

— Excerpt —

The Age of Amy

CHANNEL '63

BY BRUCE EDWARDS

Chapter 1

Emancipation

“**I** quit!” I shouted, my shrill voice echoing through the courtroom. “I resign from this family!”

“Please take your seat, Amy,” said Judge Higgins. “Your theatrics have been noted, but you are in Family Court, not an episode of *Law & Order*.”

The August sun blazed through the windows onto an empty jury box. There were no lawyers, no court reporters, nor spectators in the gallery. On this day, no testimony would be given from the witness stand. The judge didn’t even have a gavel.

Judge Higgins shuffled a pile of legal documents on his tall desk, then set aside the papers that prompted this gathering in the first place: *Petition for Declaration of Emancipation of a Minor*. In our state the law permits minor children with parental issues to leave home and live with someone else. I was the minor in this case. I had petitioned the court to let me live on my own, to be liberated from playing the dutiful daughter, to be released from the grip of my pathetic parents. In simpler terms: I wanted a divorce from my family.

I had filed the papers all by myself, with no help from anyone. For sure, it was a bold move, especially for a 16-year-old.

My mom and dad sat at a long table normally reserved for high-powered attorneys. I sat at the same table, a few empty chairs down from them. After all, they were the bad guys, not me.

“As to why I called you all here,” said the judge, “I want to see if we can resolve this issue before proceeding further with this case.”

My dad raised his hand and rose to his feet. “What’s the point?” he said. “We are all in agreement in this matter.”

“Absolutely,” added my mother. “Amy wants to move out, and I for one don’t plan to stand in her way.”

“I understand that,” said Judge Higgins, “but before I can issue a ruling, the laws of this state and the Department of Social Services mandate that the court shall first attempt to mitigate the situation, in accordance with Family Code Regulations.”

Legal mumbo jumbo! The “situation” was clear. I no longer wanted to share my life with my parents, and they made no bones about not wanting me around.

It was all perfectly legal. Separations between parent and child were graciously granted in cases involving abandonment, neglect, and maltreatment. Thoughtlessness and disrespect topped my list of grievances. As far as I was concerned it was an open-and-shut case. I wasn’t even asking for financial support, although my folks could have easily afforded it.

None of this would have happened when I was younger. My first fifteen years had been pretty normal—even above average, I would say. My dad was a struggling writer, and Mom, a devoted mother and homemaker. Along with my elder brother and sister, we were the all-American, lower-middle-class family. We lived in a modest city apartment, and survived on Dad’s meager earnings from whatever part-time work he could dig up.

With little to spend on entertainment, we made do with simple pleasures. Family outings rarely went beyond the city park around the corner. In winter I built slushy snowmen and crossed frozen ponds in secondhand skates. Summer ice cream cones were limited to single scoops. Watching the other kids devour fudge sundaes always left me feeling a little inferior, but a piggyback ride home on my dad’s shoulders never failed to bring back a smile.

By all rights I should have felt cheated for having to suffer through a deprived childhood, but we were a close family then, and I loved every minute of it!

I gazed out the courtroom window while the judge rattled off more legal gibberish. He had to raise his voice at one point, over the rumbling of a tractor rolling past the cow pasture across the street.

That’s right—a cow pasture! The city I loved was now a distant memory. Dad had found success in a string of best-selling novels he had authored. To escape his instant celebrity, he uprooted us to *Shankstonville*—a small farming community smack dab in the middle of America’s heartland. It was a move I did not want to make, but what choice did I have?

Along with Dad’s financial rewards came the trappings of wealth. All the things we had done without in years past were suddenly at our fingertips. Dad bought a huge, opulent house behind tall, iron gates. An avalanche of material possessions rolled through our front door, and the more consumer goods flowed in, the more family values rushed out. My parents became possessed by their ultra-sized, big-screen TV. My brother and sister—and onetime playmates—stayed locked up in their rooms, lured into a cyber realm from where they would never return.

Everyone was content to hide from the world in that monstrous palace, but not me! I was the outgoing type, and craved involvement. I dyed a neon-blue streak in my hair as a form of protest. Lame, I know, but then I hadn't had much experience in rebellion.

I wanted out of that house, so I decided to take legal action to gain my independence. The only complication was where I was going to live next. My grandparents had passed away by then, and I had no other living relatives to take me in. But that didn't deter me. What I really wanted was to live by myself, but being under age, there was no way the judge was going to allow it. The only other option was that I be placed in foster care. Ugh!

"In light of there being no kin to take custody of Amy," said the judge, "and with no one else willing to assume guardianship, the court will have to rule based on what is best for the child."

"The best thing for her," said my dad, "is to give her what she wants. Let her face the world on her own terms, and learn how hard it *really* is. Struggling to earn an income would be a good lesson in humility. Let her feel the frustration of being short on rent each month."

"And what about having enough to eat?" said my mom. "Maybe experiencing hunger pains will make her appreciate what it takes to keep food on the table."

I stood up and faced the judge. "I never said living alone would be easy," I said. "But if you think that's not '*what's best for the child,*' think again! Place me in foster care, if that's what you're planning to do, but be prepared to have another runaway teen on your hands."

A faint buzzing sound came from the bench. A housefly was circling the judge's head. It zoomed in front of his face like a military drone on a bombing mission. The judge waved a legal pad at the fly, but it persisted in tormenting him. Finally, the fly buzzed over to a window and rested on the glass. Beyond it lay his freedom; to carouse with others of his own kind; to share a trash can lunch with his fellow pests. All someone needed to do was open the window and he would be free. I was looking for that same opening for myself, but like the fly, I was in a court of law, where justice isn't always guaranteed.

-- END OF EXCERPT --

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