

READ IT FIRST

CHARLIE PRICE



**DESERT
ANGEL**

To Kit Anderton—friend and brother

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Distributed in Canada by D&M Publishers, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

Designed by Jay Colvin

First edition, 2011

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

macteenbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Price, Charlie.

Desert Angel / Charlie Price. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: In the California desert, fourteen-year-old Angel is on the run from the man who abused her, killed her mother, and intends to kill her too.

ISBN: 978-0-374-31775-1

[1. Survival—Fiction. 2. Violence—Fiction. 3. Illegal aliens—Fiction. 4. Mexican Americans—Fiction. 5. California—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.P92477Des 2011

[Fic]—dc22

2010044122

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The fight started after midnight, Scotty drunk, Angel's mother shrill on crystal. When it didn't die down, Angel left the trailer to sleep nearby in a small draw where one of the drainage creases made a cradle. Screened from night winds, cut off from the yelling and threats, Angel could nestle in her robe and watch the stars. She no longer made wishes. Fourteen was too old for wishes. Sleeping outside was just one more thing that had to be done. When she awakened at dawn, the truck was gone and the trailer was empty. The inside wall by the door was bloody.

LATER ANGEL WISHED SHE'D CHANGED CLOTHES, shed her robe and put on jeans and a jacket. Wished she'd grabbed her daypack and taken the bread and a couple of water bottles. But

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no. She had to find her mother. Couldn't think of anything else.

The pickup tracks went north, away from the westbound dirt ruts that connected their squatter camp to Dillon Road. Maybe she'd noticed that before she went into the trailer. Maybe that caused the rush. Angel knew there was nothing north except cactus and yucca and tall scree ridges that bordered the California desert.

She had walked twenty minutes or more when she stopped to slip off a shoe and shake out an annoying piece of gravel. In that quiet moment she heard the drone of Scotty's truck bucking terrain in compound low and found his line of dust on the horizon. She stepped out of her sweatpants, used them to erase her footprints as she scabbled several yards from the track to flatten behind a creosote bush.

She waited until he passed before looking up. Seemed like he was alone in the cab. She didn't pay any attention to the brief flood of sadness. Sorrow can make its own desert and Angel's tears dried a long time ago. If anything, she would occasionally notice a knot of anger burning somewhere in her chest. When the truck was out of sight, she stood, shook her pants out, put them on, and resumed walking.

Four months ago, Angel and her mom had been running from a guy named Jerry, another in a long string of abusive boyfriends picked with the accuracy of a heat-seeking missile. They'd hitched out of L.A. heading for Arizona. Supposed to find a cousin in Phoenix. A ride they caught in Ontario let them off at a truck stop in Cabazon. Angel's mom struck up a

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conversation at the lunch counter while they waited for their burgers. Scotty was an easy acquisition.

Clever Scotty. In the truck stop he told them he was a hunting guide. Wrong. Turned out to be a gun dealer who trapped eagles and tortoises for quick money. He drove them east into the badlands. Big old GMC pickup towing a twenty-foot American Freedom trailer, both painted camo. Past Desert Hot Springs he took some dirt ruts into the flats and stopped at the jagged ridges bordering Joshua Tree. From a distance their camp looked just like more sagebrush. The beatings didn't begin until the third week of the new relationship. Scotty didn't climb in bed with Angel until the fourth week.

FOLLOWING HIS PICKUP TRACKS AND, finally, the drag marks, Angel found her mother's shallow grave before noon. She pawed through the loose dirt until she uncovered a wrist, pulled till she cleared the hand. Her mother's fingernails were broken. Scotty had torn the rings off. Angel pictured her mother clawing at Scotty's eyes. Scotty. Angel had no weapon to kill him. That would have to wait.

Her mother. Lila Lee Dailey. Gone to dust. Angel could feel the cry coming, bad, huge, and it scared her. What if she couldn't stop? What if she broke apart? She pushed the sadness away. Got hold of it. Wadded it up. Made it tiny. Put it down deep. She could bring it back later if she wanted to. Right now there were other things.

Sitting beside the grave, Angel knew she couldn't leave until she fixed it. Piled rocks on it high enough and wide

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enough to keep the coyotes out. She would roll in the dirt around the mound to mask any blood residue with her scent. She didn't realize she might have learned that from Scotty. But first things first: a good place to hide if he came back.

She scanned the area. A climbing rock? A cave? Nope. A patch of scrub? Too obvious. She would have to dig. Fifty yards farther north, past a mesquite thicket, she scooped a shallow depression behind one of the yucca plants dotting the valley floor. If Scotty returned, he'd see the rock mound over the grave. He'd look for her. Might check nearby bushes, the obvious places, in case his arrival had surprised her, but he wouldn't walk far. He wouldn't guess she'd go to much trouble to hide. He accused her of being silly and lazy. He would figure she'd run. Head west to Dillon Road, to Thousand Palms, maybe on to Cathedral City. Well, she would. Later.

The search for heavy stones required care. Rattlers. Scorpions. An eroded ledge nearby offered some heavy sand clods at the top, several loaf-sized stones along the bottom. It took her a couple of hours to carry them and cover the grave. When she finished she was seriously thirsty. She thought for a moment but found no solution. She collected her robe from the graveside, and used its hem to brush footprints back to her burrow. Nothing else to do but lie down, pull the robe over her, and wait until dark.

2

Her own scream caught her by surprise. Brief but loud. Did she dream it or do it? And then she was listening to an engine. Maybe that's what woke her. She listened harder but could no longer hear over her heartbeat. She resisted the urge to raise her head or do anything to give herself away. Struggling to calm herself, she picked up the sound again, nearer. The engine stopped and a door opened.

RUNNING AND HIDING. She'd gotten pretty good at that. Not much memory of her childhood. Years ago her mom had a job. Gone a lot. Angel stayed with some woman. Dirt backyard but you could see big ships parked in the Bay from the woman's porch. After that, the trucker in Redding. Angel went to school a little bit there. Later, the fat security guard. His house smelled

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like feet. And the biker. Angel lost track. Up to Jerry. Jerry and the dog collar. Scotty hadn't been any worse than that until last night.

SHE FLINCHED WHEN THE TRUCK STARTED AGAIN but she didn't look until the sound of the engine faded almost out of hearing. If he hadn't hit the brakes for a second, she wouldn't have located him heading west. He thought he might catch her on the move. Angel stood. Dusk. Not enough light for him to see her in the rearview mirror. Plus, he wouldn't be looking. He'd be wondering which way she'd go when she got to Dillon Road. That made up her mind. Back to the trailer. Water and a weapon. She was sure she could find a weapon. She knew as she walked. The best weapon would be a phone.

THE TRAILER STILL BAKED from the late afternoon heat. Inside, she was right. Weapons everywhere. But first water. Her mom always kept a cool quart in the fridge. She drank that down and then a Coke that made her belch so hard her chest hurt. And then another bottle of water. She made herself go slower so she wouldn't get sick. Scanned for a phone. None in sight. Sat at the fold-out kitchen table until her stomach settled.

Okay. She was ready to outfit. She picked up a hunting knife Scotty kept by the sink and carried it to her daypack. First things first. How much time did she have? Fifteen minutes? An hour? She had to disable the trailer. The cops would want to see it. Find the blood. What if she stuck a knife in the sidewall tire? Would it blow up?

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Outside at the wheel well she knelt, made a quick study, noticed the valve stem. When she cut it off, air came out in a steady hiss. She did the other three. The trailer settled to its leveling blocks. She located two spares and sliced them. Not going anywhere now.

Back inside, part two of her plan. Protection. She searched the bedroom, found the suitcase full of pistols. Picked a short one with a big hole in the end. How did Scotty load these? A metal holder came out of the handle. How? She pointed it away from her and looked it over. Pushed the small knob at the bottom of the grip. The bullet case slid out and hit the floor. Angel didn't pick it up until she stopped shaking.

Okay. The metal thing was full of bullets. She put it back and carried the gun to the outside doorway. Her legs were unsteady. Hunger? Fear? She took her time setting the pistol on top of the TV, making sure it was stable, making sure it wouldn't fall, before she got more water bottles from the fridge. Drank half of one, took a breath, and finished it. Rummaged in the paper sacks on the counter. Found the bread, jammed a couple of pieces in her mouth, and washed them down. She held on to the counter till she felt solid again.

At the door she lifted the pistol out straight in front of her and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. Was it broken? Did the drop wreck it? She pictured Scotty ejecting the shell case, checking the bullets, shoving it back, and jacking the barrel. It took her another minute to make the barrel move. Something snicked in place. She held the gun out again and pulled the trigger. The noise deafened her and her hands flew upward as

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the pistol bucked out of her grasp and hit the top of the doorway before bouncing down the steps into the sand. She followed it, picked it up, and cocked it again. This time a bullet jumped out into the air and fell to the ground. Why was this so complicated?

She was trembling. Running out of time. Back at the suitcase she found a pistol where she could see the bullets in the round cylinder. The end hole wasn't as big but it would probably do. Back at the doorway, it wouldn't fire. She raised it to toss it away, stopped, examined it again. A plastic plug behind the trigger thing, jammed between it and the handle. She pushed it out with a fingernail, aimed outside, and pulled the trigger. Explosion. But this time she held on.

All right for protection. Next, supplies. Jacket, cap, sunglasses, tennies, daypack with water and food. She tore off her sweatpants and pulled on jeans. Last, search out the phone. She hurried. Counters, shelves, drawers? No deal. He must be carrying his and her mom's. She had just given up when the floor jiggled.

Scotty stood in the open door.

"Hi, honey, I missed you."

She opened her mouth but could not speak.

"You did a nice job with the grave. I would have done that later."

Where was the gun? Did she set it down? Put it in her pack?

"Have you ever changed a tire?"

She didn't see the fist coming.



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