

Guardian Angels

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(An Excerpt from the Novel *Out at Home*)

The storm plastered Dixie. He was stuck without a ride out in the middle of nowhere on the East Carolina shore, halfway between the hamlets of Coinjock and Grandy. Hitching along Route 158, he shivered under a driving downpour hoping for a ride to take him to the Banks. One fiasco after another that day had forced him to miss Ryz'n's twenty-second birthday. He knew she would be ticked but hoped she would not hold a grudge against him. After all, it was not as if he hadn't tried to get there.

Rain drenched through his clothes and water dripped into his ears and down his face and neck. He huddled for scant protection against the foundation of a billboard, which ironically enough was advertising the sale of comfortable, new homes on the Outer Banks. An isolated car zoomed past him down the virgin highway ignoring his outstretched thumb. Dejected, Dixie watched as the vehicle passed unimpeded. Cold, wet pellets fired down upon him, actually stinging his skin. He had no sooner turned his head back around than he heard a loud crack, like a nearby rifle shot. Looking back down the highway, Dixie saw the car veer wildly to the right and heard that sickening, tire-squealing, highway sound. The driver tried to hold the vehicle on the road, but failed. There was not much of a shoulder, just flat, mostly open ground. The car halted abruptly when it ran into a scrub pine tree a few hundred yards away.

Sounded like a blow-out. He was the only one around to help. Two flats in one night with two different vehicles? *You gotta be kidding me!* Toting his sea bag across his back, Dixie left his makeshift lean-to to run down the road against the wind-driven rain. He squinted, leaning into the stinging downpour as soaked bands of hair plastered his forehead. The car remained motionless, but the lights were still on. He could hear the motor running and saw the vehicle spewing exhaust. It was a muscle car, a black-over-red Chevelle Super Sport, looked to be a 1972 model, similar to the one Lori had owned over in Honolulu. Those babies could really fly.

He approached the driver's side cautiously. Someone lay drooped over the steering wheel. Dixie said a quick prayer that the person was alive. He opened the door with sheets of wind-blown rain driving down and sideways against the car. A young, blond-haired woman slumped over the steering wheel. She faced towards him. Dixie saw no blood. He did notice the windshield was cracked near the roof line but not broken through, as if her head had struck it. The car was running, but somehow the transmission had been knocked into neutral. Her foot was off the gas, but she was not going anywhere with that pine tree in front of her. She was not wearing her seat belt. Without touching her, Dixie flicked rain water onto her face for about half a minute. The pale girl roused, turned to him and promptly vomited at his feet. Dixie knocked back against the inside of the opened driver's door, stepping back into a puddle to avoid her waste, but too late. His soaked feet fully caught her signature greeting. He hoped Ry's birthday would end soon. He wasn't sure he could take much more of this celebration and good cheer.

The stunned woman sat back, laying her head across the front of the seat back between the headrest and the door frame. Rain blew in against her face. Dixie gave her a minute to collect herself. He found a puddle deep enough to wash her vomit from his shoes. When she stirred behind him, he reached around the steering wheel to turn off the ignition. The girl rolled her head towards him. He backed off.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Mister. I'm so sorry."

"Anh, it's all right. I didn't much care for them shoes, anyway." When he laughed, the rain poured down upon his face, running into his mouth in streaming rivulets.

She forced a weak smile before her head slipped off the edge of the seat back. Dixie caught it and placed her head back straight against the headrest. The girl winced as her blond locks fell across her face. Dixie pulled them aside. Apart from the two of them, the highway was lifeless and there were no buildings around. They were alone. She coughed. Dixie stepped back, fearing a repeat vomit.

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The blonde smiled weakly. “No, I’m not gonna do that to ya again, Mister. You’re okay ... for now, anyway.” She had blue eyes and wide, sandy brown eyebrows.

“You hurt anywhere else besides your head?”

The blonde groped over her body, spending several seconds prodding and caressing her belly with her hands. She looked up to whisper: “Thank you. All’s well.” Then she raised her head and stretched her legs. That was a good sign, a very good sign. Relieved, she looked at Dixie.

“No, no. It’s just that my head hurts real bad. But I’m all right. We’re both all right, praise God.”

“Lemme take a look.” He was surprised that her plight precluded his stutters.

Dixie took her head in his hands. She complied by pointing out the injured spot. By the dome light, he could make out a large bump forming in the center of the crown of her head. There was some swelling and a little blood, but nothing critical.

“I got some aspirin in my sea bag, if, if you think you could handle it.”

“Thanks so much, but I don’t think I should be shoving aspirin into my stomach just now, maybe later. But thank you all the same.”

“Yeah, I hear ya.”

Dixie stood in the rain, with thunder and lightning all around wondering just how all right she truly was. You could never tell with head injuries. He sure wished there was some sign of life around here. Having failed to flip off the running car engine earlier, he reached across her now to turn off the ignition. Then he stood upright in the downpour. If he could fix her car, he could take her somewhere for help.

He yelled to be heard over the storm. “Sounded like you had a blow-out, Miss.”

“Yes, yes that must have been it. Couldn’t control her. Fortunately, the Lord could.”

The Lord? “Yeah, right. Lemme take a look at things. You be okay for a minute,” Dixie asked with genuine concern. She nodded but winced.

When he started to shut the door, she asked him to roll down the window some. She needed the air. He complied and closed her door softly. Leaving his sea bag on the car roof, he shuffled around to the front side of the car, purposefully dragging his feet through every puddle he could find to wash the vomit completely from his Adidas. He figured that she sure had eaten well that night. He forced himself to sniff upward into the rain-washed air lest he get sick himself. Then he checked out the car.

The pine she had smashed into was not very big, maybe twenty feet high. The force of the car had kind of uprooted it and knocked the tree backwards a bit, snapping off some boughs in the process. The mangled bumper stuck to the frame somehow. The collision had smashed in the driver’s side front grill, as well as the driver’s side front headlight. With great difficulty, Dixie reached across some tree branches and lifted the partially propped hood feeling pine sap stick to the back and side of his hand. The radiator was okay. The frame appeared to be bent back a bit into the battery casing. He stepped away from the side of the car toward the road to ask her to start it up.

The car started fine. He signaled her to cut the engine. She complied and slumped back against the seat as if that simple act had consumed all her energy. Things looked okay under the hood. He stepped back to the car to shut the hood, but could not snag the latch because the hook to the latch was bent backward.

The rain was pummeling him and he could not afford to have it blowing under the hood. Dixie placed his sea bag on the hood temporarily to hold it down. He walked around the car to the passenger side checking out the tires as he went. He saw it. The right rear tire had a hole the size of a half dollar in the sidewall near the rim.

“Good thing it was the rear and not the front tire. She’d never have held her for as long as she did.”

He got up to knock on the front passenger door window with the driving rain plastering him. The girl leaned shakily across the seat to unlock it. Dixie crawled in to sit down on the seat next to her, closing the door behind him.

“Whew! Rough night!” He clapped his hands, rubbing them together for warmth.

“Glad it’s June and not January.” He tried to sound hopeful, slapping the rain off his face and squeegying his hands over and through his rain- drenched mane.

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“Yes, we have much to be thankful for,” admitted the girl.

Dixie thought hers to be a curious response given their circumstances.

“My name’s Nicholas, but I go by Dixie.”

He smiled and offered her his hand. She returned the smile, taking his hand feebly.

“Oh my goodness, your hand is freezing.”

“Well, that rain comes from the upper atmosphere, Miss. It’s plenty cold up there and I’ve been out in it a while.”

“But why?”

“I’m lookin’ for a ride to Kill Devil Hills.”

“Well, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has answered your prayer.”

“Really? How’d you know I was praying back there?”

“I didn’t, but *He* did. And He’s answered my prayer, too.”

“Oh, how’s that?”

“Well, I prayed He’d help me get home safely on this terrible, stormy night and He’s brought you to help me. Had you waiting for me like a guardian angel, see?”

“Had *me* waiting out in this weather for *you* to come along, just so *I* could help *you*? Well, pardon me for mentioning it Miss, but if you had stopped for me back there, maybe we wouldn’t be in this predicament now.”

Dixie smiled as kindly he could under the circumstances.

“Well, I suppose so but I was running late and well, you’re right I really should have stopped. I was thinking about it and then Bam! Well, the Lord has worked my mistake to our mutual good. Because now you’re my guardian angel tonight and I guess I’m yours.”

“Yeah? Just, how do you figure that?”

“Well, I can help you, too.”

“You? Help me?”

“Sure, with a ride.”

“Unh hunh. And where do you live?”

“Kill Devil Hills.”

Dixie was stunned. “No kiddin’? The Lord moves in mysterious ways, I guess.”

“He most certainly does, Mister Dixie. Our God is an awesome God.”

“Well, I hope He can help us get that tire fixed and lock your hood down.”

“Oh, I think He can manage that. Let’s pray for it.”

Before he knew it, she had taken his cold, wet hand in hers and proceeded to pray. Dixie bowed his head and concurred with “Amen” when she stopped.

They talked as the storm front moved through. The girl said she was from Philadelphia. Her name was Dorothy Cavendish. She had come down to the Banks for vacation after her senior year of high school and never returned home. She had met a local boy whose parents owned a diner in Kill Devil Hills. She fell in love and married the boy. Then he joined the Navy for the educational benefits. He was on sea duty now over in the Mediterranean. She was almost six months pregnant with their first and proud of it. Dixie listened with interest, as she talked about her faith. She and her husband worshipped at the Assembly of God Church back up the road. She had just come from an evening service. She claimed the Spirit had been upon the congregation mightily that evening. Many had spoken in tongues and the praise and worship music far exceeded the normally allotted time. That’s why she was late getting home.

The storm lulled. Dorothy apologized for monopolizing the conversation. But Dixie assured her he had enjoyed listening. That compliment drew a big smile across her flushed face. He wondered what she had meant by “speaking in tongues” but decided not to question her about it. He might get more information than he wanted. Because once she got to talking, she didn’t let up, kind of like the storm that had picked up again. Her talking was a good sign; showed her head was all right. But you could never tell with head injuries. He asked for the car keys so he could open the trunk to get at the spare then got out and retreated to the trunk.

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Two flat tires inside four hours. Was this real or a dream? If he was dreaming, why did he smell Dorothy's puke odor rising from his shoe tops? No, this was more like a nightmare. Cold and soaking wet, he wondered if that qualified as a wet dream. He chuckled. Given his situation, chuckling was better than cursing or crying. That phony preacher man had attacked him that morning. The cop had picked him up in the afternoon and now, two flats in one night? As he worked replacing the flat tire, he had trouble with one lug nut he could not break free. Exasperated, he returned to Dorothy in defeat to explain the problem.

"Oh, dear." Her wide, sandy brown brows furrowed. "There's only one thing to do."

She bid him sit right next to her again, turned into him and took each of his hands in each of hers. Then, with her eyes closed shut, she prayed for deliverance. When she was done, she sat silent for a good minute holding his hands with her eyes closed. She nodded then thanked God for answering her prayer. She urged him to try again to remove the lug nut. Dixie looked at her askance, but he got out and walked back to the rear tire half expecting to find the lug nut lying on the ground. It wasn't. In fact, the thing had not budged and he still couldn't budge it. He cursed. So much for that sweet prayer. Dixie stood with the tire iron in his hand. He felt like chucking it as far as he could. Instead, he thrust it into the rear of the opened trunk. The tire iron clanked against something metallic but the noise was muffled. He looked in the trunk, lifted up the flap of a blanket to find a cross tire iron. He took the cross tire iron out of the trunk and tried it on the recalcitrant lug. The cross tire iron allowed him to distribute pressure more evenly and forcefully, by jerking down with his left hand and pulling up with his right simultaneously.

Two flats in one night? This couldn't be happening. And this couldn't be puke he smelled rising from his feet either. And this couldn't be a storm drenchin' him to the bone. No, it was all a big frickin' nightmare with a pregnant teen angel in it no less.

He jerked on the tire iron again. The nut broke free. The thing broke so cleanly free under his pressing weight that it surprised him. He lost his balance, falling forward and to his left, striking his head rudely against the edge of the fender above the wheel.

"Shee-ittt!"

He jacked up the car a little more to clear the ground. Then he pulled the blow-out off the rim and replaced it with the spare. Still cursing, he lowered the car then put everything back in its place in the trunk and returned to the girl.

Dorothy had been resting her head against the seatback and door with her legs lying across the front seat. When he told her he had fixed the tire, she bid him sit down next to her again. She made room on the front seat to pray with him in thanksgiving. When she finished, he said.

"Dorothy, I found the tire iron by accident. Don't think God had much to do with it."

"By accident?"

"Well, yeah. I got piss—uh tick—'d off. And threw the other tire iron in the trunk. I heard it clang against something under a blanket. Turned out to be what we needed."

"What makes you think the Lord didn't orchestrate that whole thing, Mr. Dixie? Do you think He's prone to accidents?" Dorothy laughed, causing her to wince.

"Ya know Dorothy? There are probably four billion people in the world. You think God is big enough to handle the problems of each and every one?"

"My God is. He created the world and everything in it, so why would He create something too big for Him to handle? Wasn't an accident; it was a God incident."

"Well, don't get mad now, Dorothy. I'm not saying He did and I'm not saying He didn't. But do you really think He has the capability to get involved in all the details of every person's life or that He even cares to?"

"He can 'for those who love Him and are called according to his purpose.' That's in the book of Romans, Chapter Eight, verses twenty-eight to thirty. And in First Peter, Chapter Five, verse seven, Peter said 'to cast all your cares upon Him for He cares for you.' Besides Mister Dixie, who else do you know who's given up their life for you? Who else has died so you might live in heaven for

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eternity? If He's that interested, interested enough to die for you, don't you think He'd be interested enough to live for you, too, in every aspect of your life? And help out with a measly flat tire?"

Dixie stared hard at her. She had stumped him. She'd claimed to be only nineteen, but she spoke with the wisdom of a ninety-year old. He rubbed his chin. His bandage had fallen off somewhere along the way but the knife wound no longer bled. Wet, tired and feet smelling of vomit, Dixie didn't care to argue. Besides, the girl had a point.

"Look Dorothy, I don't know." He shrugged. "It's something I'll have to think on. I'm not refuting it, ya understand, it's just well ... Well, I mean, pardon me for saying so, but it sounds a bit like Santa Claus, ya know? How can he deliver all them presents in one night?"

Dorothy grinned.

"God is real, Mr. Dixie. He is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent and eternal. Santa Claus is not. Santa Claus was a Christian man in Turkey around two or three hundred A.D. who left presents on people's door steps, knocked on the door and ran away. He was mortal, not divine. But God never, ever runs away, Mister Dixie. Once you've accepted Him, He will never leave you or forsake you. That's in the Book of Hebrews, Chapter Thirteen, Verse Five."

Dixie rubbed his chin some more as the wheels of his brain chewed on her claims.

"Well, what do you think Mister Dixie?"

"Well, ya know Dorothy? I kind o' tend to believe ya. Leastways, I'd like to, but—"

"You do? Well that's just great. Let's pray right now then."

"No-no-no-no—nope. I'd rather just get on down the road. I'm wet and soaked clear through and it's been a long, rough day. I'd just as soon pray later, if ya don't mind."

"Okay, you drive and I'll pray as we go."

"Amen to that sweet prayer, Dorothy."

Dixie hustled around to the other side of the car. Dorothy slid over as he slipped behind the wheel. Dixie started the engine up, looked behind and backed the car a few feet when he noticed his drenched sea bag sitting atop the hood. He smacked the heels of his hands against the top of the steering wheel then bit his lower lip to keep from cursing in the front of the girl.

"What's wrong Mister Dixie?" He shook his head negatively.

"Ahh! The latch on the hood is busted. I can't close it. That's why my sea bag is sittin' up there to hold the thing down. Guess we could use another prayer, hunh?"

"Sea bag? Are you a sailor, too?"

He was tired and ticked and he didn't feel like any more small talk. The thing that really ticked him was there hadn't been a single damned soul drive by to help them during this whole ordeal. They might as well have been out in the middle of the sea.

"No Miss, I'm a Marine."

"Oh! Well that's almost the same thing."

His temper was rising. He gritted his teeth.

"No Miss, there ain't nothin' quite the same as a United States Marine. He is a totally unique animal!" Dixie flashed his white teeth at her in a quick grimace. "And right now this Marine is in need of somethin' to tie down that hood."

"How 'bout some twine?"

"Twine?"

"Yes. There's some tied to the bottom latch of the trunk, leftover from our Christmas tree last winter. Would that help?"

"You sure about that, Miss? I don't remember seeing any—"

"You take a peek and see if there isn't." She forced a pert smile to encourage him.

Dixie opened the car door to check. Mann, he was tired. This had been some day. He did not remember seeing any twine in the trunk, but he turned the engine off, stepped out in to the storm yet again and walked back to open up the trunk. Sure enough, the twine was tied around and tucked into the trunk latch, just like she said. How'd he missed it? He cut the twine loose from the latch with his

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pen knife. He used the twine to tie down the hood. Then he tossed his wet sea bag into the back seat. Dixie nodded to Dorothy that all was well. Climbing behind the wheel again, he said.

“So, why do you keep twine from a Christmas tree in your trunk until June?”

“Thought maybe I might need it sometime, like for next year’s Christmas tree. Or something else. Guess I was right, ya think?”

“Yeah, Christmas came early this year, like about six months early to be precise.”

Dixie drove them east across the bridge over Currituck Sound and then south down the Banks to Kill Devil Hills. Only the right headlight worked and he had a devil of a time seeing around the cracks in the windshield caused by Dorothy’s head. He thought it a miracle that she had not squished the baby in her stomach into the steering wheel. He spent half the time hanging his head out of the window, like a panting dog, to make sure he stayed between the road lines and did not hit anything.

Dorothy seemed to recover okay. She pointed out rather cheerily the hill where the Wright brothers made their first flight. Her headache seemed to have subsided with the passing storm. Dixie suspected her improvement must be an answer to prayer. Lights were out everywhere. The storm must have knocked out the power. Whenever he slowed down to see better, Dorothy would encourage him onward, noting confidently that Jesus was the light with them through every storm of life. The Banks were dark, but she pointed out the Wright Brothers Memorial on the big hill off to the right. With his unique night vision, Dixie had no difficulty reading the street signs in the dark, which amazed Dorothy. At her direction Dixie turned east off 158 onto Pamlico Avenue and then took the first right onto Orville Place. He followed the nearly deserted street down almost to the next intersection with Wilbur Way where he found the second and last house on the right. Vacant lots overgrown with weeds lined the opposite, east side of the block in this sparsely populated coastal town.

“Why, this is where those Rock’N’Roll girls stay sometimes,” Dorothy said.

“Yeeup. That’s why I’m here. One of ‘em is my wife.”

“No kiddin’! Well, ain’t she the blessed one?”

Dixie pulled up to stare at her. But the pregnant girl simply beamed like a true angel. Blessed One? Because of him? The way she thinks, the girl must be an angel herself.

“I sure hope she shares your high opinion of me after missing her birthday today.”

“Why Mister Dixie, I don’t see how she could have any other opinion, do you?”

Her pleasant demeanor and the halo he imagined over her head convinced him of her sincerity. He sure as hell hoped she was right. Ryz’n could get ticked off over the lamest things. But he knew his present faux pas gave her legitimate grounds for a big time vocal battering. The rain had trailed off to a sparse staccato drizzle. Dixie got out and pulled his sea bag out of the back seat before Dorothy took over behind the wheel.

“Now Mr. Dixie, our diner—The Wright Brothers Restaurant—is just down around the corner here.” She motioned up and to the left with her forefinger. “You stop by for something to eat—anything you want, on the house—your wife too, okay?”

He nodded. “Okay, Dorothy. Sure you’ll be all right to drive home? I don’t feel quite right about lettin’ ya leave like this?”

“Oh, I’m okay now. I’ve been prayin’. She grinned, “Just have a tiny headache now. Besides, I only live the other side of the restaurant. Over there, with my in-laws.”

Again, she pointed southeasterly to a building a couple short blocks away.

“They’re good people. You stop by and see for yourself.”

“Well okay, then. Sure do appreciate the lift.”

“It was my pleasure. The Lord let us help each other out tonight Mister Dixie—like guardian angels. Now don’t forget what we discussed.”

“No, no, I won’t, Dorothy.”

She reached through the window to take hold of his forearm to pull down on it. Dixie bent over to see what she wanted. Dorothy reached up with her left hand to the back of his shoulder to pull him closer. She pecked him on the cheek then whispered.

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“You were my guardian angel tonight, Mister Dixie. Thank you with all my heart.” She took his right hand to place over her pregnant belly. Surprised by the kick, he jumped back a bit pulling his hand back through the opened window.

“The baby’s kicking. Ah, it’s stopped now. Just wanted you to know you were an angel for both me and my baby.” She smiled. “You saved both of us.”

“Whoa. I don’t know about bein’ no angel, Dorothy. I think it was more like the reverse, like you were mine. Bye now and thanks again.”

Dixie stood back erect and motioned softly for her to go.

“God bless you, Mr. Dixie Nicholas.”

She wiggled her fingers on her free hand as she waved goodbye. She drove to the corner, where she made a left and then a right, disappearing behind the diner. He dropped his sea bag in the street to trot down around the corner after her to make sure she was all right. He observed her as she got out of the car to enter a home safely.

“An angel, hunh? A regular knight in shining armor? Right. Hope my wife agrees.”

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