

How to Rule the World

-a novel-

by

Jade Heasley

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Dedication:

To my Mom, Glenda Heasley, for teaching me to appreciate the fine art of literature, and to my Dad, Phil Heasley, for teaching me to appreciate the fine art of practical jokes.

And, to the rest of my family, with love.

Special Thanks To:

Phil and Glenda Heasley

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“Choose my instruction instead of silver,
knowledge rather than choice gold,
for wisdom is more precious than rubies,
and nothing you desire can compare with her.”

-Proverbs 8:10-12

Chapter One

I was nineteen when the summer of 2000 began. It was a more innocent time because for most of us the date September 11th had no significance attached to it. The future seemed hopeful, the economy was booming, gasoline was cheap, and some people were still begrudgingly eating the stashes of tuna that they had stockpiled for the meltdown of the Western Hemisphere that was predicted to happen when all of the world's computers crashed due to the "Millennium Bug." Business cards began sporting e-mail addresses although few people were willing to shell out \$2,000 for a desktop computer, and even fewer had internet access. Cell phones were still a novelty (albeit a very unreliable novelty), and video game graphics were actually starting to look realistic. In short, it was a great time to be young.

I had just wrapped up my sophomore year of college. When finals were over and move-out day arrived, my Mom came down to my dorm at Shelton College and helped me load all of my packed boxes into the pickup truck she borrowed from her dad and brought me back home. She co-owns a bookshop with her dad, my Pop Matthews, and I worked there for them during college breaks. I practically grew up in that store, and it's like a second home.

I remember a lot of things from my last summer as a teenager quite vividly, but maybe that's true for anyone during those few precious years of transitioning into adulthood. For most people, those years of the late teens and early twenties often set the course for the rest of their lives, and in my case, that was certainly true. I think that for all of us, those years are filled with soaring highs and some crushing lows, fiery determination and sheer exhaustion, and more dreams and ambitions than most people can achieve in a lifetime. But it's the thrill of chasing those dreams that adds so much color and meaning and depth to life, rescuing us from the monotony of day-to-day routine that so many people seem to get lost in. When you're young, you're determined that you won't ever be someone who gets trapped in a dead-end job or that anything in your life will ever be less than total excitement. During young adulthood the days have a tendency to fly by at a dizzying pace, filled with thrilling anticipation and hope for the future that you will be one of the few who can grab ahold of everything you ever wanted.

At the age of nineteen I knew exactly what I wanted out of life, although I wasn't entirely sure of how to attain it. Nonetheless, I was fired up and ready to go after my dreams just the same.

What I remember most about that time of my life is that summer, when I came up with the best scheme I've ever dreamed up, and even though I was nineteen it was like one last, grand childhood caper. That stunt was like the gateway that led to adulthood in one singular event, when a girl with a goody-goody reputation shook up an entire town with an infamous act and the subsequent aftermath. It was daring, maybe even rotten, but it was done to prove a point and it worked beautifully. I don't think that any of us that ever lived through it will forget it. Years have passed, but I still feel the corners of my mouth curl up into the glowing smile of a champion troublemaker whenever I think about it, and I have to struggle not to break out into a wicked chortle.

Chapter Two

My first morning home started pleasantly enough, and ended in momentary panic. I vaguely became aware that I was awake, slowly blinked my eyes open and was surprised to find myself in my own bed since I had spent most of the last year waking up in my dorm room, but I suppose every college student has had that experience. I am not a morning person and I wasn't expecting to wake up before my alarm clock invaded my dreams with its obnoxious, beeping electronic cruelty.

When I glanced at the timekeeping instrument of torture, I was horrified to realize that it was 10:14. I had never slept through my alarm before, and I had set it to go off at 7:30 so I could be at the bookstore when it opened at 9:00. Mom knew that I wanted to be there; so if the alarm didn't go off, why had Mom not wakened me?

With the glowing red numbers of my alarm clock silently mocking me, I flew out of bed to go call her and when I opened the door to my bedroom I was practically knocked over by the sugary aroma of chocolate decadence wafting from the kitchen. It's amazing how the incomparable smell of melted chocolate can seem to cure the world of all its ills. Mom had left me a batch of freshly baked cookies and a note telling me that she had snuck into my room and turned off my alarm so I could sleep in, and to stroll down to the bookstore whenever I felt like it.

I ate my sugary junk food breakfast and knew that I had the best mom in the whole world.

Chapter Three

After I got around for the day, I grabbed a can of soda out of the fridge and headed out the door. It was one of those amazing mornings in early summer where the sunlight was golden and perfect, and the smell of lilacs graced the fresh air. After a year at an academically intense private college and the crucible known as Finals Week, I felt like the freest woman in the world. I had four months of summer to do anything that I pleased, and I had the best summer job in the whole world waiting for me.

It had been several months since I had the opportunity to walk through town, so I strolled leisurely, enjoying the sunshine and the clean fresh air. I grew up in West Branch, a small town in central Pennsylvania where the Susquehanna River drifts lazily through the southern end of town, and Bald Eagle Mountain rolls just beyond the town's northern border. A set of railroad tracks from the late 19th century divide the town in half, and a few times a week a bright blue Conrail engine would roar down the tracks, dragging about a hundred cars behind it. You could hear the train whistle blast throughout the valley and the whole center of town would shake mercilessly when a train would sail by. When I was a little girl, my Pop would walk me down to the edge of the tracks and we'd collect loose railroad spikes and when a train would come through we'd watch it and wave to the people in the caboose. But by the summer of 2000, it had been years since a caboose had been through West Branch. Even into early adulthood I treasured those moments when a train whistle would blast and the railroad gates would clang their warning bells, it was like a calling card from the past and yet it somehow generated an excitement about the future as though an adventure was about to begin.

I loved living in West Branch, named for the West Branch of the Susquehanna River. It was one of those numerous little towns in the middle of Pennsylvania that had been occupied by European settlers since colonial times, but most of those little settlements were never formerly organized into towns until well into the nineteenth century. Most of the area was populated by German settlers who took advantage of the rich farmland. But then the Pennsylvania log boom came and went, the industrial boom came and went, and by the late 1970s the town was mostly made up of small businesses and three small surviving factories. A lot of people left the area after most of the factories either went under or were sold-out and closed, and the population has hovered well below two thousand people ever since.

Although some people thought that West Branch's best days were gone, I didn't believe it. I think that small towns are amazing places to grow up. Everybody knows almost everybody else, the crime rate is practically non-existent, and small towns are full of good, honest, hard-working people. No matter where you go in a small town, you're bound to bump into the people that you're privileged to call friends.

As I walked through the neighborhood on my way to work that morning, a lifetime's worth of memories came back to me, mostly ones that brought a smile to my face, and some that I would rather forget.

I walked past the town park where Mom used to take me on picnics when I was little, the same playground where she had played as a child, and where her parents had played as children. The park had a small fountain that little kids always splashed in and made wishes as they threw in pennies. There was also the huge green lawn where the Lion's Club hosted the town's Easter Egg hunt every Spring, and even though I never found the treasured golden egg that was redeemable for an eighteen-inch chocolate bunny, I still went home with fistfuls of candy and a smile on my face.

That park was also the site of the only time I ever got into trouble during school. One day in the third grade our entire grade went to the park for an end of the year picnic. Someone decided that it would be a good idea to give us water balloons, and as I was filling my sparkling sapphire balloon at the old spigot, an inspired gem of wisdom and innovation came to me. I pretended to make a few attempts at tying the balloon shut myself, and I walked over to Mrs. Fringlum, a teacher that none of us could stand and asked her if she could tie the balloon for me. In the process of handing it to her, the water in the balloon "accidentally" sprayed out all over her. As delighted as I was to hear her screams of infuriated shock, I managed to miraculously keep a straight face and apologized profusely with the most innocent Shirley Temple look on my face. Mrs. Fringlum made me sit for ten minutes (this was before the term "Time Out" was associated with the above mentioned punishment) and I must admit that those were the ten most rewarding minutes of my young life. Mrs. Fringlum was livid that she had to walk around in wet clothing for the rest of the afternoon, and I overheard a few teachers talking about how poor little Wendy Sloane certainly wouldn't have done that on purpose and that Mrs. Fringlum had overreacted.

A block beyond the park sat the little rental house where I lived with my parents from the age of four until the age of eight when my parents got divorced. That place was bittersweet. True, I had some good memories there, some Christmas mornings and some birthday parties, times I spent with Mom baking cookies and playing with my beloved dolls. I had some unhappy memories of my dad. Although I don't remember exactly when the cracks in my parent's marriage began to surface, there had been signs of trouble for a long time. I'd hear them arguing occasionally over various things but then the arguments became more frequent. But it's what wasn't said that seemed to be the most obvious sign, it was the nature of the silence that indicated something was very wrong. Mom only ever seemed like her usual happy self when my dad wasn't home, and my father only had two moods: infuriated, embittered silence and livid, screaming tirades. He was a deeply angry man, and I was never sure why or what caused it. It seemed odd to me, even as a child. Pop Matthews

was one of the happiest people you would ever want to meet, and yet he'd seen some horrible, unimaginable things while fighting in World War II but he still managed to live a happy and normal life. My dad's anger towards life in general was a mystery to me.

Even though I can't remember exactly when things started to fall apart, I clearly remember the day when my dad exploded in one of his usual tirades, and Mom responded by taking me by the hand and walking me out of the house in silence, and then the car ride to the edge of the river where she asked me what I thought about her getting a divorce from my dad, and the feeling of relief that flooded over me when I realized that I wouldn't have to spend the rest of my life growing up with an irrational dictator in the house.

I forced myself to forget about my dad and continued onward.

I crossed the street and paused when I got to the fence of the West Branch Public Pool. I had a million memories of that place. The sign said it would be open on Friday, June 9th, as was the tradition that the first day the pool was open was the last day of school. The pool was empty, and the concession stand window was shuttered, but the faint smell of chlorine lightly tinged the air. It was considered to be a rite of passage in West Branch when one was deemed to be old enough to go to the pool with a friend your own age instead of your mother. I had a lot of good memories of the pool, my favorite one being the summer when I was fifteen, standing a little too close to the deep end of the pool in the pursuit of attempting to discreetly admire the beefy chest and arms of Nate Danner, the nineteen-year-old life guard. Before I realized what happened, I felt two hands pound into my back and I flew into the pool. I barely had time to catch my breath but I've always been an excellent swimmer, and I shot to the surface, caught my breath, and tried to wipe the chlorinated water out of my eyes. I realized that Brent Wyde was the one who had pushed me in, and as he was kneeling on the edge of the pool asking for my hand to pull me out, Moira took revenge by pushing Brent in right after me.

The only problem was that Brent was laughing at me when Moira pushed him, so he landed in the water with his mouth open and came to the surface coughing and sputtering. He was clearly shaken but trying not to act like it. I swam over to him and started slapping him on the back and asked jokingly, "So you can dish it out but you can't take it, huh?"

He cleared his throat and said, "I guess not when she gets involved," he said, pointing to Moira, who, standing at the edge of the pool while we were still in the water, seemed to loom over us both like a Greek statue.

I probably should have been mad at Brent, but I had had a crush on him since the second grade so rather than feeling anger, I was flattered by the attention.

Nate threw us both out of the pool complex that day, but he never said a word to Moira. Brent was chivalrous enough to walk me home after he had shoved me into the pool, and he talked the entire time, leaving me to wonder if pushing me into the pool was a misguided attempt at flirting. But, fifteen year old boys aren't always the best at communicating so I was left to try to

puzzle out his intentions on my own. After a few minutes, I was pretty confident that he liked me as well and was delighted at the thought.

I walked past the school, and caught myself grinning slightly at the fact that the place never seemed to change. The trees, shrubs, and grass were all neatly manicured, and yet another group of West Branch seniors were anxious to get their diplomas and take on the world. I glanced at my silver class ring with a peridot starburst stone and wondered how many of the people that I graduated with were still living in town. Unfortunately, it seemed like the end of every summer was the start of a mass exodus of the best and brightest young adults leaving for college, and never again coming back to West Branch. Not everyone my age loved small town life like I did.

A few blocks down from the school was the main intersection of town, where Peach Street intersected with Main Street and that corner was where our three-story bookstore dominated the local landscape. On that bright morning when I got to the bookstore I pulled open the heavy wooden door by its old brass latch, the familiar smell of new books rushed out to meet me and pulled me in with its welcome embrace. The old brass bell above the door jingled merrily, and Mom looked up at me and smiled.

“Hey, hon,” she smiled.

“Hey, Mom,” I answered.

“Did you get my note?” she asked.

“Yes, I did,” I replied.

“What note?” asked a familiar voice. I knew right away it was Pop Matthews.

“Pop!” I said as I gave him a hug.

“How’s my granddaughter?” he asked.

“Glad to be home,” I said.

He smiled and said, “We’re glad you’re back. You should have heard your Mom these last few weeks. You’re all she could talk about.”

I glanced over at Mom. “Guilty as charged,” was all she could say.

Pop looked over and said, “Now Nattie, I don’t think we should put the girl to work right away, do you?”

“No, I think she should have spent the day at home relaxing after a full semester but of course she was too stubborn to listen,” Mom said while shooting me a mock dirty look.

“Too stubborn? Gee, I wonder where she gets that from?” Pop asked jokingly. All three of us were as stubborn as the day is long.

“You say that like being stubborn is a bad thing,” I said.

“Not at all,” Pop said. “There’s nothing wrong with being set in your ways so long as your ways are good.”

Pop and I gabbed for awhile and he caught me up on all of the town news, and then I started to glance around at the sleek paperback newly released books, as well as the classics that had the nice hardback covers with gold-colored embossing. It was a quiet Monday morning in the store, which was named The Curiosity Shop. The inventory was mainly books but there was also a variety of educational toys and puzzles, as well as a good selection of board games that were a little too complex to be carried by most toy stores. The Curiosity Shop was a place to think and learn and discover new things, and it was one of the main businesses in town.

The book store was in the town’s main intersection, in an old three-story building that was over a hundred years old. Mom and Pop Matthews had bought the building when they started the shop about twelve years earlier. My Grammy had passed away and Pop was heartbroken. Even though he had retired from teaching a few years before, he took a full-time job bagging groceries at a little mom and pop market just to be out of his house as much as possible. A few months after he started working there, my parents divorced and Mom started looking for work to support the two of us. Pop told her that she most likely wouldn’t find a decent paying job that would allow her much flexibility to take care of me, and so he suggested that they go into business together. After some discussion, they decided to open a bookstore, and so The Curiosity Shop opened shortly thereafter.

The store was in the town’s historic district, and they kept as much of the original character to the building as possible. The shop was actually pretty big, besides all of the shelves that housed tons of books there were overstuffed chairs here and there, a chess board, a giant globe that was three feet around, and there were pictures all over the walls. Some of the pictures were of covers of classic books, movie stills of film adaptations of famous books, photographs of authors, and historic events such as the Marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima and the famous V.J. Day kiss in Times Square. My favorite picture was in a small frame behind the counter, a photo of Pop grinning ear-to-ear, standing with some of his army buddies on the streets of Germany the day that the Nazis surrendered unconditionally.

I walked around the store slowly, glancing around at the different books but I was more interested in soaking the place into my soul. It felt so good to be there again since it had been a few months since I last was. I loved the book store as much as I loved my own house. I strolled around the back of the store looking at the section of history books when I heard the brass bell above the door jingle. I put the book I was looking at back on the shelf and went up to see who had come in.

Chapter Four

I walked up to the front of the store and when I saw who it was, I immediately wished I had stayed in the back. It was none other than Penny Henning, the paper girl, dropping off a stack of the weekly freebie local newspaper, The West Branch Weekly. It was mostly coupons and classified ads and it used whatever little revenue it generated to hire people like Penny Henning to deliver it. I guess to call Penny a paper girl is misleading; it would be more accurate to call her a paper middle-aged woman. She looked like she was around fifty but in reality she was still in her late thirties. I realize that late thirties isn't middle aged but when you look like Penny, it's all the same. She had a big outdated poufy permed hairdo that was a bleached blonde semi-mullet and so over-processed it looked like straw. Not to mention that she had an inch of dark roots showing. Penny was also missing a significant number of teeth but other than that, she looked pretty much how you would imagine a rapidly aging paper woman would look. She took her earnings from her paper route and blew them on lottery tickets, cigarettes, booze, and the tanning salon. No one really cared for her that I knew of, yet her self-esteem was so remarkably high that she imagined herself to be the most important woman in the free world.

I wouldn't mind Penny's once a week visits if it weren't for the fact that she had a hideous habit of blurting verbal hurricanes of unwanted advice and suggestions. You know the type, unfortunately for you. If a rocket scientist ever had the misfortune of getting trapped in an elevator with her, Penny would spend the entire time lecturing him about everything that she felt was wrong with the space program, even though she would have had no pre-existing opinions of the space program before she stepped into the elevator. The poor rocket scientist would probably respond by hanging himself with his own necktie just to not have to listen to her talk.

Penny didn't even bother to say hello. She dropped the bundled stack of newspapers on the counter and said to my Mom, "You know what the problem is with this place?"

I answered her question with a question, "We keep the door unlocked during business hours allowing any and all to come in without a preexisting screening process based on criteria of previous unwanted and unpleasant encounters?"

"No," she said while pointing at me. I could tell by the look on her face that she didn't have the slightest idea what I had said, just like I knew she wouldn't.

Pop was laughing and Mom was trying not to.

Penny went on, “The problem is you need to start serving coffee.”

We all knew what she was hinting at. Penny just wanted to be able to come in here every week and use this as her own personal coffee shop. Mom said, “We don’t have a license to sell food.”

“I don’t mean you should sell it. You should just give it away,” Penny said with the demanding conviction of someone who primarily mooched for a living.

“I can’t do that. I’d go broke,” Mom said. Of course that was a slight exaggeration, but Penny was the type that you just wanted her to be on her way.

“No you wouldn’t, because people would come in just to get the free coffee and then you could sell them books,” Penny said.

“It’s not as easy as it sounds, Penny,” Mom said. “We’d have to invest a lot of money to give coffee away for free. For starters, we could lose a lot of money if people slopped coffee on our merchandise and we had to throw books away. Coffee could get spilled on chairs or the oriental rugs and they would have to be professionally cleaned. Not to mention that professional quality coffeemakers are expensive.”

“We would have to buy cream and sugar,” I added.

“Coffee beans,” Pop said.

“It wouldn’t cost you that much,” Penny said in an annoyed tone of voice and I found it rather ironic that we were somehow irritating her.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I said.

Penny glared at me for daring to have an opinion that was different from her own. “Why not?”

I dead-panned, “Because it would cause horrifying global tragedy.”

She met me with a blank stare. I practically whispered, “Paper cups. The paper cups would cause devastation.” I didn’t believe that for a second, but I couldn’t resist the urge to screw with Penny’s head. Maybe that sounds mean, but she started it. Not the most mature attitude on my part I suppose, but I was still a teenager in those days.

“*Paper cups?*” she asked in disbelief. “Paper cups would hurt the environment,” she argued. I’m sure she had no previous notions of paper cups being an environmental threat but she was grasping at anything to keep the argument alive. Penny was the type of person who broadcasted her

opinion to everyone who was unfortunate enough to be within earshot. She was also under the impression that everything she said was an ironclad truth by virtue of the fact that she believed it.

Pop snorted through his nose. Penny shot him a dirty look. “You aren’t afraid of what paper cups can do?”

Pop was getting angry. “Me? Afraid of paper cups? Let me tell you something, I was a kid not much older than Wendy when I dove out of a boat and ran through cold salt water dodging bullets and watching hundreds of good American boys get shot up by Nazi bullets on Omaha Beach. I was at Normandy, went through France, Belgium, Germany, and nearly froze to death in the Battle of the Bulge. Was I scared then, knowing that a Nazi could pop up from anywhere at any time to kill me? Knowing that a grenade or bomb could end me in a split second? You bet I was. But I came home in one piece and you think that after all of that a paper cup frightens me? Not on your life.”

Penny stood there looking at him, still not willing to give up the idea that she could convince us to start giving away free coffee. Penny turned to my Mom and said, “Paper cups cause environmental damage. Just use glass ones like restaurants use.”

Mom said, “I’m not shelling out several thousand dollars for a commercial grade dishwasher and then a few thousand dollars more to have the first floor remodeled to fit it in here and run the plumbing for it. Besides, I think paper cups would be far less harmful than a commercial dishwasher that would use an acrid, bleach-based detergent boiled to a high temperature.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Penny said.

“I’m being serious,” Mom said, and she really was being serious. “All of that chemical residue from the rinse cycle would wind up in the river eventually. There are towns thirty or forty miles down the river that get their municipal water from the river.”

“It’s filtered,” Penny said defensively.

And that’s when I decided to lay it on thick. “We wouldn’t want to cause water pollution,” I said in a patronizing tone, but of course Penny was too stupid to realize that I was being sarcastic.

“You’re just making excuses not to serve free coffee,” she said, and then proceeded to start hacking with the rattled cough that is unique to four pack-a-day cigarette smokers.

“No we’re not,” I answered as innocently as I could. “Think about it: a big commercial dish washer would use electricity. That electricity is generated by burning fossil fuels. Then water would be used and mixed with industrial strength cleaning solvent. The heat from the boiling water and the energy from the dishwasher would release heat into the atmosphere and add to global warming. What’s even worse is that the fumes from the commercial dishwashing detergent will waft through the air and right up into the trees. Those fumes will drift into the eyes of tiny little baby birds and make them go *blind*. Those poor little blind baby birds will start chirping for their mother bird, but

she'll be lying on the ground passed out from eating bleach-poisoned worms. And when those poor, blind baby birds fly out of the nest to find their mother, they will crash into tree trunks like little kamikaze birds and *die*. Soon, all the local birds will be dead and that will throw us into an ecological tail spin much like the kamikaze baby birds. The only way to avoid that disaster would be to have kind-hearted people like you sacrifice a free cup of coffee to prevent global travesty." I pretended to start crying. Penny looked stunned and bewildered. It wasn't until Pop started roaring hysterically that Penny realized I was being a smart aleck. An incredibly well-spoken smart aleck with considerable acting talent, but a smart aleck nonetheless.

Penny rolled her eyes and left in a huff. The antique bell above the door frame jingled violently as she slammed the door behind her.

Mom put her arm around me and said, "I sure do miss you when you're away at school."

Pop said, "Good for you, Wendy. That cranky old witch needs to be put in her place for trying to tell your Mom and I how this place should be run."

I asked, "What makes her think she's an expert in business?"

"People like her think that they are experts in everything. Twenty years ago she worked at a gas station for a few weeks, got married, and basically hasn't done anything since except think she is high society," Mom said.

"I wouldn't call being married to a man who has never worked a day in his life 'high society,'" Pop answered. Penny's husband didn't work and lived off of the system. Buck claimed he had a problem with his neck due to a car accident he had been in when he was nineteen, fortunately it was a single car crash and he was the only one in the vehicle. When they took him to the hospital his blood alcohol level was three times the legal limit. He was bruised and banged up, but other than that he was fine. A few weeks later when the bills started coming and he had no job and no money, Buck claimed that his neck was injured so severely that he couldn't work at all, even though the doctors couldn't find anything wrong with it and it took Buck a month to figure out that there was a supposed problem. Most of us suspected that the only abnormal thing about his neck was the constant stream of booze that was washing down the inside of it because the man was a falling-down drunk and everyone knew it.

"You know, I can't believe that Penny's never been arrested," Pop said.

"Why? What's she ever done that's illegal?" I asked in genuine surprise.

"I'm not saying she's ever done anything illegal. I just think that she looks like the type that would be at home sitting in the back of a police car," Pop said. And that was true. People have a tendency to wear their lifestyle on their face, whether they realize it or not. They say you can't judge a book by its cover, but you really can tell a lot about a person by their face. Once a person reaches a certain age, you can tell if they drink to excess, how much stress they deal with, and how they feel about the world and their place in it.