

The Gus McIntyre Adventures

MOUNTAIN DEMONS

BY
GERALD L. GUY



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MOUNTAIN DEMONS

By Gerald L. Guy

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DEDICATION

To my birthday babies, Jason and Kelly Guy. Each celebrate birthdays this month and have become adults, for whom a father could not be prouder. Happy Birthday, Guys. This one is for you.

PREFACE

In the course of creating The McIntyre Adventures, the characters continue to stir my imagination and evolve in unexpected directions. I fell in love with the people of Saguache, Colorado and was not ready to leave Maggie Longmire, Buford Wineguard, Kate Sanders or Corncob Carter behind.

Saguache is located in the heart of the San Juan Mountains, and the place where Gus McIntyre and his friends find respite from those who wish to harm and steal from them.

Walter "Junior" Hamilton is the first of the McIntyre party to arrive in the small town after discovering a fortune in gold and his future wife deep the mountains. The newlyweds seek refuge at the boarding house of Maggie Longmire while Walter waits his friends' arrival from Denver.

McIntyre, Hamilton and Carter escorted Kate and Lizzy Sanders to Denver so they could start a new restaurant in the fledgling mining town. Besieged by charlatans and conmen, the enterprise never materialized. Sick of Denver, McIntire and friends are happy to rush to Hamilton's aid. Walter seeks his friends' help in transporting their gold from the mountains to a bank in the tiny mountain community.

Misfortune continues to plague the group before they can secure the Hamilton fortune. Outlaws kidnap Kate's daughter and demand a hefty ransom. When she refuses, they burn Maggie's boarding house to the ground. Amidst the ashes, Kate agrees to help Maggie and her nephew, Buford, rebuild and start a joint business — The Phoenix Inn and Restaurant. The new lodge is taking shape as two newcomers wander into town.

Gerald L. Guy

James "Spud" Thompson will fight multiple demons before he finds salvation and a new path with the help of the entrepreneurs and workers who make The Phoenix Inn rise in the wilderness.

Enjoy the journey in this ninth edition of The McIntyre Adventures.

PROLOGUE

"Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings."

How many times have Americans heard those prophetic words from the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life?" It is one of the many times Hollywood has promoted and profited from the concept that God commissions angels to protect humans from their own foibles.

Decades later, the beloved Michael Landon reprised the role of angels in our lives in the TV series "Highway to Heaven." Unlike Clarence, the angel who helped guide Jimmy Stewart to reformation, Johnathan Smith was a "probationary" angel sent to Earth to help people in need.

The concept of guardian angels is steeped in biblical teachings and harkens to mankind's need for heavenly guidance in our daily transactions. It is etched in our belief system and allows us to create scenarios where intervention is acceptable even though proof does not exist.

Every religion on Earth references angelic beings who protect the faithful. Muslims believe two angels are dispatched in front and behind all who are devote. Catholics believe guardian angels are assigned at birth.

In Psalm 91 of the Holy Bible, it is written: "For He commands His angels with regard to you, to guard you wherever you go. With their hands they shall support you, lest you strike your foot against a stone."

As a result, angels have become enduringly popular because they represent unconditional love, something all humans crave. Their presence in our lives is so embedded in our belief system that few dismiss the idea that good fortune, meaningful coincidence or unforeseen surprises are the work of divine intervention.

Modern thinkers want us to believe divine intervention adds to man's continual degradation, while authors and film-makers help keep our beliefs in miracles and magical turns of events easy to explain. And why not? Why should something that perpetuates good be bad?

I grew up believing in fairies, Santa's elves and even Glinda, Dorothy's Good Witch in the "Wizard of Oz." And yes, when I emerged unscathed from a six-car pileup on the interstate, I gave thanks and credited divine intervention.

Dak, the mystical entity that intervenes in the life of James "Spud" Thompson in "Mountain Demons," is a combination of all the things I believe in. Whether imagined or real, where would any of us be without faith that good, whether believed or imagined, lurks around the next corner?

"We don't know how strong we are until we are forced to bring that hidden strength forward... The human capacity for survival and renewal is awesome."

**ISABEL ALLENDE,
American Novelist**

Gerald L. Guy

PART I

Second Chances

CHAPTER 1

The last thing James "Spud" Thompson remembered he was looking down the barrel of a Colt Paterson revolver. He watched as the hammer was pulled back and the man holding it made a sound that was sub-human.

A tall, frail man in his forties, Thompson had just won the biggest pot of the night and was reaching for his winnings when everything went south. The word "C-H-E-A-T-E-R" careened slowly through the air just before the Colt appeared. Thompson couldn't believe it. He'd never been caught committing one of his slight-of-hand tricks before. He was too smooth of an operator to be caught cheating.

The only thing he could figure was alcohol and the size of the pot -- well over five hundred dollars — had more to do with his predicament than his underhanded tricks.

He could feel the crisp notes and coins in his hands as he gathered the spoils of five card draw. He recognized the scent of gun oil before he felt the pressure of the pistol against his forehead, pushing his head up so he could look at his assailant.

He couldn't believe he was about to die.

Thompson knew the ramshackle town of Coyote was bad news when he first arrived. When he strolled into the Last Stop Saloon to wet his whistle, he couldn't resist joining the poker game taking place in the far corner of the small barroom. He watched the three grubby-looking miners shuffle and trade barbs and cards for thirty minutes before asking if they needed a fourth player. They sized him up before accepting him into their game.

Thompson was dressed like many of the dozens of drifters who passed through the tiny mining towns that dotted the San Juan Mountains. He was unshaven and disheveled after long days on the trail. He wore a six-gun on his hip, but that wasn't unusual. It was his warm smile that gained him entry into the game.

Thompson thought the three miners would be easy marks. He won every fourth or fifth hand, waiting for the pot to grow before he made his move. He was an hour into the game when the cards unfolded perfectly for him to seize the opportunity.

The other three players had solid hands. Face cards were plentiful. He had to beat a pair of kings and queens, three jacks and a full house. Bets were raised and the pot increased in a flurry. Each of the gamblers thought they were ready to cash in.

What they didn't know was Thompson had the ace of spades hidden up his sleeve, and it fit perfectly into the ace-high flush he needed to steal the night's largest prize. He feigned concern as the pot rose in value until only he and one other player — the full house — remained.

Three tens and a pair of threes would win most hands but not this one. Thompson figured he had timed his ruse perfectly.

He called.

He threw his cards on the table with a smile and declared, "Your full boat doesn't beat an ace-high flush, mister? It's a hell of a hand, though, and it's been a pleasure sharing cards with y'all."

The low, rumbling growl came when he reached for the pot.

Thompson leaned back in his chair and froze. He never expected the shabbily-attired miner to be packing heat or to be aware of his trickery. Heck, they spent most of their waking hours in the dark.

How could this be happening?

Suddenly, everything slowed. He watched as the burly finger of the full house squeezed the trigger of the Colt. There was smoke and he smelled cordite as a piece of hot lead spiraled slowly from the barrel of the pistol and seemed to float through the air toward his forehead.

Immediately, Spud knew he had played his final game of five card draw. He gasped but no sound escaped his lips. He closed his eyes and waited for the bullet to end his miserable existence. When nothing happened, he opened his eyes and saw the bullet, suspended in mid-air and only a foot in front of him. He could see and hear nothing else. Nothing moved, especially the bullet. Everything around Spud Thompson was swallowed by a murky fog.

He was trembling when a voice boomed through the thick miasma. "If you want a second chance at life, stand and walk toward the exit. I have a surprise for you," a deep baritone voice stated.

Without hesitation, Thompson stood. He preferred anything to death.

As his head rose above the gray fog in which the bullet was suspended, he realized the saloon was now brightly lit and empty. He was surprised how filthy it looked in the bright light. He wasn't sure he was in the same saloon even.

"Where are you," he asked, wondering if he was dreaming or dead.

"I'm right here. Turn around, Spud!" the voice said.

When Thompson turned, he spotted a tall man leaning against the wall, just inside the entrance of the saloon. He was dressed impeccably, like a businessman or gambler. However, the dark suits

worn by so many in the western territories was bright red instead of gray or black.

"Who are you? No, let me rephrase that. What are you?" Spud said, looking at the man with suspicion. The gambler had never seen anyone attired exactly like the man in front of him. His white shirt glistened in the bright light and was pulled together at the collar by a scarlet, string tie that was held in place by a golden star.

"Are you the law? Are you here to arrest me?" Spud asked, dumbfounded.

"You might say I'm a student of the law," the man said. "I'm here to teach you right from wrong."

"I know right from wrong," Thompson replied.

"You certainly don't act like it. Everywhere you go you con and cheat. It's not what I would call upstanding behavior, Spud."

"How do you know my name?" he asked.

"I know many things," the man said, "and I have intervened in your little game of skullduggery to expose you to a better path in life. I'd like you to come with me."

"Where are we going?" Spud asked.

"Here and there."

"What if I don't want to go?" Thompson asked stubbornly.

"Then you can take your seat and I will remove the fog in which the bullet is suspended. Then, you will die," the man in red said without changing the pleasant expression on his face.

"I don't want to die."

"Then come along," he said nonchalantly and disappeared out the batwing doors.

"What's your name?" Thompson called out.

"You can call me Dak," the man replied. His name seemed to echo through the saloon. It scared the gambler.

"I'm coming. Wait for me," he called out and rushed for the exit.

"You'd best hurry," Dak replied.

CHAPTER 2

When Thompson stepped out of the saloon, he found himself no longer in the small community of Coyote, but in the middle of what he assumed was the San Juan Mountains. It was freezing cold and snow was falling.

Dak, dressed all in red, stood out like a burning flame on a dark night. He seemed unphased by the falling snow and tossed Spud a buffalo robe to help ward off the cold.

"Thank you," he said. "It's colder than a whore's.... er, a ditch digger's... er, the dickens out here."

Spud curbed his surly tongue because knew deep down he was in the presence of someone or something special — a wizard or angel. Maybe, he was the devil, eager to escort him to a dark place for all of eternity.

"I appreciate your cautious choice of words," Dak said. "It's one of the first things you must learn on our journey. Foul language has no place in respectable society. You have been walking on the dark side of life for too long."

"I've done the best I could, given I grew up with nothing" the gambler said.

Thompson, like so many others, was born to a family who ventured into the uncivilized territories of the American West. He was orphaned at a young age and learned to scratch and fight for his livelihood in the rabid backstreets of St. Louis, Missouri.

"Is that why you have spent most of your life taking from others?" Dak asked.

"I took only what was made available or I assumed was unwanted," Thompson said.

"I don't think the man you cheated in the poker game intended to give you his hard-earned money out of the kindness of his heart," Dak stated.

"It was a game of chance. In poker, you have to expect to lose on occasion. It wasn't his day," Thompson said emphatically.

"I don't think he would agree with that assessment. By chance, did you notice a bullet was heading in your direction before I intervened?"

"Of course. How could I not notice? I thought I was a dead man. How'd you do that, stop the bullet in mid-air and all?"

"I can do many things," Dak said. "You cheat at poker; I can cheat death. They are not the same type of skills, but one is far more rewarding than the other."

"Well, thanks for saving my life," Spud said.

"Oh, I haven't saved you yet," Dak said with a big smile. "Like that bullet, you are sort of in a state of suspension."

"What the he... heck does that mean?" Spud asked.

"It means somebody up there deemed you worthy of a second chance," the man in red said and pointed toward the sky that was completely blocked out by the falling snow.

Spud looked upward. The icy flakes stung his eyes. He turned back to the Dak and said, "What do you mean when you say I've been given a second chance? Why me?"

"It means you have redeeming qualities, of which you've never taken advantage. My boss wants to see if you can put them to good use. So, he's giving you a second chance."

"Who's your boss?" Spud asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Yeah, I want to know who's dealing the cards," Thompson chided.

"You seem awfully demanding for a man who was about to die. I'd suggest you just follow me and do as I instruct," Dak said, the smile gone from his face for the first time.

Dak was either angry or very serious, Spud assumed. Still, he wanted to know more.

"It's my life," Thompson said. "I have a right to be curious."

"Let me be very clear. It is up to you whether you live to experience this extraordinary opportunity before you or die at a table in that horribly filthy saloon. You can follow me and abandon your stubbornness. Or you can return to your seat, where in one second your forehead will be impacted by a hot piece of lead. Which do you choose?"

"Not much of choice, big guy," Spud said smartly. "So, lead the way. Where are we going?"

"There is a small town called Saguache not far from here," Dak explained. "I think you're going to like it there. You could be great help or you end up back in the final poker game of your life."

"How far away is it? Are we going to ride or walk? Maybe we should wait out this storm. If you haven't noticed, the snow is starting to pile up," Spud said.

"Please understand one thing. Time is precious, my man. Of all people, you should understand that. You were a second from death. Why should we waste it?" the man in red said.

"Who is we?" he asked.

"You and me, of course," Dak said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Let's get going then. I'm freezing. Aren't you cold?"

The snow was piling on the buffalo robe Spud had wrapped around his shoulders. Dak, on the other hand, seemed immune to the elements. Not so much as a flake fell on his shoulders.

"Neither cold nor heat have any effect on me," Dak said. "I think the mountains are so beautiful when they are snow-covered."

"If you say so. Lead the way. I'll follow," Thompson said.

Dak looked at him with a smile. Obviously, he was happy with the gambler's decision. The strange man snapped his fingers and Spud felt his feet leave the ground. A dizziness suddenly assaulted him. He closed his eyes to ward the queasy feeling of flight.

* * *

WHEN SPUD OPENED his eyes, he and Dak no longer were standing outside the Last Stop Saloon. They were atop a mountain, looking down at a snow-covered, ramshackle town.

As Thompson's swirling brain calmed, he heard his escort say, "This is it."

"W-What just happened?" Spud asked as he noticed their new location. From a deep snow drift, he asked, "Where are we?"

"We're on a mountain, overlooking Saguache," Dak explained.

"How'd we get here?" the gambler asked, mystified by all that had transpired.

"You followed me here."

"I know that, but how did we get from Coyote to here?" the inquisitive gambler asked.

"I told you, I don't like to waste time," Dak said.

"I guess not," Thompson said and decided to avoid the subject until a later time. Whatever magical journey was at hand, it was better than dying. He realized Dak was only going to tell him what he wanted him to know. He wondered what might happen next.

"So, that's Saguache?" he muttered. "It doesn't look too promising to me."

"Yes. It's been through a few months of difficulty, but this is where opportunity awaits," Dak said.

"What kind of opportunity?" Spud asked.

"You've spent your days robbing, cheating and deceiving others," Dak explained. "Starting in Saguache, you will begin working instead of scheming for a living."

"What do you mean working? Do you mean I need to find a job down there?"

"You are not only going to work, but you will volunteer your time to help others. There will be no compensation other than your food and lodging," Dak explained.

"You've got to be joking. If I work, I get paid!"

"Not in Saguache."

"Then, I'm not going," Thompson said.

"That is your choice alone," Dak said and raised his right hand in the air. His forefinger was resting against his thumb and he was about to snap them. He paused and added, "I can return you to your poker table if you wish."

"No!" Spud shouted. "I've changed my mind. I'll do whatever you say."

"I thought you might reconsider," the magical man said and took a step toward the town. "Follow me."

Thompson grumbled as he examined the long trail that led down the side of the mountain to Saguache.

"If you make me walk all the way down the side of this mountain, I'm going to be very cold and very unhappy," Thompson proclaimed.

"What is it you don't like about walking? We have fresh air, the promise of good tidings and a glorious view," Dak said.

"I love the view; it's my feet that rebel against walking in freezing snow," Thompson said. "It seems senseless to trudge all the way down the mountain when all you have to do is snap your fingers."

"That's fine. All you do is complain," Dak said and snapped his fingers.

The next thing Thompson knew they were standing next to a sign on the outskirts of town that welcomed visitors. It read: SAGUACHE, Colorado (pop. 162).

"Thank you," Thompson said, his sour frown suddenly gone until he looked down Main Street and saw nothing but derelict buildings.

"Oh, say it ain't so," the crotchety gambler grouched. "I thank you for saving me some steps, but again I am convinced you have misled me. There's nothing left of this town. How will I find a job here?"

Saguache looked like a ghost town, or one that soon would perish, as did so many mining towns in the mountainous regions of the West. Towns and communities popped up anywhere gold or silver was discovered. When all the ore had been extracted and there

was no more money to be made, most mining towns shut down or were abandoned. Saguache was the exception.

Neither man, woman nor animal could be seen anywhere. Half the businesses were boarded up. Dak gazed down Main Street, smiled and said, "You are wrong. This is exactly where your opportunity begins."

Dusk was setting in. Someone already had set a match to the streetlights .

"What makes you think we will find anything in this sorry place?" Thompson asked.

"Ya gotta have faith," Dak said. "The Lord works in mysterious ways. Something tells me this town might look unfriendly, but it has a heart of gold."

"I get it now. You slipped up and told me who your boss is," Thompson said as a cynical grin crossed his face. "What's the Almighty want with me?"

"I have no idea. My biblical reference was only a figure of speech," Dak said and began laughing. "Do you think I'm an angel?"

"I don't know what you are. You tell me," Spud said. "I have no idea what is going on. One minute I was about to die and the next I'm standing in a blizzard atop a mountain. Now, you've brought me to a deserted town you say is full of opportunity. Do you mind telling me what the he... er, what in tarnation you have in mind?"

"Who or what I am is not of your concern. Nor is what lies ahead. You've made a choice between death and opportunity," Dak said. "I will escort you to your first stop. Then, you will be on your own. Do not to squander what is being offered. As you know, the alternative has a painful consequence."

"I get it. You've allowed me to dodge a bullet. I'll do whatever is needed. Could we get out of the cold now?" Spud asked.

"Do you always whine so much?" Dak asked.

"Kiss my rosy, red a... er, cheek," Thompson snarled.

"That's better; I think you're learning."

"I'm no daisy," Spud said.

"That's what the boss said," Dak stated with a snicker and pointed down the street. "Carry on; I will follow you, now."

As they walked toward the center of town, the devastation got steadily worse. Two buildings in the heart of town had fallen into rubble. As darkness set in, vultures picked at the remains of what looked like a collapsed diner.

"Saguache once was a thriving, little community," Dak observed. "What you see here is the result of greed."

"I think somebody blew it the smithereens," Thompson said.

"Let's find out what happened," Dak said.

"Can we do that, as well as find somewhere to get warm?" Thompson begged.

"Maybe we can do both. Let's try Phillips' General Store. It's boarded up but a sign says it is open," Dak said, buoyed with confidence,

"I'll meet you at the potbellied stove," the reluctant gambler said.

END OF SNEAK PEEK