



DESERT ANGEL

*He is waiting. He is watching.
He will hunt her down.*

MILE
1



CHARLIE PRICE

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About the Book

Nowhere is safe ...

Angel is on the run. Her mother is dead, her body buried in a shallow grave by her latest boyfriend, Scotty, a ruthless, illegal hunter who is prone to violence and who wants Angel dead before she can talk to the police.

Angel has lived through more than a young girl should have but she's determined to stay alive.

But in the scorching heat of the open desert, where can she hide?

A thrilling, horrifying cat-and-mouse game from the author of *HEAR THE DEAD CRY*

DESERT ANGEL

CHARLIE PRICE

CORGI BOOKS

To Kit Anderson - friend and brother

1

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 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 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 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 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?

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 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.

3

WHEN SHE CAME to on the couch, everything smelled like gasoline. She struggled to get up but couldn't. Ropes. The living room was dark. Through the open front door a dim glow. Could be the pickup's running lights. She coughed and stifled it. Where was he? Outside? The trailer vibrated again.

"Time to go, sweetie."

Angel pretended to be unconscious.

"You know I'd take you, but you wouldn't stay. Prettier than your mom but hella trouble."

She felt his steps come to the couch. Ducked her chin to minimize the blow, but he didn't hit her. He covered her face with a pillow and lay on it. She got half a breath before he crushed her, and she thrashed like hell but in that second she knew it was foolish. She kept the air she had, kicked for another minute, gave a last struggle, and went limp. She could take tiny, tiny breaths but she didn't know whether he could feel them.

When he took the pillow away she smelled beer. Thank god. It would make him dumber. She could hear him fumbling, the scratch of a lighter, and then the flame was at her nose. She forced herself to accept the burn, knew he was checking for air. He moved the lighter to her cheek. She willed herself to be totally still, wall off the pain, but

didn't know how long she could stand it; she was running out of air. A few seconds more, and she felt him back off. A rope loosened. Neck, arms, legs. The pressure ceased and the cord brushed the floor as he coiled it.

"Accident, sweetie. These trailers. Happens all the time. Generator. Spark. Gas."

She heard him walk down the living room into the bedroom, back through into the kitchen. Checking things. At the couch he put his hand on her hip.

No.

He rubbed up along her ribs and over her chest. "Miss you."

She could feel him looking at her. Worse than the burn.

He wheeled and clomped out.

She could hear the lighter rasping outside, and then a *whoosh*. When she opened her eyes, the outside door was filled with flame. The propane tank by the kitchen could blow any minute. That left the bedroom back window.

Would he stay and watch? She didn't think so. He'd jam before anybody investigated.

The heat was making her crazy but she had to find the pack. Water. There, on the floor in front of the TV. The fire beat her to it. She gave up and raced to the bedroom. The window beside the bed was too high to kick out. A bat, a club, anything. The closet wall was smoking but she made herself paw the floor. Cowboy boot. Not heavy enough. Ax? Hammer? Both burning in the kitchen. Crawling away from the closet, she scanned the dresser. Above it on the wall, an antelope head, a mounted four-prong buck. She tore it down and swung it by an antler, breaking the glass and then the metal sill. She pushed out the remaining pieces and scrambled after, tucking her head at the last moment, crashing in the sand and rolling. Then clawing, scrabbling, running, until she was knocked off her feet by the explosion.

Debris rattled around her. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't breathe! And then she could, but the sobbing made it hard to catch up. The sand was warm. Something poked her. At the top of her thigh. A rock. She scooted a few inches sideways. Now, lying on her stomach, it was all soft. Soft. She rested her head on her arms.

4

ANGEL OPENED HER eyes and levered herself over onto her back. Everything hurt. Most, her nose and cheek from the lighter burns. Touching them made it worse. The arms of her thin jacket were torn and crusted with dried blood. Her jeans damp with dark splotches from cuts. She rose to sitting and turned to the trailer. Smoking, black, it was barely recognizable with the kitchen area missing.

The realization took a few minutes. No one came. No one noticed. Maybe no one would even investigate. And then worse. Her mother was probably gone. Scotty would move the body. Make sure she was never found.

Angel watched the ridgeline stars disappear first, fading into a light gray, and the night sky surrendering inch by inch, the blackness leaching out to the quiet glow before sunrise. She knew she should be walking. Walking while the air was still cool. Walking before water became the main issue. Instead she lay on her back and decided whether she wanted to keep living.

She'd fought to live. Why? Look around. Hard to say. What exactly would make this life worth living? She was broken, stupid. No. She didn't feel stupid. She just didn't know anything. Homeschooled by her mother. Great. She brushed her eyes.

She knew a few things. "First things first." She'd heard somebody say that. She liked it because it made sense. And she knew other people. Not knew them, but knew how to read them. From a mile away. Knew what they wanted and whether they thought they could get it from her. And maybe she knew one more thing. You can't count on anybody. The only one who'll be there for you is you.

She made an inventory starting with what she wore. Jacket, T-shirt, jeans, underwear, tennies. She felt in her pockets. Small scarf. Piece of emery board. Quarter. Earring. In her watch pocket, a five-dollar bill folded the size of a stamp. Great. What could you do besides laugh?

Really, what did she have? Herself. Nothing. The tears surprised her and the sobs became hiccups. She held her breath, made them stop. She hit the ground with her fist, hit it with both fists. Gave up. Useless. The sun had slipped over the ridge unnoticed. It hit her eyes and hurt.

She gained her feet slowly, letting the different pains stretch into a single dull ache. Water? She walked to the trailer. Any water had evaporated, containers melted. Circling the ruins, she saw nothing that wasn't charred or stinking. At the end of her circuit she kept moving, following ruts now, west toward the snowcapped mountains, west toward the paved road and Cathedral City.

Weeks had passed since Scotty had picked them up at the truck stop. They'd driven east on 10. Before long the signs had said Desert Hot Springs, then Dillon Road. Scotty took that farther east until he slowed and turned left on a jeep trail, northeast toward jagged ridges. Angel had been looking out the passenger window, memorizing, calculating, like she'd done for years. It was natural. Know the neighborhood, remember streets. You might have to run.

Her mom had been straddling the floor shift and flirting. Scotty made her scrunch back long enough to put the truck in compound low gear. Said he didn't want the trailer to bob around and pop off the hitch. Half an hour later he

found the flat camp at the foot of cliffs that stretched for miles, crumbly, unclimbable, cut with deep ravines. Scotty had unhitched the trailer and parked the pickup facing out. Angel understood: safe hideaway, quick getaway.

Now, walking in the opposite direction, it would take Angel at least an hour to make it back to the pavement. There she remembered houses scattered along the road, remembered the cinder blocks, patched roofs, junky yards; the rusty half-ton trucks with stock rails.

Angel ignored the baking heat, the shadows of birds flying above her, because something was wrong. It took her another mile or so to catch it. She hadn't brushed her footprints. She looked over her shoulder. Sooner or later Scotty would track her.

"Tortoises, pretty easy. You know their prowls, find their marks, circle till you run into one." At the kitchen table, wearing gloves, rubbing scent on a snare chain, he'd cut his eyes at her, sensing her interest. "Eagles, though, pretty tricky. Guerrilla war. Got to be patient. High ground, rotten deer. Got to pop a net on them soon as they land." He had turned his head to look at her fully. "Those, you got to be willing to wait. Got to cover every detail."

She had seen it in his eyes. Tortoise or bird, her time was coming.

So she knew Scotty would come back, make a last check, but maybe not today. He'd wait to see if anybody was going to sniff around the burn. He'd probably glass the place from a distance. If it was clear, he'd go in and poke through the wreck, looking for her bones. When he didn't find them, he'd come after her.

She glanced at the sky. Sure. Like it was going to rain. No, her tracks would still be there, around the ruins, heading out along the trail. She had a head start so she needed to reach the pavement before he caught up. Then he wouldn't know if she'd gone east or west or hitched. If she had water she'd make it for sure. Without it ...