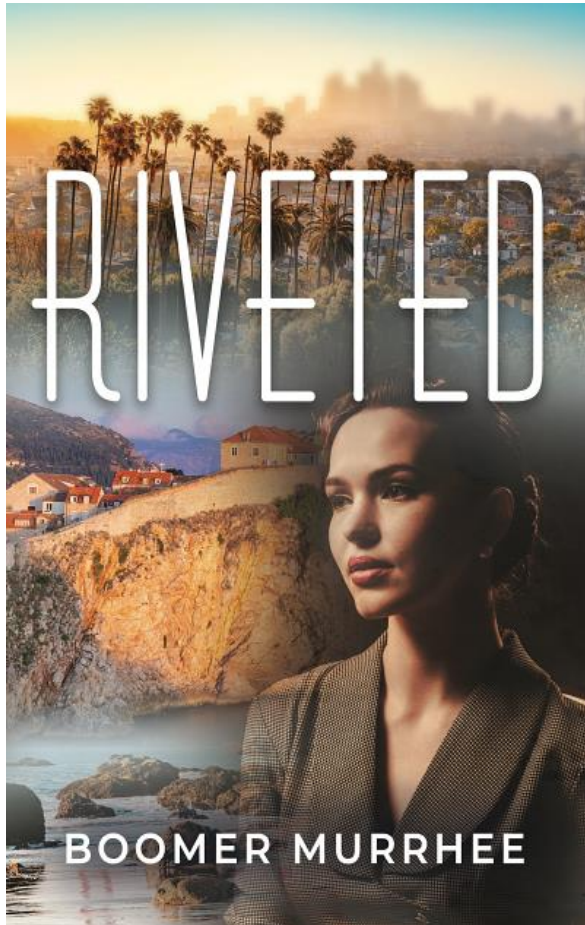




*Spain, 1945. As war's dust settles, secrets refuse to stay buried. An OSS operative, a resilient woman, and a dangerous man collide in a web of betrayal and survival. History's shadows run deep.*

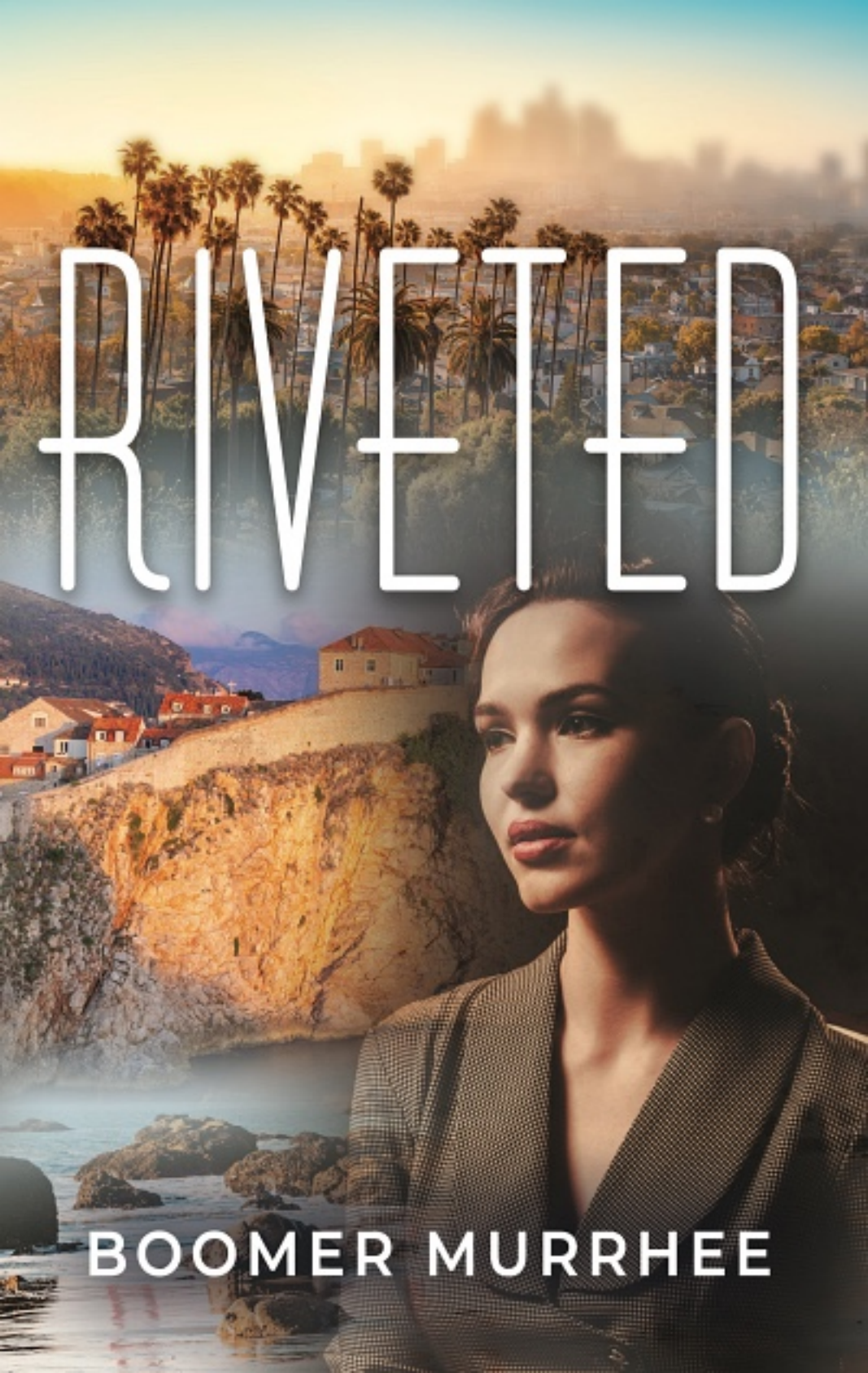
## **Riveted**

By Boomer Murrhee

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# RIVETED

BOOMER MURRHEE

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First Edition

## Chapter 1

### Rose

*Early January 1941*

Before dawn, I opened the shed and a powdered light drifted in, thick enough to taste.

The John Deere sat slouched in the corner, half gutted, and the radiator hose split. The fuel line was clogged, as always. I rolled up my sleeves and reached for Papa's wrench, the one he kept hooked by the door. It still fit my hand as if it belonged there.

I stepped deeper into the shed. Oil and the scent of last year's hay hung in the air. It wrapped around me as something familiar. It didn't ask questions. The tools were right where I'd left them, clean, sharp, lined in rows. My rows. Neatness didn't make life easier, but it did make the noise fall away.

I turned the wrench in my palms. The weight steadied me.

Jake once told me machines are honest. They don't pretend. If a problem shows up, they'll show you. I held on to that. People lie. Machines give you a way back if you listen.

Comfort lived in making things right—knowing I could take what's broken and put it back together better than it was. Here, no one expected a smile, a nod, or to say the right thing. Out here, I could fix what was broken.

The breeze shifted—eucalyptus and the bite of wood smoke. Somewhere down the road, a car backfired, then nothing. Only the hush of the yard answered.

I'd rebuilt this tractor so many times I could do it in my sleep. The boys in town used to smirk about it, like it was a party trick. But a girl who lost both her parents by eight learns quick—if you can't make it right, you go hungry.

The belt was frayed, too worn to trust. I dug around in the bin until I found one that was close enough to fit. It wasn't by the book, but it'd hold.

The wrench slipped, raking my knuckles. I didn't curse. What for? I wrapped my hand in the tail of my shirt and kept going. The gasket was cracked and worn tight, and the whole assembly looked like it hadn't been greased in years. Jake always meant to, but meaning to doesn't get it done.

I laid the parts out on a feed sack, neat and clean. The shaft was cracked but not ruined. The bearings were tired, but they spun. The seal was shot.

Jake stepped closer and looked down at my hands.

"I'll cut a new shaft. A piece from the harrow blade should do."

He cocked his head. "The soft strip off the old harness for the gasket?"

I nodded.

He didn't say more. That was his way of saying yes.

My fingers followed the curve, smoothing the edge of the steel harrow blade. It wasn't pretty, but it would hold. The steel warmed in my palms. Memory did the rest.

Click of metal. Grind of grit in the threads. There was rhythm in it.

I stood and stretched my back. Wiped my hands on a rag slung over the fence rail. My fingers ached, but it was the good

kind, the kind that meant the day hadn't wasted you. I checked the engine, half expecting it to spit or leak. But it kept its mouth shut.

When the bolt finally gave, it did all at once. I wiped my brow on the back of a greasy wrist. The patch wasn't perfect, but it would do. Like everything else around here, it held together with willpower, rust, and borrowed time.

"You didn't have to mend it yourself," Jake said.

"I know." I wiped the back of my neck. "But it needed fixing."

He grunted. "Your daddy'd be proud."

I didn't answer. I tossed the rag onto the rail and climbed into the seat and turned the key. The engine hesitated, then caught. Rough at first, then steady. I eased it forward a few feet, then it came to life, evened out.

Jake gave a low whistle. "Well, I'll be."

The sun edged higher while the tractor idled, stirring engine soot behind it. Not much, but enough to remind me that things could still be mended if you were willing to get your hands dirty.

"This coupling's gone. It's hanging on by half a thread."

Uncle Jake grunted. "Don't need it holding forever. Just till October."

That was him—practical to a fault. He was built like the barn he patched every winter—weathered. Square-shouldered. Fists like tree bark.

"You want perfect or just passable?" I asked.

He scratched his beard. "On a farm, they're the same."

I smiled—small—not that he noticed. Jake let the yard do the talking. Every word had weight, like fenceposts driven deep.

Barn chaff hung in it like ash. I could smell old hay, engine oil, and the coppery sting of my own blood. Somewhere outside, a crow called once, sharp and flat.

The morning moved on. Chickens rustled at the fence line, pecking and scratching. The windmill groaned in the distance.

Jake leaned against the barn door, arms crossed. “You know, not every girl could tear apart a tractor.”

I shot him a look. “Not every girl lost her folks at eight and had you showing her how.”

He let a small smile loose, barely. “You always had a knack. Your daddy used to say you had grease in your blood.”

“Probably true. I never minded it.”

“Figured. Most kids wouldn’t trade dolls for socket wrenches.”

“I still had dolls. They just rode carburetors instead of tea trays.”

He laughed outright. The sound rolled across the yard and up into the trees.

Then a pause. “You ever think about leaving?” he asked. “Going off to one of those places you read about?”

“Sometimes. But the farm needs both of us.”

“That it does.”

We slogged on through the morning. I tied my coat around my waist. Jake didn’t like that...he said it made me look like one of the town girls. I didn’t care. Sweat is sweat. You either drip or drown.

I leaned into the open casing and tugged at a rusted bracket. The bolt wouldn't budge.

"Hold that steady."

Jake planted his boot and held firm. I slipped a pipe over the wrench and leaned in. Metal shrieked before it gave.

"You always wrestle 'em like that?"

"Only when they lie to me."

That got a grunt. Might've been a laugh. Close enough.

The flu took Ma and Pa fast. I was eight. Ma told me not to be afraid. Her voice shook like a cracked teacup.

Uncle Jake came for the burial with potatoes and whiskey. I'd been working on the tractor when I heard his truck. I grabbed the butcher knife on the way—the rabbit wasn't going to dress itself. I opened the door with a wrench in one hand and the butcher knife in the other.

He looked me over, nodded once, and said, "That'll do."

He moved his bed and a drawer into the tack shed, saying he preferred stillness. Truth is, I think he didn't want to sit where my father used to. He never married, saying the land was woman enough.

When I asked about his brother—my father—he said, "Tom was a good man." Then stopped, like that was all there was to say.

Silence runs in families. Same as jawlines.

By midday, the tractor was squared away. I tightened the last bolt and stood. The engine coughed once, then it found its rhythm.

Jake lit a cigar and leaned on the fence. "Ain't pretty, but she'll pull."

“You said the same about Alma’s cousin.”

He snorted. “She could plow a row, that girl. Hush now.”

I liked making him laugh. It didn’t happen often, but it felt like winning something I hadn’t known I was after.

We sat on the tailgate and passed a warm canteen. The irrigation line needed fixing. The coop needed new slats. Always another problem.

“Strange year.”

“You mean the weather?”

He shrugged. “Air feels off. Like it’s leaning. Ain’t tipped yet, but it wants to.”

That’s how he talked when the truth came slow.

I looked up. The breeze moved sideways, dragging a haze with it. A change was coming.

“Tell me you feel it too.”

He narrowed his eyes toward the hills. “Storm, maybe.”

But it wasn’t a storm I felt.

I dreamed sometimes, but not like the girls in town with their shoes and husbands. My dreams came softer, like dusk.

Trains, mostly. Rolling east. Oceans, too—real ones, not the postcard kind. Always in motion. Alive.

I didn’t know where they came from. Only that they did.

By breakfast, they were mostly gone.

I told Jake once I might head east someday. He just grunted and said, “What for?”

I didn’t have an answer that made sense.

But something in me knew there had to be more than bolts and dry fields. I wanted to stand on my own.

He never pressed. But after that, the truck always ran clean. He never said a word. That was his way.

By late afternoon, the sky turned pewter, and the chill returned.

Back at the shed, Jake met me at the door. He had something in his weathered hands.

“Your daddy’s,” he said, holding a brass compass. The metal was worn smooth at the edges, warm from his pocket. “Figured you ought to have it.”

I turned it over. The needle spun, then settled. North.

“He used it surveying the back forty.” A good compass tells you where you are, not where you should be. That part’s up to you.

I closed my fingers around it. The weight felt right—small enough to carry and solid enough to trust.

“Thanks, Jake.”

He nodded once and turned back to the shed. That was his way.

I slipped the compass into my pocket and felt it settle there like a promise. Or a question I wasn’t ready to answer yet.

I closed the shed door, stacked the tools, and watched Jake head for the henhouse. I lingered a moment longer. My arms ached. Dirt caked my boots. The world felt like it was made of iron and patience.

But the breeze—it hummed through the trees like a wire strung too tight.

Something was coming.

I didn’t know what.

But I felt it.

And I didn't look away.

## Chapter 2

### Rose

I didn't want to go.

The sun had already started to sink behind the hill when I stood in front of the mirror and smoothed the front of my dress. Blue cotton, faded at the shoulders and hem, let down twice, once by Mama, once by me. The woman looking back had my father's mouth and my mother's fire. I gave her a look, not a smile.

A knock at the door.

Jake's voice, gruff. "You ready?"

"Give me a minute."

He didn't ask questions. He never did. He didn't have to come at all, for Christ's sake. He just wanted an excuse to ride into town.

Or keep an eye on me. He never said.

The Grange Hall sat square and stubborn against the wind. Its roofline tilted, porch sagging, but it held. Lanterns swung on rusted wires overhead. The place smelled like grain, linseed oil, and engine soot—it couldn't decide if it was a feed store, garage, or dance hall.

They'd swept the floor and hung bare bulbs from the rafters. A few streamers drooped from too many seasons. The band—fiddle, banjo, upright piano—wasn't polished, but they had rhythm enough to get the boots moving.

Jake parked and left the engine running.

"You don't have to walk me in," I said.

“I’m not.”

But he didn’t drive off until I reached the door.

Inside, the air clung heavy with sweat, perfume, and sawdust. Girls in gingham spun, shrieking. Men leaned against the walls like they owned the place. They hadn’t watched the world turn mean and kept going anyway.

I nodded to a few faces, but I kept my distance.

A couple asked me to dance. I smiled and said no.

I stood near the punch table with a paper cup in my hand, watching. As the music thumped, I felt apart. I pressed my palm flat against the paper cup, grounding myself in its damp chill, wishing for the feel of a wrench instead. Among girls with lipstick and easy laughter, it was apparent I’d never be one of them. Most hadn’t buried what I had.

Nearly an hour passed before the tempo softened. The piano dipped. The fiddle drew long. Voices calmed down.

That was when I saw him.

He stood near the back wall. Hands in his pockets. Not scanning, not twitching. Still.

His gaze landed on me.

I looked away.

Footsteps. Measured. No swagger.

“Would you care to dance?”

His voice was even. Not pushy. Just ... real.

He was taller than I’d expected. Clean-shaven. Calm like a winter wood—but not safe.

I lowered my head.

On the floor, he didn't rush. Didn't pull. His hand found mine, warm, steady. The other rested at the small of my back, light as breath. We moved slowly, letting the music lead.

The light caught his face in soft gold. He had strong features, but nothing showy.

"Name's Peter."

"Rose."

He nodded. Didn't press.

"First dance in a while?"

I nodded again.

"Yours too?"

"Yes."

"Why now?"

He sized me up, then nodded once. "Sometimes it's time."

Something in his voice steadied me. He'd already weighed the options and had chosen this moment. He'd been waiting for something, and tonight he'd found it.

That was all.

The next song came faster. People spun and stomped. We didn't join. Just stood.

I stepped back first. "Thank you."

"Maybe another time."

"Maybe."

My legs felt heavy as I walked back.

But he followed. "You from around here?"

"I grew up six miles west. Born and raised. That count?"

"You look like you've got somewhere else to be."

Up close, he looked younger—tough, not soft. His voice had polish, not pretense.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Upstate New York.”

“That’s far.”

“I wander.”

“Looking for something?”

“Work. And maybe a place to stay. Just for a while.”

“Is that supposed to impress me?”

“No. Just honesty.”

A beat passed. “Peter.”

“Rose.” We shook hands. His grip was solid. Calloused.

“Dance?” he asked.

“Not unless I’m chased.”

He laughed—real, low. “Consider yourself chased.”

The band picked up again. He offered his hand. I hesitated, then took it. Once, my hip brushed his. He adjusted, no flinch, no presumption. He watched me, not hungry or smooth, just curious. He saw something he hadn’t expected. It startled something in me—a small, unexpected spark.

When the song ended, we stepped apart, not strangers anymore. Then he nodded once and disappeared into the crowd. I let him go.

Back in the truck, Jake didn’t speak. The road hummed. Headlights carved tunnels through the dusk. He gripped the wheel. I watched the trees blur past. Peter—quiet, deliberate—didn’t perform. He observed, and that unsettled me. Most men want to be seen. Peter’s look said he already had a measure of me. I’d been seen before. But not like that.

Jake broke the silence. “Who was he?”

“Peter.”

“Where’s he from?”

“Said he’s new.”

Jake snorted. “Didn’t look local.”

“He didn’t pretend to be.”

“He ask your name?”

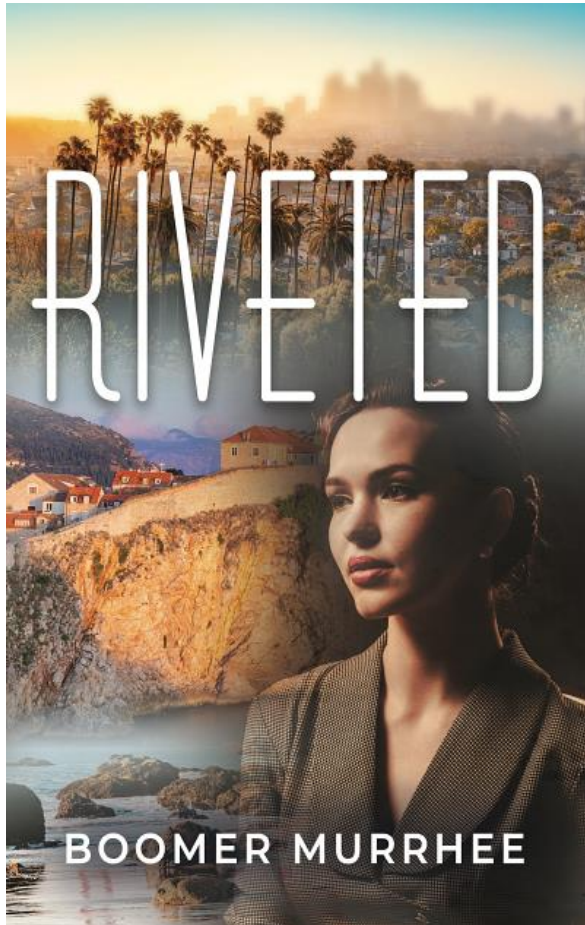
“I gave it. He’s looking for a job. We could use the help.”

Jake’s jaw tightened. “You be careful.”

“I always am.”

“That’s what worries me.” He didn’t say more, and I didn’t press.

That night, I lay awake listening to the fan blades, the creak of Jake’s boots, the hush of crickets. Peter—the weight of his gaze, the way he said my name. I told myself it didn’t matter. He’d move on. They always did. Still, I dreamed of him. Didn’t mean to. But I did.



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