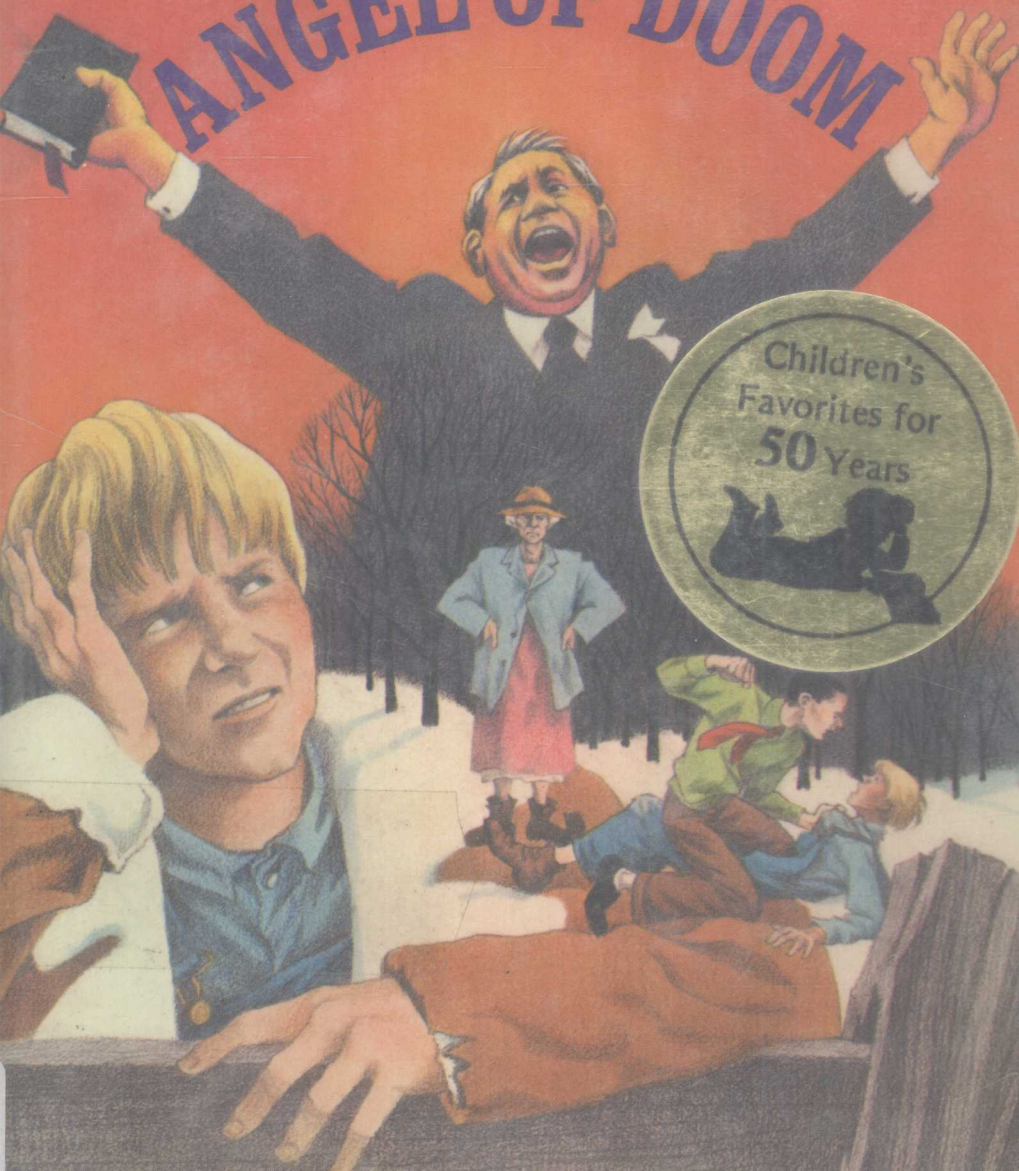


ROBBIE BRANSCUM

# SPUD TACKETT

AND THE

## ANGEL OF DOOM



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# **SPUD TACKETT AND THE ANGEL OF DOOM**

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**BY  
ROBBIE BRANSCUM**



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AND THE  
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in an Arkansas farm community during the second world war,  
affecting fifteen-year-old Spud, his grandmother, and cousin Leroy.

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*To Doree Stone for her understanding kindness.*

*To Diane Tilley, my friend and kinswoman.*

*To all who have been scared silly by hellfire  
and brimstone preaching.*

*Most of all to Ray, whose roses bloom  
in my heart, on the hottest summer day  
or the coldest winter night.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

I didn't hate the Japanese people for starting the war because Grandma said that the common everyday folks, just like us, couldn't help having war, that it was our country's leaders who decided such, and that the folks like us and most of the Japanese people had to go along with it as best we could.

No, I didn't hate the Japanese—I was just mad, mad as hops at them for ruining Christmas. For all my fifteen Christmases, my uncles, aunts, and cousins came home to spend Christmas with Grandma and

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me—bringing cakes, and sacks of pumpkin, and raisin pies.

Grandma would roast tender frying chickens with sage and onion dressing, and we would feast and play the time away. This year there'd just be me and Grandma. Oh, I suppose there'd be the usual stocking with an orange, an apple, a pack of gum, and a candy bar for me, but somehow this year it didn't seem enough. Or maybe I'd outgrown the joy of it. I'd not tell Grandma, though. It'd shame her deader than a doornail to know the boy she'd raised was thinking of himself more than the boys of hers going to war—sons, sons-in-law, and some older nephews.

When I'd asked Grandma why the menfolks was going to war before they was asked or told to go, Grandma snapped, "Why, Spud Tackett, our Arkansas boys don't never wait till somebody throws rocks at 'em. They jest hop in an' does what needs doin'."

Grandma's eyes looked real proud, and, truth to tell, I felt sort of proud myself, and said, "I wont t' go too, Grandma. I ken shoot."

"I know ye ken, Spud, an' real good too. But big boys like ye need t' stay home an' keer fer the folks left behind—old folks like me an' little younguns."

I thought maybe Grandma was right about the little

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younguns, but I had my doubts that Grandma needed me to take care of her, for she was pure whang leather, the strongest kind. The whole hills seemed covered with a brooding sadness as menfolks left for war. But the routine of farm work went on as always.

Then on Saturday it came the first snow of the year. As me and Grandma walked to church the next day, I noticed that every tree looked like a Christmas tree and even the worst old houses like a body dreams of living in.

There was mostly old folks in church and middling to young women with babies. Church was held in our little one-room school, but then everything was held in the school—from pie suppers to funerals. I always hated going to school for a few days after a funeral for, in my mind, I could still see the pine coffin at the foot of the platform where the teacher had her desk and Brother Rose his pulpit. I could 'most hear the kinfolks of the dead one saying how their loved ones looked so natural, just like they was sleeping. As for me, I'd rather dead folks looked dead, so if a body met them on a dark night, they'd know to start running.

I didn't pay too much mind to the preaching. I never did, just mostly looked out the window and wished I

was outside. Besides, I was used to old Brother Rose's sermons—he'd been our pastor ever since I could remember.

Suddenly old Granny Treat yelled, "Glory to God! Praise the Lord! I done had me a vision."

My neck hair crawled, and I could see Brother Rose's eyes go wide 'cause folks didn't have visions often in our little Baptist church, and since it was the first time I could recall anyone interrupting Brother Rose's sermon, I sat up and listened, and so did everyone else.

Granny Treat was standing and looking sort of wild-eyed, her gray hair straying from the bun and snuff juice tracing itself in time grooves down her chin. Fact, her whole face was time tracks. Seeing she had folks interested, she yelled again, "I done had me a vision."

I heard my grandma snort plain as day, and Granny Treat must've heard it too 'cause she raised her voice even louder, yelling, "The Lord told me in a dream that a man of God is a-comin' heer, a-comin' heer t' the hills. An angel he be. He's a-comin' t' lead us through the war, t' lead us t' Glory."

With that, Granny Treat sat down. She looked smugly around at the open-mouthed folks and patted



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her straying hair snugly. Brother Rose had pulled himself together and said kindly, "Thank you, Sister Treat," and went on preaching.

With the excitement over, I went back to not listening again.

After church, when everyone had shaken hands and left but me and Grandma, Brother Rose said, "Now, I do wonder what brought on Sister Treat's vision," and his eyes looked like they were laughing. Grandma's eyes got all crinkly, too, and she said, "I expect it was 'cause of the letter she got yesterday from her grandboy sayin' he'd met a preacher who was headed this way holdin' revivals."

Brother Rose laughed out loud and said, "Well, I cain't think of no better way of spreadin' the news than havin' a vision in the middle of church."

"In a pig's eye," Grandma snapped, then laughed too.

I sure wasn't laughing the next day, though, 'cause we got a letter, or Grandma did, saying her youngest son's boy, Leroy, was coming to stay a spell. I had a hard time sleeping that night 'cause of things aggravating me fierce.

It was a plain fact I didn't know what to do. I mean, with a city cousin coming to live with us till times got

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better or the war got over with, it looked to me like Grandma wouldn't be too likely to let me have enough money for new shoes. She said we didn't have the money, but I knowed we had leastways thirteen dollars left over from the last year's berry picking. And when I said so, Grandma snapped, "Spud Tackett, ye know that money is fer hard times."

Far as I was concerned, times couldn't get much harder without plumb killing me. 'Sides, Grandma thought boys didn't have no business a-wearin' new shoes but once a year nohow.

I turned over and punched the lumps in the feather bed down flat with my fist, doubting I'd ever sleep no more. I mean, a cousin coming sort of made me look at everything, including myself, with new eyes—not that I'd ever been much to look at, mostly bones and hair held together by freckles. Grandma said I took after Pa's side of the family. I wouldn't know 'cause I'd never seen Pa. He'd been killed someplace way off 'fore I was born. For that matter, I couldn't recall Ma much neither, 'cause she left the farm when I was real little, about three years old. I reckon that was about twelve years ago, but I suppose she looked like Grandma, I mean her being her daughter and all.

Truth to tell, looking like Grandma wasn't saying

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much neither, 'cause she was worn to a strip of raw-hide by the Arkansas weather and farm work. Her eyes were a snapping blue, and her voice had a sting that could nigh flay a body when she got a mad on. Her white hair flew around her head like cotton candy, and outside she wore Grandpa's britches, 'cept on Sundays.

Sometimes I thought Grandpa hadn't died at all, just sort of turned into Grandma, but reckon maybe it was 'cause of her wearing his clothes and hat and she was allus saying what Grandpa would say or do if he hadn't went on.

Grandma always acted like Grandpa was cut down in the prime of life, but he was ninety-seven when he died four years ago, and Grandma was seventy-three last October. Grandma and Grandpa had eight young-uns, and they was all gone now, not dead, just gone to far-off places to live, though Grandma said they might as well have gone on, no more than she got to see them, just on Christmas mostly. But I could tell she was real happy that her grandboy Leroy Jackson was getting to come and live with us till his pa, Grandma's youngest boy, got home from the war. Once when I asked Grandma why she talked about her boy Tom, Leroy's pa, more than her other young-

uns, she said, "'Cause he's my baby, allus will be—the first and the last is pure hard to fergit—they has a way of a-tugging at a body's heartstrings."

Leroy's mom had gone to work in a war plant, and she didn't want Leroy to be alone, 'cause, like me, he was an only youngun. I'd never seen Leroy, but I hated him anyways—hated him just 'cause he was coming to stay or maybe because Grandma was his, too. I mean, heck fire, it'd been just me and Grandma nigh since I could remember, and it was hard enough to make a living on our twenty-acre hili farm without having to put up with an uppity city feller. 'Sides, I reckoned Grandma would like him better than me. I mean, him being new to her and all.

I didn't dare tell Grandma how I felt, 'cause she was a dyed-in-the-wool Christian and didn't hold with jealousy. I punched the feather bed again and thought the fact was, there wasn't much Grandma did hold with 'cept hard work and church-going. I sort of grinned to myself and thought maybe Leroy wouldn't stay, poor as the farm was and all. Fact of the matter, we didn't get out much. About the only reason me and Grandma knew there was a war on was hearing war talk at church. We didn't have a radio for news

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'cause Grandma said batteries were too dear for us to buy.

I dreaded sleeping with Leroy, too, 'cause we just had two bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. Our beds were iron bedsteads, and there were nails to hang extra clothes on. The living room had an old rock fireplace Grandpa had built and some cane rockers he made from river-bottom cane. He'd made the oak table and benches in the kitchen, too, and the washstand by the back door. Grandma said Grandpa had brought the big black cast-iron cookstove from Little Rock on a wagon when they were first wed. The braided rugs on the floor had belonged to Grandma's ma, and our curtains were made from feed sacks Grandma had dyed blue and red.

When I said I wished we had more stuff, Grandma would say, "Spud, a body ken jest wear one pair of drawers at a time, boy." I gave a deep sigh. Me and Grandma had lived all winter on corn bread, pinto beans and potatoes and what milk old Belle, our cow, seen fit to give.

I wished I could sleep. But I felt hungry, for the house still smelled of the cinnamon and brown sugar Grandma had used to make fried apple pies for Leroy. Being hungry wasn't new to me—seemed I was that

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way ten minutes after I'd eat anyhow. Once I feared I had a tapeworm, but Grandma just laughed and said hunger was the way of growing boys.

I heard Grandma's corn shuck mattress rustling and knowed she was having a hard time sleeping, too, but I bet it was 'cause of the new preacher coming. He was from a far-off place called Russia, a place not even in America, let alone Arkansas. Anyway, he was a preaching man, and folks was a-building a brush arbor not far from Jud Treese's pond. Grandma said some of the folks would be sniffing around him like he was a strange dog. Then, with a sort of worried sigh, she said, "Boy, don't ever judge a hen till ye see how many eggs she ken lay. That's what yore Grandpa used to say." According to Grandma, Grandpa said a lot of things, but I recall him as a real quiet man. 'Course I knowed that was just Grandma's way of saying wait till she seen whether the new preaching man was for himself or God.

I heard Thunder, our old mule, kick his stall in the barn, and someplace far off an owl hooted. And I heard no more till Grandma's voice cracked the wall of sleep around me. "Spud! Spud, git yore chores, boy. Yore cousin is goin' t' be heer afore ye kin spit."

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# CHAPTER TWO

I knowed before I seen Leroy I'd have to whip him, and there wasn't a doubt in my mind that I could, for hard work had turned me into a lot of Grandma's whang leather, and hard winters had kept just the muscles and melted off any extra fat. 'Sides, Leroy was a city boy, and any fool knowed a city boy was sissified. 'Course I didn't know it for sure 'fore I got outa bed at Grandma's call 'cause I hadn't seen him yet.

I slipped outa bed into my overalls, thinking it'd

be the last time my bed was mine for a long spell. I stopped at the washstand and cracked the ice to douse my face and slick my hair back, noting that Grandma was shoving a pan of biscuits in the oven and also noting she was wearing one of her good flour sack dresses. "Showin' off fer Leroy," I muttered under my breath.

"Eh? What er ye sayin', boy?" Grandma asked, turning her mop of cotton candy hair my way.

"Jest sayin' I'd hurry with the chores," I answered, stepping out the back door, shivering as the first blast of December wind hit me.

Grandma had already fed Belle and milked her, 'cause Grandma seemed to fear men and boys were never quite clean enough to do the milking. A half dozen barn cats were lapping warm milk from a tin pan. I climbed the ladder to the barn loft and pitched hay to the mule and cow and mixed a bucket of bran to slop the hog. I fed the chickens corn and opened the barn stall doors so Belle and Thunder could go out to pasture.

The old black snake that Grandma had made a pet of slid out of a hole in the side of the cellar where she lived in winter, making me jump 'cause I was never quite sure if it was old Hermie or one of her



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kinfolks ready to bite the dickens out of me.

Grandma could, and did, make pets out of 'most anything. A body could pat old Hermie on the head like a dog, or she'd crawl on your shoulder and curl up and snooze while you carried her around. But sometimes Hermie got in the hens' nests and swallowed the eggs; then Grandma got mad and chased her with the broom.

I figured it'd be another hour before the mail car brought Leroy to our place, so I went to the house to eat. Grandma hopped around the kitchen like a bird, just stopping to peck at her plate now and then. She was putting beans on to cook for noon dinner.

"Ye swipe that gravy off yer plate, boy, an' get yore jacket. Let's git a-goin'," she said, jamming Grandpa's hat down on her head.

"I allus thought Grandpa said, 'Haste makes waste,'" I sniggered.

Grandma snapped, "He allus said smart-mouthed younguns needed peach-treeing—real often, too."

"We got us an hour, Grandma," I protested, wanting another biscuit.

"Not time. Not time we walked t' the mailbox in the snow. 'Sides, Abe Marshall is jest as liable t' be early as late with the mail. An' we don't wont Leroy