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# AU79

**A Tracker Novel**

**Anita Dickason**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Publisher: Mystic Circle Books  
Cover Design: Mystic Circle Books & Designs, LLC  
Cover image courtesy of Pixabay

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ISBN:  
978-0-9968385-6-6 (paperback)  
978-0-9968385-7-3 (hardback)  
978-0-9968385-8-0 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018904000

# Acknowledgements

To my daughters,

*Julie and Chris*

Thank you for listening to the endless conversations  
and all your helpful suggestions.

*Julie*, your military background was invaluable.

*Chris*, thank you for finding my plot.

To my sister,

*Cheryl*

What a joy it was to have your help in turning the  
manuscript in a finished novel.

To my friend,

*Pat*

It is so nice having someone with your  
ability in my corner.

## List of Characters

Adrian Dillard, FBI Tracker  
Andy Rodriguez, Laredo PD  
Arthur Larkin, President--USA  
Bill Goddard, FBI—Laredo  
Bing Morris, Bar Owner  
Blake Kenner, FBI Tracker  
Cam Bardwell, Informant  
Cat Morgan, FBI Tracker  
Dale Kennedy, M.E.  
David Parker, HSBC Bank  
Donnie Martin, Corpse  
Eddie Owens, Reporter  
Frank Littleton, Federal Reserve  
Gabriel Pearsall, Laredo PD  
Jack Davis, Austin FBI  
Jimmy Bishop, Editor  
Joe Warden, Border Guards  
Jonah Grigsby, Desert Rats  
Karl Chambers, Laredo ATF  
Kevin Hunter, FBI Tracker  
Lance Brewster, TEDAC agent  
Larry Henning, Texas Gold Depository  
Linda Spencer, Laredo FBI  
Matt Wilson, Laredo ATF  
Nicki Allison, FBI Tracker  
Norman Reynolds, Border Guards  
Paul Daykin, FBI Director  
Randy Atkins, Laredo ATF  
Ryan Barr, FBI Tracker  
Scott Fleming, FBI Tracker  
Skip Thornton, Laredo PD  
Stan Meyers, Border Guards  
Stuart Dyson, Laredo ATF  
Ted Phillips, Dallas PD Fusion Center  
Tim Grimes, Laredo FBI  
Todd Bracken, Texas Gold Depository  
Tracy Harlowe—Laredo PD  
Vance Whitaker, Homeland Security  
Will Cooper, Austin FBI

# One

## Texas

He hated undercover assignments. Most could be defined with one word—sleazy. Despite its ominous purpose, this one wasn't any different. The bar stank. Smoke from the grills hung in the air, adding another layer of grime to the windows filled with flashing beer signs. Grease and dirt, and probably a good bit of blood mixed in, stained the wood floor. A rank odor of sweat rose from the bikers that edged the bar and grouped at the tables. Their attention was riveted on the action that flashed across the large TV screens mounted on the walls. An occasional cheer would resound when a touchdown was scored.

FBI Tracker Adrian Dillard leaned back in his chair, his long legs outstretched under a table tucked in a dark corner of the room. One arm rested on the scarred wood near a long-necked beer bottle. The other was on his leg within easy reach of the gun concealed by a grungy leather jacket.

He took a sip. His gaze wandered around the room, then back to the TV screen. While outwardly relaxed, his every instinct was alert. His neck tingled with a familiar sense of danger. Despite the rough stubble of whiskers and hair that brushed his collar, several of the bruisers in the place had already cast suspicious looks his way.

Would the informant show? He hoped the promise of the hundred-dollar bills in his pocket would be enough. An ATF agent, Stuart Dyson, was missing, and this might be his only shot at finding his whereabouts,

or to learn if the agent was alive.

He glanced at the wall clock. Damn! The man should have been here by now. A whisper echoed in the tiny receiver in his ear. "Biker just pulled into the parking lot. He's wearing a red bandana. May be our guy."

Fellow Tracker Cat Morgan had the entrance covered from her position in a vehicle parked across the street. As he watched the door, Adrian shifted in his chair. His fingers inched closer to the gun.

When it opened, a burly man dressed in a black leather vest, t-shirt, jeans, and black motorcycle boots strode toward the bar. Tattoos covered his arms. A scraggly beard hung down his chest, and mousy-brown hair was tied in a ponytail. Wrapped around his neck was the red bandana.

With one foot propped on the rail, he leaned on the bar, and his eyes skimmed the tables until he spotted Adrian in the corner. His glance lingered on the black ball cap with the red and orange entwined circles before he turned to greet the bartender.

Adrian lifted the bottle to cover his lips, and whispered, "This is our man. He recognized my cap." When Adrian set up the meet, the recognition signals were the cap and bandana.

Cat said, "I got a picture of his face. I'm sending it to Nicki."

Adrian knew if anyone could do a fast turnaround on identifying the man, it was the unit's research guru, Nicki Allison.

The biker watched the TV while he waited for the bartender to hand him a beer, then crossed the room to Adrian's table. He turned a chair, straddled it, and laid his arms on top of the wooden back. After another quick look at Adrian's battered ball cap, he asked, "You the one looking for information?"

"Yeah."

"Where's the woman?"

After a sardonic flick of his eyes around the room, Adrian said, "I decided the atmosphere was unhealthy." Cat's snort echoed in his ear.

She was listening to the conversation through his open mic.

The biker's lips peeled back in a leer. "Too bad. I heard she was a real looker. You got the money? If you don't, I'm not saying anything."

"Tell me what I want to know, and you'll get it. Where's Dyson?"

"Dead." He grinned and took a swallow of beer.

Adrian's expression didn't change, though a sudden jab of anguish coiled in his gut. He pushed aside his bottle and leaned forward. "How do you know?"

"Ain't you a cool one? I just tell you the man's dead, and you don't even blink."

His gaze relentless, Adrian repeated the question.

The man answered, "I hear things. That's the scuttlebutt."

"Who killed him?"

The biker's eyes dropped to the bottle in his hand. "I don't know." He took another deep swig.

"Where's his body?"

"Can't tell you that either."

"So far, you haven't told me much. Why was he killed?"

With a shrug of his shoulders, the man said, "Word is that he was sticking his nose where it didn't belong."

"What was he investigating?"

The biker motioned with the bottle, pointing it at Adrian. "That's gonna cost you a lot more cash."

"How much?"

"Twenty-five grand."

"I'll need to set up another meeting. For that kind of money, I want to know who killed him, where's the body, and why he was killed. Is that clear?"

"You know where to leave a message when you get the dough. But I want my thousand bucks now. If you're not willing to fork it over, don't bother with another meet."

"Not here. Outside." Before Adrian pushed back his chair, he paused

to scan the room. Everyone, even the bartender, was watching the game. He stood and followed the biker out the door.

The man stepped to his bike, turned and held out his hand.

Adrian stopped in front of him and pulled the envelope from his jacket pocket. "Are you sure he's dead?"

When the man grabbed the envelope, Adrian's fingers brushed his hand.

"I said he was dead, and it's what I meant." He flipped through the bills before stuffing them in his pocket. Crumpling the envelope, he tossed it at Adrian's feet. Astraddle his bike, he sneered and revved the engine. With a roar, he pulled out of the parking lot.

From down the street a truck accelerated and passed the motorcycle. A shot rang out. The bike tilted and spun. The biker's body catapulted over the handlebars, struck the pavement, and rolled several times. With a squeal of tires, the truck skidded around a corner and was gone.

Adrian sprinted toward the twisted body. *Son of a bitch! There goes our chance to find Dyson.* He knew the man lied when he said the agent was dead.

Disgusted, he stared down. There was no point in checking for a pulse. The shattered face and head was unrecognizable, and his blood smeared the roadway. At the sound of footsteps, he glanced over his shoulder. Cat raced toward him.

"I called nine-one-one." She skidded to a stop alongside Adrian. "Hells bells, there went our lead."

The roar of engines echoed in the night air. Their heads swiveled to watch the exodus of bikers from the bar as they hauled ass in the opposite direction.

"Guess they didn't want to talk to the cops," Cat quipped. She stepped to the other side of the body. Bent over, her hand patted the pockets that weren't drenched in blood. "Did you get the license plate number?"

"No, too dark." His attention shifted to the police cars that screeched

to a halt behind them. Flashing red lights and the glare of headlights lit up the street. He pulled out his badge case and held it up as an officer exited and ran toward him.

A controlled mayhem of people and cars soon filled the street. The medical examiner's van replaced the ambulance that didn't stick around once the medics confirmed the man was dead.

A woman, attired in plain clothes, stepped out of an unmarked car. She stopped to speak with one of the uniformed officers, then turned to stare at the federal agents standing on the sidewalk before striding toward them.

Tall, with a lanky build, her short dark hair curled around a thin face with deep-set eyes. With a look of suspicion, she held out her hand. "Homicide Detective Tracy Harlowe. My patrol officer says you are feds—out-of-town feds. What are you doing here?"

Adrian shook her hand. "FBI Tracker Adrian Dillard." He nodded toward Cat and introduced her. "We've been assigned to the investigation of the missing ATF agent."

"Stuart Dyson. I know him. So, who's the dead guy?"

"Someone we thought had information on Dyson's whereabouts." Adrian added the details of the shooting and motioned toward the body. "There's a thousand dollars in his pocket that I paid him."

"Hefty payment. What'd it buy you?"

Adrian hesitated as he assessed what he should say. "Not as much as I wanted. He claimed Dyson's dead."

In the glare of the harsh lights, her face paled, and lips tightened before she asked, "That's all you got?"

"He wanted more money before he'd say anything else."

"Do you know who he is?"

"No. I'd appreciate a call when you identify him." He handed her a business card. "Is there anything else you need from us?"

She looked over her shoulder at the body. "I guess not. Once I process the scene, I'll get the money back to you."

Adrian nodded, and they headed to their car. It was still parked in the lot across from the bar.

As Cat pulled onto the street, she said, "Did you notice her reaction when you said Dyson was dead?"

"Yes. I wondered about it myself." His phone rang. "It's Nicki." He tapped the speakerphone as he answered.

A chirpy voice said, "I identified the picture you sent. Your informant is Cam Bardwell. He has several priors for assault and drug possession. Did you learn anything about the agent?"

"He said Dyson is dead." Adrian relayed the details of the shooting.

"Damn!" Nicki exclaimed.

"Nicki, I'm not certain Dyson is dead. I think Bardwell lied."

Cat shot a questioning glance at him.

He shrugged, and then added, "Something about his body language didn't set right. Did you get a home address?"

Nicki rattled off the location.

He jotted it down. "See if you can find any associates. I'm not sure where we go from here, but we'll get back to you."

After he disconnected, Cat asked, "Is that why you asked Bardwell a second time if Dyson was dead?"

Adrian decided to stay with his original explanation. No point in muddying the waters any further with the real reason he knew the man lied. "Yes. Let's head to his house." He tapped Bardwell's address into the GPS system, then settled back into the seat. The events of the last few days spun through his thoughts.

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Word had already spread through the federal agencies about the extraordinary ability of the new unit. The Trackers had gained a formidable reputation from an investigation of a serial killer, and a kidnapping case that involved children of influential politicians.

When the local investigation of Dyson's disappearance stalled, FBI Director Paul Daykin assigned the case to the Tracker Unit. Two hours

later, he and Cat were on a plane headed to Laredo.

Despite the late hour when they landed at the airport, they were met by Dyson's supervisor, Karl Chambers. On the way to the ATF office, he filled them in on the details. "Stuart had asked for a few days off. He said he had personal business to take care of. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary until a Laredo patrol officer found his car at an abandoned warehouse. Nothing indicated foul play, other than his laptop was missing. We've tried tracing his phone, but it's been turned off."

"What cases was he working?" Adrian asked.

"The latest was a theft of explosives from a local drilling company. Thieves used a stolen truck to ram a wall of the building where the explosives were stored. Once inside, they had easy access to whatever they wanted. The explosives were loaded into a second vehicle. By the time the cops reacted to the alarm, all that was left was the stolen truck."

"Do you think his disappearance is linked to this case?" Cat had asked, leaning forward to look at him from the backseat.

He tossed a quick glance over his shoulder at her. "It was our first supposition, but nothing's turned up in his notes. So far, there haven't been any leads on who was behind the theft, or what happened to the explosives. Since there hasn't been any chatter on the streets, we figured it's already in Mexico."

"What about his house, anything there?" Adrian asked.

"No. We searched it. Even his fiancée couldn't find anything missing or out of place."

When Cat asked about Dyson's office computer, she struck a nerve.

Karl's tone became abrupt and dismissive. "My agents searched his computer files. There was nothing suspicious. I've already set up an access link for your boss. You can look for yourself if you think it's necessary."

Despite the man's defensive attitude, Cat grinned. "Nicki Allison is our computer expert. Scott will have passed the link to her. If there's

anything to be found, she'll be the one to do it."

Attempting to appease the irate supervisor, Adrian rephrased his next comment. "Even though you've already searched, I'd still like to look at his house. If nothing else, it'll let us get a feel for the agent."

Karl had given him a distinct what-the-hell look as he parked in front of the ATF building. "If you think it'll help, his fiancée gave me a key."

Inside, Karl directed them to a conference room before heading to his office. Seated at one end of the large table, an older man, middle to late fifties if the grey hair was any indicator, typed on a laptop. When they entered, he closed the cover and stood.

"You must be the Trackers. I'm Supervisory Special Agent Bill Goddard in charge of the Laredo FBI office."

Adrian knew Paul Daykin had contacted Goddard to inform him the Trackers would be taking over the case. From the disgruntled look on the man's face, it was obvious he resented their presence.

Cat stepped forward to shake his hand as she introduced herself and Adrian.

"My office is at your disposal, along with any assistance I, or my two agents, can provide." He motioned with his hand toward the table. "Car keys. One set is for the SUV parked in front, and the second is to a pickup truck parked in the garage next to my office." Goddard picked up his laptop, nodded to the two agents, and walked out the door.

Cat said, "He's definitely pissed. Between him and Karl, it's not an auspicious start to our investigation."

Adrian grunted and turned his attention to the table. Spread across the surface were the contents of Dyson's vehicle along with a stack of file folders. Most of the items, including pieces of trash, were in transparent plastic bags. He flipped through the folders. "These are the reports on the investigation."

Cat examined the bags. After rifling through them, she said, "Nothing here that seems suspicious."

Before they left the ATF office, Karl gave them the key to Dyson's

house. When they searched the place, Adrian found a blank notepad lying under several magazines on the coffee table. When he tilted it toward the light, faint indentations were visible.

"I found something," he hollered. When Cat appeared in the living room doorway, he held up the pad. "Did you come across a pencil in your search?"

"I've got one in my bag." Cat picked up the backpack she'd dropped by the front door and pulled one from the side pocket.

With light strokes, he brushed the page, and read, "Bing's Watering Hole. There's a number—eleven. I bet that's the time."

The place was a local hangout for the bikers who roamed this part of Texas. Adrian devised a plan to go in undercover. He and Cat would pose as family members. The cover story was that Dyson had mentioned the meeting at the bar. They'd even printed up a few flyers to add authenticity to their story. He and Cat headed to the bar. After a hefty bribe, the bartender agreed to pass on a phone number to a man who might know something.

Now, the informant was dead, and they were back to square one.

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Cat's voice broke into his thoughts. "Hey, did you fall asleep over there?"

Adrian straightened in the seat. "Nope, filtering what happened since we arrived."

With a smug tone, she said, "Well, I got something."

"What?"

"Bardwell's cell phone."

He looked at her in amazement. "How'd you get it?"

"I found it when I checked his pockets. You'd turned away to meet the officers. I decided to eliminate the red tape and grabbed it." Cat reached for the phone in her pocket and passed it to Adrian.

"Considering how his body bounced and rolled, I'm surprised it's not in pieces." He tapped the screen, and it lit up. "Hmm ... there are

several numbers on here. I'll send them to Nicki."

After a quick glance at the GPS screen, she pulled to the side of the street. "Bardwell's house is the one on the right, and someone got here ahead of us. His front door is busted open."

They fanned out, guns drawn as they approached the house. Adrian was first through the doorway. He quickly scanned the living room before moving down a hall. Cat headed toward the kitchen. Once they determined the house was empty, they met back in the living room. Chairs and a sofa had been tipped over. The contents of drawers from the end tables were strewn across the floor, along with pictures that had been hanging on the wall.

Adrian stepped around the end of the overturned couch. "The entire house has been trashed."

"What a mess," Cat said. "They even dumped a container of flour in the kitchen. I wonder if they found what they were looking for?"

"Maybe not. Let's see what we can find. I'll start here, and you check the bedrooms."

As Cat walked out, he squatted and began to sort through the items on the floor.

A voice rang out. "Police! Hands in the air."

With a sigh of resignation, Adrian stood. His arms stretched over his head, he turned and stared at Detective Harlowe and a gun pointed at his chest.