

## Crack o'Doom

by Angel Leigh McCoy

The sky grew ominous and cast a gloom on the farm. Jeanie's mom had told her not to leave the yard. "There's a storm comin', kiddo. Stick close." The smells of imminent rain and eager pine mingled. The leaves on the oak trees turned up, thirsty and ready.

"Storm comin'," seven-year-old Jeanie told the dogs through the tall fence. She entered their pen, careful to close the gate behind her. Daddy's labradors, Sissy and Sassy, were excited. Their tails wagged their thick bodies, and their chocolate snouts snuffled her all over.

The dogs had run down any grass that might have once grown there. They'd dug around, looking for moles and buried bones. Mangy-furred tennis balls lay strewn amidst chew-toys missing appendages and ears, and there was an old red kickball to one side, half-deflated.

Jeanie set her doll, Dolly, to one side and got down on her hands and knees at the entrance to the doghouse. She pulled out the two woolen blankets, bringing a flow of dirt and dog-hair with them. She stood and shook out the first one. It tossed up a cloud of fur and dust, and the wind blew it at her. She turned her face away—eyes, nose and mouth scrunched together.

She folded the blankets in uneven squares and put them back inside the doghouse, pressing their edges into the corners and smoothing them as flat as they'd go.

The first big blast sounded. *Boom!*

Jeanie froze in place, and her heartbeat accelerated. "Crack o'doom," she said. Jeanie's Daddy had taught her to say that whenever she heard thunder. He had said it would keep her safe.

On her hands and knees, inside the doghouse, she crawled to the entrance and peered out. The dogs had stopped playing and were watching the main house. Jeanie looked, too, at the big, white farmhouse where she lived with her parents.

Sissy let out a bark, and then a long broken yowl—the sound Mama called singing.

*Boom!*

“Crack o’doom.”

The thunder was in the house.

Jeanie grabbed Dolly to her and hunkered down inside the doghouse. She called the dogs, and when they came rushing in, she burrowed between their warm, wiggly bodies, letting them push at her with hard noses, clawed paws, and lapping tongues.

A man shouted Jeanie’s name. It was Mr. Conti.

Jeanie went still, head cocked to one side, listening.

“Jeanie! Your mother wants you to come inside!”

“It’s Mr. Conti,” Jeanie said, but she stayed put. “Shhhhh.”

“Jeanie!” The man approached the dog pen. The legs of his one-piece jumpsuit, torn at one thigh and stained at the knees, came into view. He stood just outside the pen, turning in place, with the barrel of his shotgun sticking down and out in front of him.

The dogs poked their heads out. One of them growled.

“Jeanie! Come home, girl! Right now!” Mr. Conti sighed loudly.

Jeanie hugged Dolly tighter. She had never liked Mr. Conti. He watched her. He made her feel shy and unsettled. She did her best to avoid being alone with him and never spoke to him.

Sassy launched herself out of the doghouse and ran straight toward Mr. Conti. She slammed into the fence and barked up a ruckus.

Mr. Conti jumped back. “Damn dog!” He raised the gun and pointed it at Sassy, looking down the barrel at her with his mean face. He pushed the gun at her, as if firing, then lowered it. He huffed and headed off toward the woods, toward his own farm.

Jeanie’s stomach eased. She didn’t hear any more thunder. She grabbed her doll and crawled out. She opened the gate enough to slide out without the dogs coming with her, and she crossed the lawn to the front of the house. She went inside, careful to close the door behind her, so the flies wouldn’t get in. Standing in the main foyer, she listened for her parents. Most days, she could hear where they were.

That day, however, the house had stopped—stopped breathing, stopped living. A silence had settled on the rooms, the kind that’s waiting for you when you first come home from vacation, or when you wake up to find yourself all alone. It was the kind of silence that a person would do anything to chase away, like whistling, stomping booted feet on the mat and calling out to anyone who will answer.

“Mama?” Jeanie went to the kitchen, but no one was there. The TV in the living room was switched off. “Daddy?” Nuzzling her face in Dolly’s hair, she crept upstairs.

She found them. In their bedroom. Mama and Daddy were lying on the floor, eyes open, staring up at the ceiling, forever. And, there was blood.

More than anything else, the smell in the room brought tears to Jeanie’s eyes. It was the smell of blood and dissipating warmth mingled with toilet and something bitter, like firecracker smoke.

Jeanie went to her mom. “Mama?” She got no response. “Mama!” Nothing. Her heart pounded in her chest, and her breath became the ragged fluttering of a frightened bird. When she crossed to her dad, she slipped in some blood, but managed not to fall. She crouched at his head. “Daddy?” He didn’t move. She rocked back and forth on her feet, hugging Dolly to her chest.

The disrupted silence settled back down upon the house.

Jeanie wanted help, an adult, 911, anyone. Leaving bloody footprints on the wood floor, she went to the bed-side table, picked up the phone, and put it to her ear. She pressed the numbers—9 1 1—but the phone was silent too. Dead.

She’d seen blood before, when she’d skinned her knee, and when her mother had cut herself with a kitchen knife, but never had she seen so much blood. It had splattered the wall and made a big mess all around her parents. It pooled in the pits of their bellies and drained into cracks between the floorboards around them.

The dogs started barking again. Jeanie went to the window and looked down at them.

Mr. Conti had returned. He no longer had the shotgun, but his mouth had shrunk into a thin line, and his eyes had grown sharp and searching.

Instinct gave Jeanie a harsh push. She grasped Dolly by the hair and ran down the back stairs. She left the house through the kitchen door and stumbled out into the backyard. Her eyeballs were pushing forward, as if trying to escape ahead of her, and her breath came in catches and stops. She ran instinctively, cut through the woods, along the path her Daddy had made, and on into the kick-ball field. It started to rain, not nicely, but with all the mean intentions of a water balloon dropped from on high.

The squall came out of nowhere and crashed into the coast with a violence that bowed ancient pines and flattened tall grasses. Rain crashed down on Jeanie. It pounded her and drenched her clothes. Hugging Dolly to her, she lowered her head and sprinted to the trees on the far side of the clearing. She took shelter under a Douglas fir.

A bolt of lightning streaked from sky to ground, casting everything in blue-white light and making Jeanie’s hair tingle. The flash burned white treetops onto a black sky behind her eyelids.

Thunder came next, a physical blast of sound. She cringed, threw her hands up to her ears and tucked her elbows in tight against her body.

“Crack o’doom.”

Little rivers of rainwater made their way across pine needle valleys and flooded the ground beneath the tree. Jeanie’s tennis shoes—her first-grade shoes, now play shoes—squished when she shifted her weight.

Dolly’s hair had droplets of water clinging to it. It was scrunched up and messy. Her dungarees were drenched. Her blue, sparkle eyes stared at Jeanie’s chest, and her smile didn’t waver. Jeanie tipped Dolly, and the doll’s eyes rolled closed.

From her foxhole beneath the moisture-laden branches, Jeanie watched the rain. The drops hit the ground so hard they bounced.

The dogs gave great baying cries and deep woofs. Jeanie heard the dogs’ barks in between the rumblings of the clouds.

Something crashed through the trees, and Jeanie looked to see who it was. “Sally!” she cried.

An ogre of a man, named Sally, Mr. Conti’s son, stopped, bent over and blinked with round, uncomprehending eyes at Jeanie. After a moment, he got down and crawled into her sanctuary with her. He sat back on his full rump, ignoring the ground’s wetness, and brushed his hands together to wipe away pine needles and mud.

“There’s thunder in my house,” Jeanie said.

“She has to come home.” Sally tugged on her sleeve.

The Contis had known Jeanie since before she was born. She had many memories, and her parents had even more, of evenings spent with the two families together. The grown-ups had

played cards, read books aloud, made recipes in the kitchen or worked in the garden. Sometimes, they just talked about magick and rituals.

Sometimes Mrs. Conti would babysit her, and sometimes Mama would babysit Sally.

Sally—his mom called him Salvatore—was physically much older than Jeanie, but his mind had stopped maturing at around seven years old. He’d been born different, and though Jeanie’s mom had said, “That’s not a bad thing,” it meant he went to a special school, and nobody in the neighborhood wanted to play with him. She was his only friend, mostly because their parents were friends. Lately, she had begun to feel the weight of it. He followed her and wanted to know everything she was doing. Before, when she was little, it hadn’t mattered so much, but she was getting to be a big girl, seven-and-a-half years old, and Sally was still a little boy inside. He wanted to watch kid shows, play kid games and read kid books. Jeanie had started to feel superior to Sally, to feel bothered by his constant presence and non-growing ways, to feel frustrated by his lack of even a single original thought.

Sally was soaked to the bone. He reached out with his big, man hand to stroke Dolly’s wet hair. He had given her the doll for her seventh birthday.

“I didn’t know it was going to rain when I left,” Jeanie said.

“I didn’t know it was going to rain,” Sally said.

“You’re soaked. Go home. Your mom and dad are gonna be mad.”

“I know.” But, he didn’t move. He just sat there, rocking himself, hands clasped and wringing. “She has... to come home.” Sally blinked his large, little-boy eyes against the water on his lashes.

“No, I can’t! Your dad did something to my Mama and Daddy.”

Sally shook his head. He reached down to touch the muddy, socked foot.

The sky flashed, and another blast of thunder split the air.

“Crack o’doom!” Jeanie’s eyes filled with tears. She swiped her arm across them.

Sally hunkered, hands clutching his ears, body rocking, full lips trembling.

Jeanie looked over at him. “Say it, Sally.”

He was confused, eyes bright, rounded head moving without purpose.

Jeanie fisted her hand in the collar of his shirt. “Say it.”

“Say it,” he said.

“No. Say ‘crack o’doom.’ You have to say it every time it thunders, or something bad will happen.”

Sally said, “Crack o’doom.”

“Good. Now, go home. It’ll be okay.”

“I know.” Sally tipped his head to look out and up at the roiling clouds. “It’s worth the sacrifice.”

Lightning struck again. Close. This one lingered, its tail captured by something. It sucked oxygen out of the air and made a resounding crack that left Jeanie’s ears ringing. She cried out, though the thunder swallowed her voice. Her vision swam with electric dots. “Crack o’doom.”

In the void following the lightning bolt, the dogs’ barks called out again. Jeanie jerked her face in their direction. She easily imagined the dogs, racing back and forth at the fence, digging the rut deeper with each pass, kicking muddy splatters onto themselves and each other, eyes and noses searching—searching for her. They would protect her.

She easily imagined herself, safe from the storm, cuddled into their doghouse with them, huddled under their dog-smelling blankets, warm and drying. She could live with them forever.

She steeled herself, clutched Dolly to her chest, and crawled out from under the tree. She took off—full-bore—out into the open field, toward the sound of the dogs.

“The window is closing!” Sally called after her.

Within three steps, Jeanie lost a shoe. She stepped before she realized it was gone, and her socked foot came down in the wet grass. She stumbled to a stop, lifted her foot and hopped. The shoe had remained stuck in mud, somewhere behind her.

“My mom and dad are gonna be mad!” Sally shouted from under the Douglas fir.

Jeanie went back for the shoe, her shoe-less foot on tip-toe. She couldn’t see for the water rushing down her face. With one hand, she wiped her eyes. The rain drenched her wind-breaker. The nylon clung to her arms, and the hem drained low and heavy at her thighs. Rivulets ran into the neck, streamed down her back and soaked her play pants. She tugged at the weighted pants and scanned the ground, looking for her shoe.

“It’s worth the sacrifice!”

Jeanie ignored him.

Another bolt of lightning came to earth. It caught a tree further along, on the ridge overlooking the clearing where Jeanie searched. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the bolt travel down the trunk, splitting it open as it went. Pine needles exploded outward, a firecracker of sparks, quickly dampened by heavy raindrops. After the initial clap, a sizzle lingered.

Jeanie crouched, making herself as small as possible. “Crack o’doom.”

Sally shouted, “My boy will be normal!”

A moment passed, then two, and then Jeanie exploded out of her crouch and ran, shoe abandoned, Sally abandoned. She bolted across the clearing, heading back to the dogs. She raced toward the tree-line.

Jeanie heard pounding footsteps behind her, joining her in flight, and she was Bambi fleeing the fire with all the other animals, intent only on reaching safety.

Sally swept up behind her, clamped both his arms around her waist and lifted her off the ground.

Her equilibrium took an abrupt shift. She flailed. Dolly went flying. Instinctually, Jeanie latched onto Sally’s arm.

He crashed on toward the tree-line. Once there, he stopped and set Jeanie on the ground.

Jeanie looked up into his gasping, crazed face. “Sally! Leave me alone! Go home!” The tree overhead diluted the downpour, and she wiped her soggy hair out of her eyes. She took stock of herself and realized she no longer had Dolly. A flash of panic sent her spinning in place, peering all around her, tugging Sally so she could search behind and around him. “Where’s Dolly?”

Sally looked out at the open field, at the place where he’d caught Jeanie up in his arms. She followed his gaze, and without hesitation, ran back out into the field, into the downpour, into the storm.

Sally made a swipe at her.

Jeanie ran with single-minded purpose.

The rain assaulted her.

She searched, eyes wild.

A branching bolt of lightning and its thunder cracked the sky, and the bleaching light put a shine on Dolly’s face. Jeanie saw the doll. It lay face-up, spread-eagle, eyes closed, awash with rain.

She ran to her doll, picked it up under the armpits and hugged it to her heart.

Lightning struck. It connected with a nearby tree, coursed down it with white-hot fury, and sent its blaze arcing across to where Jeanie stood. It entered through her shoulder and rocketed down through her body. It expanded and filled her, wrenched her insides and twisted her brain as if it were wringing out a dishrag.

Jeanie’s every muscle convulsed, and she was squeezed out, out into mid-air, her soul shooting like a star. Her arms and legs flew wide, and she landed on her back, with a little bounce. Her eyelids rolled closed.

For the longest time, Jeanie couldn’t open her eyes. She couldn’t move. The smell of chemicals and burned plastic assaulted her. She lay there, listening to Sally wail. She heard Mr. Conti as well. They sounded distant, like the dogs had sounded before. She couldn’t hear the dogs anymore.

The rain stopped as abruptly as it had started. The storm ended.

Jeanie felt herself lifted off the ground and carried, like a tiny baby. She couldn’t tell who was carrying her, and her eyes still refused to open. Everything felt skewed. She felt smaller than normal, too lightweight. Her body seemed compact, as if maybe it weren’t all there anymore.

Far-distant thunder rumbled, non-threatening.

“Crack o’doom,” Jeanie thought. She couldn’t speak.

Sally said, “My mom and dad are gonna be mad.”

The walk took forever, or maybe Sally took his time. Jeanie didn’t know. All she knew was that she was awake, but she couldn’t open her eyes, and she couldn’t speak. None of her muscles worked.

Sally’s footsteps reached creaky stairs, then wood. A screen door slammed shut behind them. Sally climbed some stairs, opened a door and stepped through it. He sat Jeanie upon a cushion, upright, with something soft against her back.

One of Jeanie’s eyes cracked open, halfway. The other felt stuck, crusty, wanting to roll upward, but unable. She saw that she was in a bedroom, but she could only stare straight ahead.

The eye was half open, but it didn’t move in its socket.

In her peripheral vision, Jeanie saw the arms of the chair extending out on either side of her, larger than life, dwarfing her. She remembered that chair. She remembered it smaller.

Sally moved across Jeanie’s field of vision. She watched him from beneath the one eyelid.

He paced in the narrow track between his bed and the wall. He undressed, stripping out of his wet clothes and throwing them on the floor. He dropped his underwear and left them where they fell.

Jeanie couldn’t turn her head. She couldn’t take her eye off the pallor of his skin, splotched red where he had pimples on his back and arms, on his bottom. His belly stuck out in front, and his hunched shoulders made him seem malformed.

It wasn’t the first time Jeanie had seen him without clothes. Memories of moonlit midnights, dancing under the full moon, the harvest moon, the blue moon, the wolf moon, the hunter’s and the hay moon, with her parents, naked, and Sally’s parents, naked, and Sally with his white skin that glowed in the moonlight, dancing and celebrating, good memories, filled Jeanie’s head. The Contis had sung songs with words Jeanie didn’t understand, and her parents had sung along. They had brought cakes and drinks that smelled like the garden and tasted sweet. On the solstice, Jeanie could stay up past her bedtime and eat as many of the special treats as she wanted. She could drink the magic juice to her heart’s content. And she danced, naked, under the moon’s

watchful eye, with a cake in one hand and the world in the other, and her parents told her she was being groomed for greatness—because that’s what the Contis told them.

Sally crossed to where Jeanie couldn’t see him, but she heard him pull open a drawer. He tossed dry clothes onto the bed. They flashed into her line of sight and landed in the middle of the bedspread.

Raised voices, angry voices, came up the stairs—Mr. and Mrs. Conti. It was a brief storm, however, over almost as soon as it had begun.

Sally came back by the bed to dress. “My mom and dad are gonna be mad.” Stepping into white briefs, he rushed and caught his foot in the leg-band. He started to topple. He let go of the underpants and reached out to catch himself on the arm of Jeanie’s chair. The chair shook, rattling Jeanie and tipping her to one side. Her one eye opened the rest of the way. The other rattled around in its socket, but the eyelid remained stuck shut.

Sally tugged up his underpants.

“Salvatore! Where are you?” Footsteps echoed in the stairwell outside the room.

Sally pulled on a pair of sweatpants. “My boy’s in his room, Mom.”

A small woman came into the room.

Mrs. Conti was tiny. Jeanie’s dad had called her a little person. When the woman stood next to her son, she barely came above his belly.

“Are you okay?”

“Okay.” Sally pulled a t-shirt on over his head.

“Are you hungry?”

He considered for a moment, then shook his head.

The woman took her son by the hand and led him to the bed. She jumped up to sit on it and patted it to indicate that he should sit, too.

Sally sat beside her, dipping the mattress low so that she slid up against him. “My mom and dad are gonna be mad.”

“Why would we be mad?”

“The window is closing.” Sally looked over at the chair. His mom followed his gaze and gasped softly.

For a long moment, no one said anything. Sally hung his head.

“I’m not mad. Salvatore, I’m not mad at you. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“You did good. You showed your dad where Jeanie was.”

Sally nodded.

The tiny woman folded her hands in her lap. “You remember what we said, right? Sometimes bad things happen to the people we love, and it’s sad. But it’s worth the sacrifice if it saves someone else. Do you understand?”

Sally nodded. He looked across at Jeanie and met her one-eyed gaze. “My boy will be normal.”

Mrs. Conti rubbed up and down Sally’s arm. “Yes, my darling boy. You’ll be normal, and we’ll move to a new place where no one knows us, and we’ll start a new life there. It’ll be wonderful. You’ll see.”

Sally’s dad appeared in the doorway. He still wore his one-piece jumpsuit, torn at one thigh and stained at the knees. The brim of his hat dripped onto his shoulders, and the rest of him

dripped onto the floor. He and Sally’s mom exchanged a look. It was the look of grown-up secrets that Jeanie recognized well.

Mr. Conti nodded. “I’ve got her ready.”

“Let’s hope this works.” Mrs. Conti slid off the bed and moved to the door. “At least, the rain’ll wash away any evidence. You buried the gun deep?”

“Told you I did.”

“Yeah, you told me you’d bring Jeanie straight home, too.”

They made angry eyes at each other.

Mrs. Conti said, “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Any required change may be effected by the application of the proper kind... and degree... of Force...”

Mr. Conti joined her, reciting the quotation from memory. “...in the proper manner, through the proper medium... to the proper object.’ I know Crowley’s damn postulate, woman.”

“We had our object primed, and lightning’s a pretty damn powerful Force.”

Mr. Conti nodded, but not in a happy way, in a bad-day sort of way. “We don’t know that it disrupted the magick.”

“What if the lightning set her free? She could be anywhere. The only place we know for sure she isn’t, is in the afterlife, ‘cause we blocked her from that.”

“It makes sense that she’d stay in her own body. All we can do is perform the ritual and see what happens.”

“Let’s get it over with, then.” The woman looked back at her son. “Come downstairs, Salvatore. It’s ritual time.”

“Okay.” Sally rose. He paused to grab Jeanie, tucking her in the crook of one arm.

The world tipped askew for Jeanie. Her eye stared straight forward, locked open now, her only window on the world. When Sally turned, the dresser slid into Jeanie’s view, and Jeanie saw Sally reflected in the mirror.

He stood there, with Dolly tucked in the crook of his arm. Half of Dolly’s face had melted and blackened. Her hair was singed, her dungarees filthy. Jeanie saw a single blue, sparkle eye, staring back at her. The other was melted shut. All Jeanie could do was stare. She understood. Panic, like static electricity, crackled inside her and all over the immobile, plastic surface of her arms and legs.

Sally carried her out the bedroom door. He descended the stairs, and Jeanie caught glimpses of photos on the wall, pictures of Sally at all ages, from birth to adult. Most of the pictures showed him with his mom. As he got bigger and bigger, his mom looked smaller and smaller by comparison.

“Come in here, my boy.”

Jeanie’s insides crackled. She watched a living room go by and a hallway with a door that gave a peek into a bathroom. The kitchen came into view. It had white cabinets with shiny red handles and white linoleum on the floor.

“Come closer, Salvatore.”

Sally moved deeper into the kitchen. The tabletop came into Jeanie’s line of sight, and upon it, she saw a girl lying on her back, wet hair hanging off the edge of the table. Someone had removed the girl’s clothes. Her chest and shoulders had bright red marks that looked like roots growing across them, under the skin. They branched and sent out shoots of scarlet tributaries that spread down her belly.

“I hope it’s not too late.”

“Get the boy in position. We’re only going to get one shot at this.”

Jeanie’s line of sight shifted. She tried to close her eye, but the eyelid wouldn’t budge, and all she could do was stare down into the girl’s face. It had no life left in it. The girl’s eyes were closed, but her mouth lay open, showing a blue-pink interior, tongue swollen and overflowing her bottom teeth. Jeanie recognized the face. It was her own.

“Don’t be nervous, Salvatore,” Mrs. Conti said. “This won’t hurt a bit. Jeanie’s going to be with you forever, inside, where she can help you be smarter. You’ll see. My boy will be normal. It’ll be worth the sacrifice.”

“Don’t promise the boy something we’re not sure we can produce.”

“After all the trouble we went to, all the years of preparation, all those rituals to loosen her soul from its anchor and block it from the Light, I reckon some positive thinking couldn’t hurt. Besides, if this doesn’t work, it won’t matter. We’ll move on. We’ll find another child and start all over again. And Salvatore, well, he’ll never know the difference.”

“I’ll know,” said Mr. Conti.

Sally’s mom petted her son’s arm absently, and her fingertips brushed the melted side of the doll’s face. She jerked her hand away. “Salvatore, give me that filthy thing.”

“Okay,” Sally said.

Mrs. Conti took the doll from Sally, holding it by a heel.

Jeanie’s world turned upside-down, and she saw Mr. Conti wrap his hand around a big, shiny knife.

Sally’s mom opened a drawer and dropped the doll inside, into the old-fashioned trash compactor. She pushed down on the doll with the butt of her hand, compressing it into the paper, plastic and Styrofoam beneath it.

One blue, sparkle eye stared up through Mrs. Conti’s fingers to Sally, who stood by the table. He reached out his big, man hand to stroke the other Jeanie’s wet hair. Mr. Conti raised the knife in both hands, high over the other Jeanie’s chest. He started to sing.

The compactor closed slowly, cutting off the light as it went, gradually, until Jeanie was left in complete darkness, giving her the welcome illusion that she had finally managed to close her eye. Inside the compactor, it was quiet. Mr. Conti’s chanting sounded far away. Jeanie thought of her mom and dad. She thought of the dogs.

An engine rumbled to life.

“Do you have to do that now, woman?”

“Sorry. I wasn’t thinking,” said Sally’s mom. “It’s habit to turn it on when it’s full.”

“Well, too late now. Let it run. I’ll start over when it’s done.”

“It’ll only take a minute.”

The trash compactor slowly squeezed its contents, making neat the discarded containers. When it crushed the doll’s head, the hard plastic gave way with a loud *crack!*

“Crack o’doom,” Sally said.