

I would never accept payment from my neighbors; but to thank me for giving up my afternoon, Mr. Nemsmith took me out to eat at a diner full of old people. Because we had continued working into the evening, however, the clientele had thinned out by the time we got there.

Night was starting to fall when we got back to Carson Street, and Miss Emma was rocking on her front porch. She's a retired nurse, and she spends her days doing volunteer work for a variety of charities. After I said goodbye to Mr. Nemsmith, I crossed the street and sat in the chair beside her. This is our summer ritual. Each evening I sit and rock with her as daylight turns to dusk.

Miss Emma took care of me when I was very little, and we've been close ever since. Her husband, Mr. Rowlands, died just before I was born. He was an MP during the Korean War and a police officer after that, so he wore one uniform or another in the various pictures Miss Emma had displayed around the house. There was both strength and compassion in his face. I've noticed that some older married people end up looking like each other after they've lived together for a long time. That was certainly true of Miss Emma and her husband. I suppose that, as a black couple in a small town of mostly white people, they had to put up with a lot of things—subtle comments and behaviors that would probably go over most people's heads. Miss Emma doesn't miss a single nuance, but there's a grace about her that runs deep. She can see what's happening and still forgive. I think it all has to do with her focus. More than anyone else I know, she lives for others.

I had barely joined her when Mrs. Venema pulled into her driveway.

Miss Emma called to her as she got out of her car. "Working late again, Sandy?"

Mrs. V is heavy-set, with thick glasses and buck teeth. She crossed the street and came up to the railing of Miss Emma's porch.

"Every night for the past week," she replied. "I'm awfully tired of it, Miss Emma, I'll admit it." She turned to me. "Hey, Dawson."

"Hi, Mrs. V."

"Is it mandatory?" Miss Emma asked.

"No. But I got my wrist slapped for not making quota last month, and I'm trying to avoid that. So I'm putting in extra hours."

"Is it helping?"

"Not a whole lot. But there are some people I can't reach by phone during the day, so I'm making the extra effort. I'm just glad I can depend on Alyssa to look after Benny. That's one thing I don't have to worry about. And he loves it over there."

"I can always help, too, Sandy. Any time. You know that."

"Thanks, Miss Emma. Well... I'd better go get him."

As she trudged over to the Foxes' house with drooping shoulders, Miss Emma turned to me and said, "Mm, mm, mmmmm. Get yourself a good education and a good job, Dawson. Don't get stuck in that rat race."

"Yes, ma'am."

We rocked in silence for a while. Then it began.

For me, this was one of the highlights of a summer's day. Miss Emma would just start humming. Usually it wasn't a recognizable tune; it was just a random melodic line. Then she'd improvise. She had a wonderful humming voice that was nice all on its own, but I always waited to hear what she'd do with a theme, how she'd develop it, and the variations she'd weave out of it. It all seemed so effortless. I'd just lean back and listen and surrender to it as night came and the crickets played backup.

Most evenings she'd wind down and that would be my cue to go home, feeling like I'd been rocked to sleep. But tonight I just sat there after she was done.

"Miss Emma..."

"What is it, Dawson?"

"You know about Kendra and me, right?"

"You two have a very special relationship. Everybody knows that."

I nodded. "But it's changing... and I'm not exactly sure what to think about it."

I was hoping she'd take the bait and say something profound, but she just waited, so I continued. "We've always been together and I thought it would be like that forever. Now it looks like I have to try to win her love and I don't know how. I'm not into all that mushy stuff. I don't have a clue how to be romantic."

Still, she said nothing.

“And I’ve got a lot of competition,” I added. “Those other guys—”  
“Forget those other guys,” she said. “What do you feel self-conscious about?”

“I’m embarrassed to tell you.”

She didn’t urge me to continue, so I did.

“I don’t know how to lip-lock,” I said. I was too embarrassed to call it by its name. “Actually, Kendra and I did try it once last summer, but it was really awkward... and we kind of grew apart after that.”

“Dawson,” she said, “what do you want from Kendra?”

I shrugged. “I want her to be there, to be part of my life, to just be with me and share things.”

“What you’ve already got, in other words.”

“Yes! I just want things to stay the way they are.”

“What does *she* want?”

I thought a moment. “I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“We don’t talk much lately. Not like we used to. She’s changed. I feel like I don’t even know her anymore.”

Miss Emma rested her head back and rocked a moment. “Talking’s important. Have you tried to discuss this with her?”

“No. I’m afraid it’ll start an argument.”

“Do you think it’s bad to argue?”

“Yes,” I said. “Isn’t it?”

“It’s certainly unpleasant. But no, I don’t think it’s bad to argue with someone you love. If you have an honest difference of opinion and you’re willing to listen to each other, talking about it can bring you closer. On the other hand, just because you don’t argue doesn’t mean everything’s hunky-dory. It just means you’re going with the flow. And if either of you is unhappy, that can be bad.”

After a moment’s silence, she said, “You’re worrying about the wrong thing, you know. You’re already good at the most important thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Conversation. Everybody loves conversing with you, Dawson. When we talk, you listen... and you truly hear us. And when *you* talk, you express yourself well. That’s the key.”

“I don’t understand.”

“A relationship is an ongoing conversation. You learn about the other person and the other person learns about you. Sometimes you like what you discover and sometimes you don’t. But if you care enough about each other to keep communicating, then that’s a great start.

“Now... if you and that other person are attracted to each other physically, then other forms of communication start to happen. An

exchange of glances, a touch of the hand, a hug, even a ‘lip-lock’... these are all forms of communication. Don’t get hung up on the mechanics of it. When you’re engaging in any of those activities, you’re communicating! And you’re already good at that. Just keep being honest with the people you love—argue with them when necessary—and someday...”

We listened to the crickets for a while.

“I never thought about it that way,” I admitted. “But I’m still scared to death of having to kiss her.”

“Then don’t,” she said. “With the right person... at the right moment... you’ll want to.”

“You sound like you think it’s over between Kendra and me.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I only know that you don’t sound ready to have that kind of communication with *anyone*—yet.”

“You know, Miss Emma... you have a strange way of making a person feel really encouraged and really discouraged all at the same time.”

“I just try to speak the truth,” she said. “The truth shall set you free.”

I thought about that a moment. “I don’t actually want to be set free,” I said.

She laughed softly. “I suppose none of us do.”

I rose to go. She took my hand and rubbed it against her cheek. “You and Kendra are both my babies,” she said. “I don’t want to see either one of you get hurt.”

I nodded. She gave my hand a final pat, and I went home.

Jake and Moth were both yelling at once when I came through the door.

“No!” Jake was saying. “How could she!”

“I told you!” said Moth. “I knew what she was up to all along!”

“But that was so diabolical,” he said, “I just couldn’t believe she’d do it. Not after all they’d been through. That back-stabbing, double-crossing, no-good—”

“Welcome to Reality TV!” she said.

It was the finale of *Screw You*, a show about modern relationships.

Although he was our tenant, Jake was like a member of our family, often watching television with Moth in the evenings. He didn’t have a TV of his own, and he and Moth enjoyed talking and even arguing about whatever was on—especially reality shows. He treated her like a favorite aunt.

Seeing me come in, they both smiled, got up from their seats in the family room, and walked with me out to the kitchen. I looked around for a snack and decided on an apple, then stood there eating it absent-mindedly

while they continued to talk about the show. Once I was done, I said goodnight and headed down the hall to my bedroom.

Jake stopped the conversation, stuck his head around the corner and whispered, “You okay?”

I nodded, went into my room, and closed the door.

If the pattern held true, my old man would be home later. He had an important job at the factory in Middleburgh, leaving home before the rest of us started our day and returning late at night. I rarely saw him, which was a good thing. We didn’t get along.

I went to bed. Tomorrow I would try to be alone with Kendra. “You’re good at communicating,” Miss Emma had said.

She was right. Maybe it was time for us to talk.

## 7 WIGGLE ROOM

As soon as I saw her, I knew. The look on her face told me everything. For a moment, I thought it wouldn't be necessary to have the conversation; I could just get up and walk out of their house and never come back.

I was on the floor of the Foxes' family room helping Benny mark up his coloring book when Kendra came down the stairs. She paused and looked at me, and I knew. But we still had to go through with it.

Mrs. Fox took my place on the floor with Benny, and Kendra motioned for me to follow her out the front door. We walked outside, turned onto Morrow Road, and took a right out of town. She wanted privacy.

We walked in silence for a while. I kept wanting to help the conversation along, but I also didn't want a self-inflicted wound.

Finally I couldn't take it anymore. "Kendra, did you want to talk to me?"

"This is so hard," she told me. After a long pause, she came out with it: "I'm going to see other guys."

I was in shock. I knew it was coming, but still.

"Okay," I heard myself saying. "Do you mean you're going to see other guys besides me?"

She looked at me cautiously. "I'm... going to see other guys."

"Right." I nodded. "Other guys—and me, right?"

She stopped walking and studied my face. "Don't you know what it means when a girl wants to see other guys?"

"Yes, under normal circumstances. But ours is a special case. I just want to clarify my role in all this."

"You don't have a role. I'm going to see *other* guys."

"So you're saying there's no room for *me* in there? Because I'd be willing to share you, if it came to that."

“You’re scaring me.”

“I don’t mean to. I’m just trying to see how much wiggle room I’ve got.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean, is there still a chance for me? You said you’re going to see other guyssssssss. That’s plural. Can I be one of them?”

“No!” she said. “You want a definition of ‘other guys’? Here it is. ‘Other guys’ means ‘not you’! Are we clear now?”

I nodded, and we resumed our walk. Then I tried again. “How many are there?”

“Of what?”

“Guys. How large is your playing field?”

“Why do you need to know that?”

“Because if it’s really big, maybe I could occupy a small corner of it... a far, *far* corner... and just be quiet for a while, then maybe work my way slowly back towards the center and—”

“Do you want me to hurt your feelings? Because I really don’t want to do that. I’m trying to let you down easy, but it doesn’t seem to be working.”

“Let me approach this another way,” I said. “Are you really going to see ‘other guys’—plural—or do you have one picked out?”

It took her so long to answer that my heart broke while I waited.

Her voice was quiet. “There’s only one guy, Dawson.” After another pause, she told me. “It’s Don Henderson.”

That killed me. Don was on the cross country team with Walter and me. Although he was in Walter’s grade, I considered him a friend. He was a really nice guy. I couldn’t speak after that.

We decided to head back towards Carson Street. Nothing was said for most of the return trip, but when we were almost there, I asked, “Who gets to keep Benny?”

“He’s not really our kid, Dawson.”

“I know. But he’ll be at your house, so I won’t be able to see him anymore.”

She sighed. “My parents want me to tell you that you’re still welcome in our home.”

“Why do you say it like that? Don’t *you* want me to feel welcome?”

“I want to be with Don. And I don’t want you sitting there moping about it. If you can get over me, then sure, you’re welcome to be there. But I think it’ll take some time.”

“So... you’re banishing me?”

She didn’t say anything, but she looked very, very angry.

I thought about it a moment. Finally I said, “I can get over you...”

maybe... someday... but I can't get over losing your family."

"They're *my* family!" she said. "It's *my* home! You don't know how many times I've argued with them about this, because they're so concerned about you! Have you ever thought about how that makes me feel? The fact that my own parents are more worried about your feelings than they are about mine?"

"I just thought we'd be together forever," I said. "All of us. But especially you and me. We promised each other."

She bit her lip, then blurted it out: "Dawson, we were in middle school. I've grown up. I'm sorry you haven't."

And she walked away.

"I thought you were an empath," I muttered.



## 8 A NOT-SO-BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

I had no place to go.

The guys were both at Walter's house, and that was no longer an option. Miss Emma was volunteering at the hospital today, and if I went over to see Mr. Nemsmith, he'd put me to work. My own home was the last place I wanted to be right now.

So I just walked. No place in particular. Just one foot in front of the other, for miles.

I headed west into town (which is really just a few blocks of shops along State Route 10), then kept going.

I took some measure of satisfaction from the fact that I didn't cry. I was way beyond that point. This was the end of the world as I knew it. Within the span of a few minutes, I had lost everything that was dear to me. I now belonged nowhere. You don't cry about something like that. You just keep going... left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot... and you don't even think. Thoughts are worthless at a time like that. They all come back to the same starting premise, and that premise is both unacceptable and unavoidable. So I just shut down my brain.

Hours passed.

Finally I decided that I would drop from exhaustion if I didn't sit down and drink some water, so I headed for home. I knew there'd be a scene when I walked through the door. Moth's eyes would bulge even farther out of her head than normal and she'd be onto me. "What are you doing home? Did the Foxes kick you out? What did you do wrong?"

But I had to go.

So I headed back through town, then continued east towards Carson Street.

A couple of blocks before I got there, a bicyclist came out of the abandoned office park on my left. This guy was in a serious hurry. He was just a blur when he passed me.

Then he slowed down, stopped, and looked back at me.

“Dawson?”

He was wearing a helmet, so I couldn’t make out his face. He circled around, came up beside me, and smiled.

I did a double-take. “Jake?”

“I’m surprised to see you alone,” he said.

“Get used to it,” I mumbled.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He got off and walked beside his bike. “I’m heading back to Carson Street,” he said. “Want some company?”

I was glad. I needed something else to think about.

“I didn’t know you were into cycling,” I said.

“I keep it up in the attic with me,” he replied. “I try to stay in shape. So... what’s happening?”

I shrugged.

He tried again. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay.”

We walked a little farther, and then I asked, “What’s happening with *you*?”

He shrugged.

I tried again. “What are *you* up to?”

“Nothing.”

We both laughed.

“Seems to be a good day for that,” I told him.

We rounded Carson Street and I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“What time is it?” I asked.

He looked at his watch. “Not quite 1:30.”

Everybody was home: Mr. Fox, Mrs. V, Miss Emma, Mr. Nemsmith. Everybody. Even my old man. And they were all out in the street, like they were having a block party. Except nobody looked happy.

“Where the hell have you been?” my old man asked.

I was confused. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“I was sent home,” he said. “They wouldn’t tell me why. They just said I’d find out when I got here. I tried calling you and your mom and couldn’t get through to either of you.”

“My phone’s not on,” I said.

Moth jumped in. “Then when he got home and nobody knew where

you were—”

I turned towards Kendra and she looked away.

“We thought we were going to have to dredge the river to find you!” my old man said.

“Then *I* got home,” said Mrs. V, “and I was panicked because they told me the same thing: ‘Go home! We can’t tell you why!’ I thought something had happened to Benny, but I couldn’t reach Alyssa or Landon.”

Walter and Landon came up to me.

“Everybody’s phone seems to be working, though,” said Walter. “Now.”

“Except the Internet,” added Landon.

Miss Emma took over the story. “They even sent me home from the hospital!”

“And me from the bank,” said Mr. Fox.

“But Will was more persistent,” said Mrs. Fox. “He demanded to know what was happening.”

He nodded. “They insisted they *couldn’t* tell me—for legal reasons. And when I heard that, I was really worried.”

“Legal reasons!” I said.

“So here we all are,” said Miss Emma. “Is someone going to tell us why?”

As if on cue, a military truck screeched to a halt at the entrance to Carson Street, blocking the road. Guys in fatigues jumped out of the back. One directed traffic while the others stood at attention, facing us. They were not armed.

As other vehicles parked on both sides of Morrow Road, camera crews got out of vans and rushed towards us. They were already taping.

Mr. Fox whispered, “Everybody remain calm. And don’t say a word.”

The cameras surrounded us, recording our reactions.

“What’s this all about?” my old man demanded. “Who are you people? What do you want?”

They didn’t answer him. They just kept taping.

Then a tall figure in an expensive suit strolled around the blockade and approached us from the main road. A cameraman was walking backwards just ahead of him, taping his entrance. He had a rugged look, but it wasn’t natural. The way his hair was tousled and his face half-shaven, it was like he had just spent an hour with a makeup artist. He looked *too* good.

As he got closer, Moth’s face was contorted. “Oh... my... heavens!” she said.

He spoke with authority. “Good afternoon, Carson Street. My name is Heath Manning.”

Even *I* had heard of him. He was one of America's most famous announcers, best known as an emcee on Reality TV.

"This is Day One of a new reality show," he told us. "It's called *Eminent Domain*. And you're all about to become famous."

## 9 IT STARTS NOW

“We didn’t volunteer for this,” said Mr. Fox.

“It’s a new concept,” Manning explained. “Viewers want actual people in real-life situations, not volunteers.”

“But you can’t just come barging in here and—”

“We’ve worked it out with the mayor and everything’s cleared.”

“Not with us!”

Manning gave him his trademark tough look. “Will... think about it. The show’s called *Eminent Domain*.”

Now Mr. Fox understood. Mrs. Fox approached him and they reached for each other. Instinctively, they looked around at us—Kendra and the guys and yes, even me—as if they wanted to reach out to *us*, too, and draw us into their circle, to shield us somehow.

“Let’s begin,” Manning said. “The show starts now.”

“Right now?” asked Moth, reaching for her hair and looking down at what she was wearing.

“Right now,” he replied. “Ready or not.”

“Not,” said Landon.

“Let me introduce you to our viewers,” Manning said.

“Wait!” shouted my old man. “Are they watching this live?”

“No, Marty. The show won’t air until September. We’ll edit some of this out, but that will be at our discretion. Everything you say or do from this moment may end up in the final cut.”

Turning to the camera, Manning announced, “This is Marty Monroe. He’s the manager at a manufacturing plant in a village not far from here. He spends a lot of time on the job. A *lot* of time. This will be a major adjustment for him, having to be at home with his wife and teenage son.”

My old man looked uncomfortable but said nothing.

“This is his wife Molly. She’s a walking encyclopedia of Reality TV. And now she’s going to have a chance to put that knowledge to good use.”

Moth was star-struck.

“This is their son Dawson.”

I gave him the dirtiest look I could muster.

“Dawson thinks the world would be better off without TV. He’s a people-person who prefers quiet gatherings with his neighbors over any other form of entertainment. To him, Carson Street is the center of the universe. He may have the hardest time of any of these contestants...”

He walked over to Jake. “...except perhaps Jake Cameron. He lives with the Monroes, and little is known about him. Search for him on the Internet and you’ll find no information. Why? Is he running from something? A lost job? A shattered dream? A broken relationship? Who knows?”

Jake’s jaw dropped and his face turned a deep purple.

Manning moved to another part of the group. “This is Will and Alyssa Fox. They’re the kind of parents everybody wishes they had. They’re model citizen who have raised two good kids—Walter and Kendra. Will is a branch manager at a local bank. He’s respected by his clients and revered by his employees. Alyssa stays home with the kids. Walter and Kendra get good grades, are popular, and are amazingly well-behaved. None of these characteristics will help them in this competition.”

He pointed to Mrs. V. “Sandy Venema was a stay-at-home mom until her husband Roger succumbed to cancer a few years ago. With few marketable skills, she went out and got the only job she could find, as a bill collector. She works long hours, and it takes its toll on her. She’s a hard-working mom who spends precious little time with the kids she toils so hard to support: her teenage son Landon and six-year-old Benny.

“Two of these contestants are retirees. The first is Emma Rowlands. She’s seventy-six years young. By day, she volunteers in the community; by night, she’s Carson Street’s grandmother figure. The second is Chuck Nemsmith. He lives a quiet life. Or he did... until now.

“When they woke up this morning, these people were friends and neighbors. But now they must adapt to a new reality... for each of these families must now compete against all the others for the chance to keep their home. If they lose... they’ll lose *everything*.”

Manning had been talking to the cameras through all this, but now he turned to us. “Carson Street, I’m sure you have questions. Go!”

Miss Emma spoke first. “What right do you have—”

“We’ve already covered that,” he said. “The Rule of Eminent Domain. Next question.”

Landon raised his hand like he was in school. “Why isn’t our Internet

working?”

“All access to the outside world will be cut off during the taping of this program,” said Manning. “No one is to know what’s happening here until they see it on our broadcast. You can text and call *each other*, however. We’ve set up a cyber bubble that will allow you to communicate with one another as long as you remain within the bubble. But you will not be able to talk to anyone outside the show until it’s over.”

“Don!” whispered Kendra.

“How long will that be?” asked Mrs. Fox.

“The taping will only take a couple of weeks,” Manning said. “Each day’s activities will give us at least one episode of material. But then you’ll have to keep a low profile during the fall TV season, until the finale in November.”

We all protested at once.

“You’ll be living in luxury at the Hyatt-Regency, and the tab will be on us,” he said. “I really don’t think you’ll mind.”

“What about our jobs?” asked Mrs. V.

“You’re on a leave of absence. It’s all been arranged. We’ll make up your lost wages.”

“What about our privacy?” I asked. “These cameras...”

“They’ll be with you every minute until this is done.”

“No, they won’t,” said Mr. Fox. “They’re not coming into our homes.”

“You mean *our* homes,” said Manning. “*We* own them now. The mayor has turned them over to us. You will live in them until we say otherwise. And you will do everything you can to make our camera crews feel welcome.”

“What?” we all said. “They’re staying with us?”

“They won’t follow you into the bathroom,” he assured us. “And they’ll give you a certain amount of privacy in the bedroom, like when you’re dressing, for example. But otherwise...”

“No way!” said Mrs. V.

Miss Emma spoke up. “You mentioned our homes. What exactly will happen to them?”

The cameras zoomed in on us.

“That’s up to you,” he said. “You will compete against each other, and—”

Mr. Nemsmith interrupted. “You said you’re taking them away from us.”

Manning must’ve rehearsed this line a million times. “You’re going to compete against each other for the chance to *save* your home. In each episode, someone will be voted off the show. The Demolition Crew will be called in, and the family that has been voted off will watch as their

house is destroyed. Then they'll be escorted off the set."

I was mad. "Since when was Carson Street a 'set'?"

He looked at his watch. "Since ten minutes ago."

"What can we do to save our homes?" asked Mrs. V.

He gave her that trademark look again. "Win."

"Wait a minute! You mean the winner can save all the houses in the neighborhood?"

"Of course not. You can save *your* home by winning."

"How many winners can there be?" asked Mrs. Fox.

"There will be one house left when the show's over. The winner gets to keep their home... and the million-dollar jackpot."

I could see Mrs. V thinking as she repeated aloud, "A million dollars..."

Miss Emma's voice was shaking. "There will only be one house left on Carson Street when this is done?"

"Not necessarily. The winner could be in the other neighborhood."

"What other neighborhood?"

"There will be *two* teams. *Two* neighborhoods. But only one winner."

We all stared at each other.

Finally someone dared to ask, "Where's the other neighborhood?"

This, too, had been rehearsed. For dramatic effect, Manning turned his back to us. Facing the highway, he slowly raised his eyes upward. He didn't need to say a word. The cameras recorded the moment as the awful truth became apparent to each of us, one by one.

"God help us!" said Mr. Fox. "It's Victor's Summit!"



## 10 TO STRIKE OR NOT TO STRIKE

“But it’s not even a proper use of the Rule of Eminent Domain,” I was saying. “They can’t take away our property for a TV show! It’s only when the government needs it for some reason—like to build a freeway or to run a power line.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” said Mrs. V.

Manning was gone now, and we were trying to make sense of it.

Mr. Fox nodded. “It wouldn’t stand up in a court of law—I’m pretty sure about that. But they’re not even giving us time to contest it. The show has begun and the cameras are already running.”

We stopped and stared at the crew members all around us, but none of them seemed to care.

My old man balked. “What are you suggesting, Will? What if we did have more time? Are you saying you’d hire legal counsel?”

“Marty, I’m just saying—”

“Because *I* don’t have that kind of money. Do you, Will?”

“*I* certainly don’t,” said Mr. Nemsmith. “Not on a fixed income.”

Miss Emma turned to him. “That’s not the point, Chuck. What they’re doing is illegal and they know it. That’s why they’re ramrodding it through. They’re not even giving us time to think about it, much less to organize.”

“Ohhh, we can organize,” I said angrily. “We’re doing it right now, kind of.”

Mrs. V whirled around at the camera crew. “Can we have some privacy here?”

“It’s okay,” I told her. “We can do this whether they’re watching or not.”

My old man had heard enough. “Dawson, haven’t you got something

better to do? Why don't you and your friends go on and let us adults talk this over."

Mrs. Fox was furious. "Marty, will you let him finish for once?"

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, then she turned to me and spoke very deliberately. "Go ahead, Dawson. We're listening."

"Um... right," I said, painfully aware of my old man's irritation.

All around me, heads were nodding in encouragement. Jake grinned at me and even had a look of expectation. My back stiffened. Taking a deep breath, I tried again.

"I know this might sound stupid," I told them, "but I think we should go on strike."

Nobody said anything. My old man shook his head and took a few steps away from us.

"We didn't ask for this," I continued. "None of us signed a contract. So... we should just refuse to cooperate. Whatever they want us to do, don't do it."

Walking over to the nearest camera, I looked straight at it with defiance. "Let 'em tape us! Let 'em broadcast every word! I want the whole world to know that the families on Carson Street are not about to be bullied. This is *our* street. These are *our* homes. These network people have no right to come in here and tell us what to do."

Mrs. V whispered to Mr. and Mrs. Fox, "Do you think it'll work?"

"Of course it won't work," said my old man. "These people know exactly what they're doing. They've planned this thing out thoroughly. If we bring a civil suit against them, they'll win it. If we go on strike, they'll break it."

"How?" asked Miss Emma.

My old man looked at her impatiently. "I don't know *how*. I just know they will. They're calling the shots here, not us."

She sighed. "Marty, I'm sad for you."

Moth intervened. "Look, everybody, there's no reason to be mad at each other. It's just a TV game show. They're going to pay us fair value for our homes, so we really aren't going to lose anything. We may even come out ahead. It's a million-dollar jackpot! And if they demolish our homes... well... I could use a change of scenery, couldn't you?"

I cringed as Landon and Walter stifled a laugh.

Mrs. V was still thinking about my idea. "Molly," she said, "you've probably seen every reality show there's ever been. Have the contestants ever gone on strike?"

Moth laughed. "Of course not! Why would they?"

"I wonder what they'd do to us?" asked Landon. "How would they react if we refused to follow their orders?"

“Probably retaliate in some way,” said Walter.

“But how?” asked Kendra. “They couldn’t very well destroy all our homes just to be spiteful.”

“Worst-case scenario,” I said, “what if they did? What if they gutted Carson Street? Do you really think the audience would go along with that?”

Miss Emma growled, “It would show them as the aggressors that they really are.”

“Exactly!” I said. “And they aren’t likely to fall into that trap. But best-case scenario... they might go away and find a more compliant neighborhood to terrorize.”

There was silence as the adults all looked at each other, raising their eyebrows. My old man turned away in disgust and Moth stood nervously, rocking from one foot to the other and wringing her hands. The cameras moved from person to person, trying to capture every nuance.

Finally Mr. Fox spoke up. “Dawson, I love your idea.”

“So do I,” said Mrs. Fox, then others around the group agreed.

“But it won’t work,” he said.

“Why not?” asked his wife.

“Because a strike is only effective if everyone agrees to do it.”

He didn’t need to elaborate. We all turned towards my parents.

Moth held up both hands in protest. “Don’t look at me. I’m not joining you.”

My old man still had his back to us, but now he turned around to face us. “Not on your life,” he said.

Mr. Fox turned back to me. “So therefore...”

“Will,” said Miss Emma.

He turned to her and she looked back with pleading eyes.

“It won’t work without them,” he told her.

“It won’t work *at all*,” said my old man. “Don’t blame it on us.”

“Will,” Miss Emma said again, “I’m going to make a prediction.”

“What’s that, Miss Emma?”

Her eyes were like steel. “Prepare for the worst-case scenario. Prepare to see Carson Street in ruins. Because that’s what’s going to happen if we don’t do what Dawson says.”

“That’s probably true,” he told her. “But we don’t have any choice.”

As the families scattered towards their homes, Miss Emma remained standing where she was and said, to no one in particular, “We always have a choice.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When Ronald R. Johnson published his first novel, *Small World*, he deliberately aimed at a release date of April 1<sup>st</sup>. “It’s a comedy,” he says. “With a serious message.” That’s a fair description of his overall approach to fiction writing: his stories are meant to be fun, but they also invite deeper reflection. “*Small World* is a story about people who can barely get along with each other, and how they’re forced to work together for the larger good. It’s funny and entertaining, but the message is obvious: we need each other, whether we like it or not.”

Ron has a PhD in Philosophy from Saint Louis University and teaches at Spring Arbor University in Michigan (USA). He also writes serious non-fiction: his articles have been published in *The Congregationalist*, *The Way of St. Francis*, and a few philosophical journals; his books include *What Does God Do from 9 to 5?*

But he especially enjoys the play of imagination that fiction offers both the writer and the reader. “When I publish a novel, I want it to be an event in my readers’ lives. I want them to feel like they’re taking a mental vacation. If I can entertain them at that level—great! But if the story also nags at them when it’s done, and they ask themselves, ‘Was there a deeper meaning behind that?’ ... even better. And if they put in the extra effort and actually get the point I’m trying to make, then I can say, ‘Mission Accomplished.’”

Learn more at [www.ronaldrjohnson.com](http://www.ronaldrjohnson.com)