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Jeannette Walls

Hang the Moon

#1 *New York Times*
Bestselling Author of
The Glass Castle and
Half Broke Horses

A NOVEL

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Jeannette
Walls

**HANG THE
MOON**

A NOVEL

SCRIBNER

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To John. When I was lost, he helped me find the way.

I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king.

*Queen Elizabeth I, 1588, rallying her troops for the arrival
of the Spanish Armada*

Quality? Hell, the only time our whiskey aged was when we got a flat tire.

*Rex Walls, the author's father, who ran bootleg liquor in the
late 1940s and early 1950s*

PROLOGUE

THE FASTEST GIRL IN the world. That's what I'm going to be.

I decided this morning. It was the best kind of morning, sunny but not too hot, white clouds that looked like dumplings way up in the bright blue sky, birds chirping away at each other, and little yellow butterflies dancing around. I'd buttoned up my sailor suit and was buckling my shoes when the door opened. It was my daddy. The Duke. That's what everyone calls him.

"I got a surprise for you, Whippersnapper," he said. "A present."

"A present? But it's not my birthday."

"I don't need some special occasion to give my own daughter a present. If I say today is a present-giving day, it is. And mark my words, girl, this present is going to change your life."

"What is it?"

"Why you little sneak. Are you trying to trick me into telling you?" The Duke was using his pretend-to-be-angry voice and that made me laugh. "Then it wouldn't be a surprise." He smiled. "Up in the carriage house. Come with me."

If I live to be a hundred years old, I'll never forget today. The Duke took my hand in his and the two of us walked down the hall, past the parlor where my stepmama, Jane, was playing scales on the piano with my half brother, Eddie. He loves that piano and didn't even look my way. In the kitchen I told our cook, Old Ida, where we were going and she said she loves surprises and tugged one of my braids and then we went into the backyard.

When something good's about to happen, that makes me feel like skipping—I don't understand why so many people walk when they could skip instead—but this morning, I couldn't bear to let go of the Duke's hand, so I behaved myself for once in my life—like Jane is all the time telling me to.

The Duke and I walked past the stone wall we built together for Jane before Eddie was born—it's low, like a bench, so I can sit on it, and wide enough for me to run along the top and then jump as high as I can into the

air. Behind the wall are Jane's pink and red and white peonies that look like big scoops of ice cream. She's the only one allowed to pick them.

We headed up the long driveway, under the big poplars, past our chicken house and icehouse and smokehouse and springhouse, all of them painted white with green tin roofs just like the Big House, and all of them empty now because we buy our meat and eggs in town and the iceman brings blocks of ice for the icebox in the kitchen. Still, it's fun to go poking around in them. Eddie's only three, five years younger than me, but as soon as he gets old enough to really play, they'll make great cowboy-and-Indian forts.

When we walked by the paddock, I gave a great big wave to the carriage horses, who were chewing away on grass and swatting at the flies with their tails. They're getting fat because we don't harness them up much now that the Duke bought himself the Ford, first automobile in all of Claiborne County. I feel a little sorry for the horses, but the Duke says in a matter of time only cowboys and fox hunters and circus riders will have horses.

The carriage house at the top of the hill is also white and green and by the time we got there I was just about to bust from wanting to know what my surprise was. The Duke grabbed ahold of the door handles and said, "Close your eyes, Whippersnapper."

So I did. I heard that low, rumbly sound the big double doors make when they're sliding apart.

"Now open your eyes," he said.

So I did.

That's when I first saw it. A wagon. Sitting there pretty as you please on the brick floor right between the Ford and the carriage, an honest-to-goodness coaster wagon, with great big red wheels—bigger than dinner plates—and a shiny black metal pull handle and smooth wood sides with big black and red letters that read **DEFIANCE COASTER**.

"Is that for me?"

"You bet it is. Saw it in a catalogue and right away I said, that's for my gal Sallie." I looked up at the Duke. He was staring at the Defiance Coaster with a smile in his eyes. "You like it?"

Most times, I've got so much to say that no one can get me to shut up, but right then, I was too happy to say a word, so I just nodded and then kept nodding about twenty times.

“Had one of these wagons myself when I was your age. Couldn’t get me out of it. How about we take her for a spin?”

“Me and you?”

Old Ida all the time says I think the Duke hung the moon and scattered the stars. Maybe I do. Right then, I sure did.

The Duke pulled the wagon out to the driveway and squatted beside it. I squatted next to him while he showed me how you steer with the handle, how the brake lever on the left side stops the back wheels, not the front.

“Now why do you think that is?” he asked.

I jiggled the handle back and forth and watched the front wheels wobble. “Because the front wheels turn from side to side?”

“Right. The back wheels are fixed. You’re a natural at this, Whippersnapper. Let’s go.”

He pulled the wagon to the top of the driveway and set the brake. The Duke is big even for a grown-up man, but he sat down in the wagon. I crawled between his legs and tucked my back up against his chest. He smelled good, like cigars and the stuff they splash on his face at Clyde’s Barbershop after they trim his beard. It was mighty crowded, with the Duke’s legs on both sides of me, his knees at my shoulders like a big pair of dark wings, but it felt good, felt like I could do anything, like nothing could go wrong, nothing could hurt me. He put my right hand on the steering handle and my left hand on the brake.

Together we released the brake.

We started to move, rolling down the driveway, slow at first, bumpy over the gravel, then we picked up speed, faster and faster, and we zoomed right past the horses and I was leaning forward, staring down the hill, the big poplars coming right at us, the Duke’s arms around my shoulders while we both steered, his cheek pressed up against mine, his beard tickling my neck, his voice in my ear. “Steady, girl. You’ve got it. Steady.”

We barreled through the curve at the biggest poplar, leaning into the turn, then we straightened out the steering handle and got to that flat part of the driveway at the Big House. Jane was standing in the yard, holding Eddie on her hip and watching us and we waved at her, but real quick, we needed our hands for steering because below the Big House the driveway heads downhill again, under more trees, so we picked up speed, the gravel

crunching below us, the wind in my face, in my hair, my braids bouncing. At the bottom of the hill we got to the little stone bridge that crosses Crooked Run. There's an old weeping willow right beside it and we hit the big bump where a root snakes beneath the driveway. That jerked our wheels and popped us up, but we kept her steady and next thing I knew we were hurtling across the bridge toward the stone pillars at the bottom of the driveway when the Duke hollered, "Now!" We pulled back on the brake—hard—and skidded to a stop right at Crooked Run Road.

My face was all tingly and so were my hands and I could feel my heart thumping hard inside my chest. I have never, in all my life, ever felt anything like that. We were fast, so very fast, the Duke and me. We were flying.

I started laughing, out of nowhere. It just came out of me like soup boiling over, and the Duke started to laughing too. Then I jumped out of the wagon and danced a happy jig right there, kicking out my feet and throwing up my arms and swinging my head around, and that made him laugh even harder.

"You've found your calling, Whippersnapper," he said. "Keep at it and you'll be the fastest girl in the world."

* * *

I keep thinking about what the Duke said.

When I grow up, I can't become a senator or a governor or explore the North Pole or take over the family business like the Duke wants for Eddie. Jane's always saying that ladies don't engage in such pursuits. But becoming the fastest girl in the world, well, that's something I can do. The Duke himself says so. He likes to read out newspaper stories about automobile racing—cars that go faster than two miles a minute. He is mightily impressed by such stuff—people who are fastest, strongest, first—and that's what I'm going to be.

School's out now and the whole summer is ahead of me so every day that I don't get to go to the Emporium with the Duke, I practice. The Duke gave me one of his old pocket watches and it has a second hand so I can time myself racing through The Course. That's what the Duke and me call it. The Course. We gave names to the different parts of The Course. There's the Starting Line, the Drop, the Curve, the Straightaway, the Twist, the Dip, the

Hairpin, the Snake—that's what we call the little ridge where that big willow root crosses under the driveway—the Bridge, and the Finish Line.

I figure out ways to make each run quicker than the last, even if just by a second. Or a split second. I use a running start like the Duke showed me, pushing the wagon and then jumping in. Once I get going I scrunch down my shoulders and tuck my chin into my chest so there's less of me to catch the wind—less resistance, the Duke said when he told me how to do it. I hug the insides of the curves like the Duke told me to, picking up speed for the flatter stretches, and after a few days I get so I only need to use the brake at the end, when I reach the stone pillars—the Finish Line.

Then I pull the Defiance Coaster back up to the top, and do it again. And again. I do it for hours. It keeps me out of the Big House all day long, except for lunch, and I eat that in the kitchen with Old Ida. I think maybe that's one of the reasons the Duke bought me the wagon—to get me out of the house, out of Jane's hair. She says I'm too rambunctious—that's the word she uses—because when I'm cooped up inside I slide down the banister, do handstands in the front hall, accidentally break the glass figurines you're not supposed to play with because they're not toys, start pillow fights with Eddie, and give him rides in the dumbwaiter.

Jane says I'm a bad influence on Eddie but I think we get along just fine. He's very sweet and also very smart. He already knows all his letters and numbers and he practices that piano all the time without Jane having to tell him to. But Eddie gets lots of colds and earaches and Jane gives him an orange every day so he doesn't get the rickets. Also, Jane won't let him spend all that much time outdoors because the sun burns his skin and the flowers make him sneeze. So most days, it's just me and the Defiance Coaster. That suits me fine.

* * *

I got my best time ever today. It was windy as heck this morning, the branches of the poplars were waving around like crazy and I had trouble getting into the Defiance Coaster because that old wind kept wanting to push the wagon down the driveway on its own. That gave me an idea so once I finally got in the wagon, instead of scrunching over like I usually do, I

kept my back straight and my shoulders up. With that big wind behind me, I really tore down the driveway. I could hardly wait to tell the Duke.

As soon as he comes home, that's what I do, and he throws back his head and laughs. "That's what you call ingenuity, Whippersnapper. Making the wind work for you like that." He points his finger at me. "I said it first, you're going to be the fastest girl in the world. Something like that's in your blood. It's what makes you a Kincaid." That warms me up like sunshine. He turns to Eddie. "What do you think, Son? It's in your blood too, right?"

Eddie nods. Jane gives the Duke a look, a cold one, and he shoots back a cold look of his own and my warm feeling is gone. I hope they don't argue. Sometimes the Duke and Jane have cross words because he thinks she babies Eddie. "For crying out loud, woman, Sallie was doing that when she was the boy's age," he'll tell her. Then she'll give me that cold look, like I'm to blame.

So that's when I come up with the plan. I'll teach Eddie how to drive the Defiance Coaster. I'll teach him the same way the Duke taught me and as soon as he's really good at it, we'll show the Duke. It'll be a surprise, our present for him, and he'll be so proud of his son and if the Duke is happy with Eddie, Jane will have to like me. But I'm not going to tell her about my plan. She might say no. If I don't tell Jane then I'm not doing anything she's told me not to do, not breaking one of her rules—not exactly.

The next morning after the Duke goes to work, I wait until Jane's in the room she calls her boudoir, fixing her hair—which takes a really long time—and I lead Eddie up to the carriage house. He likes my plan, he studies the coaster, and listens close to everything I say, nodding. I can tell he understands and I can also tell he's excited. But he's also very serious. He wants to make the Duke proud of him.

It's sunny and warm, just like the day the Duke taught me, a blue sky with puffy white clouds but no wind. A great day for a beginner. I set the Defiance Coaster at the top of the driveway, pointing downhill, then I climb in and fold my legs up like the Duke did and Eddie sits between them like I did. I put my right hand over his on the steering handle then with my left hand I let go of the brake.

We start to roll, slow at first, then we pick up speed, and I'm guiding Eddie just like the Duke did me, whispering, "Steady, boy, you've got it. Steady."

The wagon wheels rattle over the gravel and Eddie's corn-silk hair blows back while we race downhill past the horses and through the Curve under the big poplar, then along the Straightaway and down into the Twist, picking up speed again, and now we're heading right for the Snake at Crooked Run that always gives the Defiance Coaster that fun little pop.

"Steady," I say. "Steady."

* * *

I'm in trouble.

I'm sitting by myself in the parlor. The big old grandfather clock is ticking in the front hall and I can hear the muffled voices of worried adults coming from upstairs.

I hope Eddie's going to be okay.

We were doing great until we hit the Snake. I had warned Eddie that we'd get popped up a little but I guess we got popped more than Eddie thought we would because he yelled and then he jerked the steering handle and so we hit the stone bridge and the wagon flipped on its side and we both got pitched out. I got my knees and elbows skinned up but Eddie was lying facedown in the gravel on the bridge, his arms stretched out on both sides. He wasn't moving. Was he hurt? Was he...? I couldn't finish the thought. I touched his shoulder but he still didn't move.

Then Jane came running out of the house, screaming something awful. She kept yelling at me to stay away from her son, and then she picked him up—his face scratched, his arms and legs limp like a rag doll—and took him into the Big House.

I followed Jane inside and started up the stairs behind her, but she again screamed at me to stay away, so I went to the parlor and that's where I was when the Duke and Doctor Black got here and ran upstairs.

I think I can hear Eddie's voice. I think he's alive. I sure do hope he is. I didn't mean to hurt him. I was just trying to make everyone happy. But I know I'm in trouble. Big trouble. I just don't know how big.

* * *

I'm still sitting in the parlor by myself when I hear a door shut on the second floor, then the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. The Duke. I know

the way he walks, heavy but quick. He comes into the parlor. Most times when the Duke sees me he smiles and pats my head or squeezes my shoulder or wraps me in a hug, but not now.

Instead, he kneels down in front of me so he can look me straight in the eyes.

“Is Eddie okay?” I ask.

“He was out cold but he’s come to.”

I feel myself breathing out, like I’ve been holding it in all this time.

“So we’ll see,” the Duke goes on. “Doctor Black wants him to stay in bed for a few days, in case he’s had a concussion of the brain.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Aw, heck, I got knocked out plenty when I was growing up. Part of being a boy.”

“It was an accident.”

“I’m sure it was. But, Whippersnapper, we got us a predicament. The way Jane sees it, you almost killed your little brother.”

“I was teaching him how to drive the Defiance Coaster. As a surprise for you.”

“I understand. Thing is, Jane believes you’re a danger to the boy. She’s angry. Mighty angry. We got to calm her down, Whippersnapper, you and me. And you can do your bit by going to stay with your Aunt Faye in Hatfield for a little while.”

Aunt Faye? My mama’s sister? My throat swells up until I almost can’t breathe. I barely remember Aunt Faye. She used to live with us and help look after me and she sends a birthday card every year, but I haven’t seen Aunt Faye since Mama died and the Duke married Jane back when I was three. And Hatfield is way up in the mountains on the other side of the county, far away from the Big House.

From the way the Duke’s looking at me, I get the feeling that he doesn’t want to do this. Maybe I can beg him not to send me away, promise I’ll be good, I’ll never be rambunctious again, I’ll do whatever it takes to calm Jane down and I’ll never do anything that might hurt Eddie, I’ll swear it on a stack of Bibles. But the Duke’s also talking in that voice he uses when his mind is made up and if you try to change it, his eyes get squinty and angry and you only make things worse.

So I ask, "For how long?"
"Just till this blows over."

PART I

CHAPTER 1

THE SUN WILL SHOW itself soon. Our house is near the bottom of the mountain—not too far from the train tracks—with another mountain rising directly across from us, so we’ve got ourselves only a narrow stretch of sky overhead. Most mornings that sky is shrouded with a mist thick and heavy as a wet wool blanket and some days the sun doesn’t burn it off until near noon. We’ll have boiled and beaten the stains out of these darned sheets by then and we can hang them to dry, take them to the clinic tomorrow and collect our money. That will get us through another week.

But we need the sun.

I keep glancing east, willing that old sun to shine, and that’s when I see the car. It’s coming down through the switchbacks on the mountainside across from us, moving in and out of the mist. Aunt Faye sees it too. We stop stirring the sheets and both watch wordless while it crosses the Shooting Creek bridge at the very bottom of the mountains, goes into the little town and out of sight, then comes through the mist on our road, the one running alongside the creek and the train tracks. It’s a big car, long as a locomotive and green—the dark, hard green of a new dollar bill. No one in these mountains drives a car like that. Far as I know, only one man in the whole county could afford such a car. It rolls to a stop at the faded sign that says FAYE’S DRESS-MAKING AND HAIR-STYLING.

“I look a fright,” Aunt Faye says while she dries her hands on her apron and touches her hair. “Be right back.” She ducks into the house.

I know I must look a fright, too, and I’m mopping my face with my sleeve when a tall, lanky man in a dark suit steps out of the car.

“Tom!” I shout, dropping the ladle and running toward him like a kid let out of school. I’ve known Tom Dunbar my whole life but haven’t laid eyes on him since he headed off to college. If Tom’s back, if he’s driven all the way to Hatfield in a fancy green automobile in the middle of the week, he’s not here

just to ask how I'm doing. Something has happened. Something very good. Or very bad.

I hug Tom hard and he hugs back every bit as hard, then he takes my hands and we just stand there, grinning at each other.

"You're looking good, Sallie Kincaid."

"That's a lie." My work dress is soaked, my hair slipping out of the loose bun I put it in this morning, and my red, chapped hands smell of lye. "But it's a white lie, so I won't hold it against you. I'll tell you something that's true. It's darn good to see you. And you look good, too."

He does. His dark hair is already thinning at the temples but some color has come back to his face since the last time I saw him, when he returned from the war looking drained of all hope and joy, his skin the color of ash and his eyes fixed in that faraway, shell-shocked stare you see in so many of the boys back from France. Now, he looks like my friend Tom again.

I glance past Tom to the green car with its long hood and longer body, its sharp angles and smooth curves, its shiny paint job and shinier nickel plating, so sleek and modern and out of place here in Hatfield, where the mist and rain and dew soften the edges of the sagging houses and coat anything made by man with mildew and rust. "That peacock of a car has got to be the Duke's. What is it? And what the heck are you doing driving it all the way up here?"

"It's a Packard Twin Six, just off the factory floor. And, Sallie"—Tom squeezes my hands and his eyes search mine—"the Duke sent me here. To bring you back."

Bring me back. Nine long years I've been waiting to hear those words. Bring me back. Bring me home. I believed the Duke when he said I'd be staying in Hatfield for just a short while and I kept telling myself he'd send for me any day now, but the weeks passed, then the months, and I stopped thinking any day now. The Duke used to drop by once or twice a year when he was in this corner of the county, but the visits were short, he was always in a hurry, and when I asked about coming home, he'd say the time's not right and I learned to stop asking. In the last few years, he hasn't visited at all. Still, I always knew that one day, one day, I would leave this little town in the mountains. Now that day is here. "Why? Why now?"

"Jane's dead," Tom says. "The influenza took her in three days."

Jane's dead. Tom said the words softly, but I hear them roaring in my head. All those times I thought about Jane, how she had ruined my life, how she'd taken away everything I loved. I couldn't help but wish something would happen to her, but I always did my best to push such thoughts away, praying instead for Jane to have a change of heart, to see that I never meant to hurt Eddie, that I ought to have a place in my daddy's house along with my brother. I swear I'd never prayed for God to take her like this, to leave Eddie without a mama. No child ought to go through that.

"All the Kincaids are gathering at the Big House," Tom says.

Aunt Faye comes back outside just as the sun burns through the last of the mist. She's changed into her good dress and she's tidying her thick black hair with those slender fingers she hates to ruin by doing the laundry. Folks say that in her day, Aunt Faye was a true beauty and you can see it even now, with her doe-like eyes and ample curves. But life in Hatfield ages a body real fast, that thick black hair is streaked with gray, and the skin at the corners of those doe-like eyes has tiny creases.

"Tom, you handsome college boy, what a surprise. What brings you here?"

"Jane died," I say. "Of the influenza."

"Oh my." Aunt Faye's hand goes to her mouth. "May God have mercy on her soul."

"Funeral's tomorrow," Tom says. "The Duke's sending for Sallie."

Aunt Faye smiles. "I told you, Sallie. I told you this would happen one of these days." Then she gives a nervous little laugh. "What about me, Tom? I'm coming too, right?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Powell," Tom's voice is kind. "The Duke didn't say anything about you."

Aunt Faye turns back to me, pulling on those slender fingers, a panicked look in her eyes. I can't leave her here—the woman who raised me for the last nine years—I can't leave her here on her own with a kettle full of stained bedsheets.

"Aunt Faye ought to be there," I say. "She's family too."

Tom nods. "Of course she is. But you know the Duke. He hates surprises—unless he's doing the surprising—and he said, 'Fetch Sallie,' not 'Fetch Sallie and Faye.'"

“I won’t go without her.”

Aunt Faye takes ahold of my arm. “Sallie, don’t be crossing the Duke. You go. You won’t be gone long. Because you are coming back, aren’t you?”

Am I? Or could the Duke possibly want me home for good? If it’s just for the funeral, Aunt Faye will be all right for a few days on her own. The sheets are almost clean now, the sun’s out, she can hang them by herself and get them to the clinic in the little red pull wagon, the Defiance Coaster. But what’s she going to do if the Duke wants me to stay?

“Am I?” I ask Tom. “Coming back here?”

“Duke didn’t say. But the wake’s already started. We best be getting off.”

Aunt Faye follows me through the house, past the dressmaking dummy and the fashion advertisements from ladies’ magazines pasted to the walls. In our bedroom, I pull the pillowcase off my pillow. I don’t have much and it’ll all fit inside with room to spare.

“You are coming back, aren’t you?” she asks again. Her voice is so small and fragile.

“Aunt Faye, you know as much as I do.”

“The Duke said he’d take care of me as long as I took care of you. What’s going to happen to me if you don’t come back?”

“I’ll take care of you,” I say. “One way or another.”

“How?”

“I’ll find a way.”

I hope. I just don’t know how. And Tom’s waiting and the Duke’s waiting and I’ve got to go.

It might be tempting fate to pack as if I’m not coming back, but I do it anyway. My second set of underclothes, my summer socks, my boar-bristle hairbrush, my dog-eared Bible that I don’t read as much as I ought to—they all go into the pillowcase. I turn my back to Aunt Faye and pull off my brown muslin work dress and, even though it’s still wet, roll it up and pack it too. I put on my other dress, a blue gingham with rickrack trim I keep for special occasions. There’s only one more thing. My rifle, my most valuable possession, is leaning in the corner.

“Aunt Faye, I’m going to leave my Remington here with you. Don’t be afraid to use it.”

CHAPTER 2

“ARE YOU READY FOR this?” Tom asks as we pass through Hatfield.

“I’m fine.” It comes out sharper than I mean for it to. I’m more on edge than I thought. Tom nods like he knows how I feel. We cross over Shooting Creek and Tom starts talking about how he loves that creek, the way its water shoots into the air from the side of the mountain and then falls almost straight down, tumbling, spilling right over the rocks, cold and fast and narrow but then, at the bottom of the mountain, when the land gets flatter, the water slows and starts winding and wandering, meeting up with other creeks and runs, losing its name to theirs, sliding around rocks and rises, slipping into the low spots where it can flow most freely. “And that’s why your Crooked Run is crooked.”

Tom tells me the Duke’s other car, the Ford, is being used to tote food for the wake so the Duke sent him in the Packard, saying, “I’ll have your hide if you get so much as a scratch on it.” Tom has always been a careful driver and now that he’s behind the wheel of the Duke’s fancy new car he is downright inching along, easing through switchback turns, steering clear of the ruts from the lumber wagons, and slowing to a crawl at every mud puddle.

So the trip back to Caywood is slow. Or maybe it just seems slow because my mind’s racing. So many thoughts in my head. Thoughts that are at odds with each other. I can’t wait to get to the Big House, but I have no idea how I’ll be greeted. I had hoped for this day for years, aching to get back home, but all that while I never gave proper thought to what I’d be leaving behind and I can’t shake the sight of Aunt Faye standing there on her own beside her dressmaking sign, waving goodbye, doing her best to smile for me.

We make our way down out of the Blue Ridge mountains in the western part of Claiborne County and into the valley where the fine Virginia land is flat enough for good farming and the fields and pastures are divided by fences and hedgerows. Winter hasn’t yet let go of its grip up in the mountains, but down here, spring has softened the ground, coaxed out the