

## Daddy Daughter Time

by Ryan Harbert

The living room was a screen-lit cacophony of Theremin wails and teenage shrieks. Donnie winced as a camp counselor on TV had a chainsaw shoved through her sternum. The mechanical teeth roared above the nails-on-a-chalkboard scream tearing from the counselor's throat. Donnie never liked horror movies. He turned his attention to his daughter, Kaleigh, watching the screen with deadpan detachment. The light from the TV threw a red shade over her face just as a synth note stabbed at Donnie's ears. Kaleigh faced another gruesome murder without a flinch. Donnie wondered what went through Kaleigh's mind when she saw things like this. He worried he would never understand the answer.

“Is this a good idea right now?” he asked.

Kaleigh trained a patient look on him.

“You know, considering...?”

Kaleigh’s jaw clenched as she took his meaning. Donnie dropped the topic and looked over his shoulder. His wife had turned on the overhead light in the kitchen. He saw her in a pair of scrubs making a sandwich at the counter, moving with the haste and precision of a firefighter responding to a midnight alarm. Donnie’s eyes crept back to the TV to find the camp counselor gushing corn-syrup blood from her chest.

“I’m going to get some root beer,” he said.

He scrambled out of the easy chair and into the kitchen. His wife kept her eyes on the automatic sandwich operation performed by her hands. All the women in Donnie’s family talked to people without looking at them. It was their craft passed down through the generations.

“I don’t hear any bonding in there,” she said.

Donnie opened the fridge and cast a timid glance back at Kaleigh. A green light turned her skin the color of newt flesh, or the contents of a bubbling cauldron.

“I’m trying, Morgan,” he hissed. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just meet her where she’s at.”

“*That’s* where she’s at,” Donnie said. He pointed at the living room, where the familiar chainsaw was turning a latex torso into mincemeat.

“So she’s into horror movies,” Morgan said. “She’s seventeen.”

“That’s still a baby! And are we sure she should be watching that stuff *now*, of all times?”

Morgan wrapped her sandwich in foil and juggled it, an apple, and a package of crackers, into a paper bag. She stopped moving just long enough to pat Donnie on his plump, bearded cheek.

“Kids deal with things on their own terms,” she said. “Besides, she barely knew the boy.”

“Yeah, but the way he died...”

“Kaleigh is mature enough to handle it.”

“*I’m* not even mature enough to handle it. I mean, torn in *half*?”

But Morgan was already sweeping toward the hall closet, an unstoppable cyclone of motherly motion. A jacket gusted into her arms. A purse whipped around her shoulder. Donnie watched her as if she were a sailboat leaving him stranded at the dock.

“Just talk to her,” Morgan said. “Who knows? You might end up liking... What are you watching, honey?”

“Chainsaw Slaughter Fest,” Kaleigh said.

“Chainsaw Slaughter Fest. How charming.”

Donnie blinked helplessly.

Morgan billowed past Kaleigh on her way to the front door, stooping to plant a kiss on her head. “Love you. Don’t make your dad throw up.”

“No promises,” Kaleigh said.

Morgan paused with her hand on the doorknob and pointed her face up the stairs.

“Alyssa, I’m going to work!”

A wall of dark curls appeared at the top of the staircase.

“Okay,” the curls shouted.

“You want to come down and join the living?” Morgan asked.

Alyssa sighed. A moment later she thudded down the staircase in her bare feet. She was a clear-eyed, clear-skinned brunette in leggings and a cardigan. Morgan placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Help however you can,” she murmured.

The front door flung open, unleashing Morgan’s boundless energy upon a neighborhood practically drowning in October. Dead leaves made a skittering orange confetti under her feet. The wind howled across the night sky where a sick-faced moon smiled madly at the houses down below, all glowing like rows of Jack-o-lanterns. The air smelled of bonfires and rubber trick-or-treat masks chomping at the bit to turn sleepy suburbia into a carnival of ghouls. Donnie hugged himself against a chill born from mildewing mausoleums. Morgan’s car started in the driveway, then coasted into werewolf country where bats blackened the skies. Alyssa let the door drift closed, sending the creatures of the night back to whence they came.

Donnie shivered. He turned his attention to Kaleigh, who was still glued to the TV, but with a smirk now tugging on the corner of her candy-apple lips. Her hair was the same color as

the mad moon. She wore black eyeliner and black nail polish that double-underlined how pale and blonde she was. She was born for wild Octobers, Donnie thought, nesting in belfries and riding broomsticks through smatterings of autumn clouds. She looked nothing like him, her father, a pudgy, black-haired man with hipster glasses and bear paws for hands. His days were spent frying fish tacos in a food truck and chopping cilantro into green oblivion, not gliding through pumpkin patches, or whatever Kaleigh did. At least he had Alyssa. She was no stranger to helping out in the food truck, or sacrificing a Saturday evening to humor her boring old parents. Donnie understood Alyssa. He wasn't convinced anyone understood Kaleigh.

“What’s this?” Alyssa asked, dropping down on the sofa beside her sister.

“Chainsaw Slaughter Fest.”

“And you’re watching it because...?”

“How else am I supposed to sublimate my primal bloodlust?”

“She says, clinging desperately to her two-dollar words.”

“She says, picturing her sister in the role of Hapless Victim #3.”

Donnie pouted at the spot where Morgan’s car used to be. He returned to his easy chair and cringed at a severed arm flopping on the TV screen.

“This looks ass fake,” Alyssa said.

“Hey, what did Mom say about swearing?” Donnie said.

“Let’s watch something else.”

Alyssa made a grab at the remote but Kaleigh sank her claws into her arm.

“Touch it and I march your Prada bag into the oven.”

“It’s Kaleigh’s turn to pick the movie,” Donnie said. “And she picked this.”

A cheerleader gurgled as her head rolled off.

“For some reason.”

“I didn’t ‘pick’ a movie,” Kaleigh said. “I just happened to be watching this when Mom sent you in here to bond with me.”

“She knows,” Alyssa said.

“Well, is there anything wrong with a father bonding with his daughter?” Donnie asked.  
“Or daughters, I guess.”

“There is if you’re only doing it because I’m ‘disturbed’ now.”

Alyssa gestured at the TV. “When were you ever not ‘disturbed’?”

“That’s not why,” Donnie said. “Your mom’s just a little worried.”

“Worried, Father dearest?” Kaleigh batted her moth-wing eyelashes. “Worried about what?”

“You know... About what being around death does to someone your age.”

“Wait a minute,” Alyssa said. “I was around it, too. I’m the one who...” She trailed off, catching a warning glare from Kaleigh. “Well, I was around it, too. Why isn’t Mom worried about *me*?”

“You weren’t as close to it as Kaleigh. You’re two grades below whatever-his-name-was.”

“Brian McCollum,” Kaleigh said, with a thimble’s worth of resentment souring her words. “And she never even spoke to the guy, did you, Alyssa?”

“It still affected me,” Alyssa said with a toss of her hair.

“Did it really?” Donnie rubbed the back of his head, lost somewhere between the monoliths of teenage melodrama and legitimate trauma response.

“Does she look traumatized to you?” Kaleigh asked.

Alyssa was currently filming Kaleigh’s side profile as lights from the TV painted her various hues of fire and brimstone.

“Now all my friends can see what you do with your time,” she said, just as a chainsaw separated a man’s spine from his hips. “Ew, that’s like what happened to Brian McCollum.”

“It’s nothing like what happened to Brian McCollum, patron saint of the vapid conformists, peace and pizza be upon him,” Kaleigh said. “Brian McCollum was *torn* in half, not cut. His guts wouldn’t have *fallen* out, they’d accordion between the two halves until enough tension severed them at their weakest point.”

“I think that’s enough horror movie for one day,” Donnie said, rising from his easy chair. He shut off the TV and turned on a table lamp. Kaleigh looked oddly out of place under the glow of a normal lightbulb, like a haunted house at noon. Donnie felt almost guilty for removing her from her Poe-and-Lovecraft element.

“Let’s do something else,” he said. “You know, as a family.”

Kaleigh and Alyssa looked at each other and burst out laughing. Donnie felt himself smile in spite of their ridicule. He liked watching his daughters share moments together. They reminded him of summer days spent blowing bubbles on the lawn and flagging down the ice cream truck so the girls could order popsicles in their sundresses. In some ways, they really did look like each other: the same way of sitting, of watching people from under their eyebrows, of looking like they knew something Dad didn’t and were tickled pink at the thought of it. Donnie suddenly felt like talking to Kaleigh for hours—days, even—until he understood her as well as Alyssa instinctually did in the recesses of her sister brain.

“He thinks we’re a normal family,” Kaleigh cackled.

Donnie’s shoulders slumped. Alyssa backhanded Kaleigh in the collar bone to silence her.

“We didn’t mean it, Dad,” she said. “What do you want to do?”

“Well,” Donnie said, “I guess whatever Kaleigh wants to do. We ruined her movie.”

“Anything?” A catlike look spread across Kaleigh’s face, one that always pawed its way into her features whenever she schemed.

“Within reason,” Donnie answered cautiously.

“I want to have a Halloween party.”

“Like, with friends?”

“No, like with you two.”



“What’s the catch?” Alyssa asked. Her eyes narrowed into suspicious sickles poised to cut Kaleigh’s legs out from under her. Kaleigh faced them as she faced all dangerous objects: without fear.

“We invite a very special guest,” she said, patting Alyssa on the cheek the way Morgan had patted Donnie in the kitchen. “Brian McCollum.”

There was silence, the kind that made clocks creep out of white noise and come ticking into the foreground.

“That was tasteless, even for you,” Alyssa said.

“Wait a minute,” Donnie said. “You aren’t joking, are you?”

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this,” Kaleigh said, devoid of the audible smirk that normally curled through her words.

“Brian McCollum,” Alyssa said, “is dead.”

“And next week,” Kaleigh said, mimicking her intonation, “is Halloween. If we’re ever going to talk to old Brian boy again, now’s the time.”

“Talk to him how?” Donnie asked. He didn’t like the look in Kaleigh’s eye. It reminded him of someone stepping on a spider and finding pleasure in the crunch.

“How else? We hold a séance.”

Stupid, Donnie thought. He was stupid to go along with this. A father with more backbone would have taken control of the situation, put his foot down, had the girls carve pumpkins or bob for apples. But Kaleigh had a way of withering his resolve. She was too old for grade-school party games. She wanted something more adult. A horrible apparition haunted Donnie, running its spindly fingers over his skull: Kaleigh is growing up and you barely know her. Soon she'll be off to college and you won't spend any more Halloweens together. You'll regret saying no to her. Give in. Join her little séance before she's gone. That voice prevailed over every logical thought in Donnie's head. It was fear. And what he feared more than spirits of the dead, more than tampering with forces beyond his ken, was that his daughter needed him, that this was some confused cry for help and Donnie never got the signal. But it was still stupid—loving, but stupid.

Kaleigh had dragged the round kitchen table into the center of the room and draped a dark cloth over it. She now pulled a definitely-not-trademarked “spirit board” out of the hall closet. Her lips pursed together to blow a layer of dust off its cover, conjuring up images of a sorceress taking an ancient tome off the shelf. Alyssa had fetched a number of candles at Kaleigh's request and was lighting them on the table. Kaleigh sat down in their sphere of darting, spellbinding light. Shadows peeked out from the corners of her face as though they were playing hide-and-seek in a pale, moon-drenched forest.

“Sit,” she said.

Donnie and Alyssa sat. The lights were off, melting everything beyond the glow of the candles into a formless tar pit where any number of skeletal nightmares could be lurking. A fell

wind sent the screen door moaning open and rattling closed. Donnie had meant to fix its latch weeks ago but, like many projects, it slipped away from him. Now, with candles all around and a spirit board in front of him, he couldn't help but hear voices in the moaning and rattling.

"Everyone join hands," Kaleigh said. She turned her palms up in a theatrical gesture. Her eyes darted from Alyssa to Donnie, catlike as ever and full of mischief. Alyssa took one hand with a sigh. Donnie swallowed and took the other.

"Is this necessary?" he asked.

"We need to form a circle," Kaleigh said with exaggerated patience, as though she were explaining colors to a three-year-old. "And when we finish, we need to *close* the circle." The mirth bled from her expression. "That's absolutely vital. Understand?"

"You're a real P.T. Barnum," Alyssa said.

"What happens if we don't close it?" Donnie asked, trying his best to disguise the tremor in his voice.

"Oh, you know, the usual: something dark and sinister will cross over from the other side and haunt us forever. That old song and dance."

"It's pretend, Dad," Alyssa said.

Donnie allowed himself a small chuckle of relief. Kaleigh squeezed his hand a little roughly.

"Let's not tempt fate."

Donnie gulped down a walnut in his throat. Kaleigh assumed a serious posture and shut her eyes.

“We open the door between life and the spirit world,” she chanted in slow, melodic tones. “We offer up our energies for you to harness. Come into the circle and speak to us.”

Donnie started to sweat. “Our energies? I don’t think we should offer anything...”

Kaleigh shushed her father. “Come, spirits, enter the ring of firelight. Give us a sign of your presence.”

One of the candles flickered. Donnie jerked back as though bitten by a viper.

“Did you see that?”

“The spirits are in this room.”

“Either that or Dad breathed too hard,” Alyssa said.

“Spirits, ignore this overly-made-up naysayer and come forward. We wish to speak to one of your number named Brian McCollum. Bring us Brian McCollum.”

The broken screen door whined open and held that position for several seconds. Donnie’s palms began to sweat into his daughters’ hands. He squinted at a flicker of movement on the rug beneath the door. Footprints? Or a trick of the shadows?

“Something has entered the house,” Kaleigh said.

Donnie didn't like her use of the word "something." He gawked at the rug as though he expected it to sprout centipede legs and scurry across the floor. The candles flickered again, all of them this time. Kaleigh seemed to feel them without opening her eyes.

"Brian, is that you? Have you come to speak with us?"

"He's fast," Alyssa said. "Must have been overnight delivery."

"He hasn't been dead long," Kaleigh said through her teeth. Then, addressing the air, "Pay no attention to her, Brian. We sense your presence in this room. Use our energies to communicate with us."

Donnie thought he felt a cobweb dance across his arm. Or maybe it was the gauze-like sensation of static electricity. Either way, he wanted to piston-fire himself out of his chair and call off the ceremony. There was still time to make popcorn balls. Thinking this, he saw that Kaleigh continued to sit with her eyes closed. Her dark eye makeup gave her the look of a death's head. At that exact moment, the air seemed to suck out of the room, as though a lid were closed on a coffin. Everything went still, even the darting candlelight. Donnie noticed for the first time in his life that candlelight made a noise, like curtains billowing in the wind. His attention had never been drawn to it before. But now that it had gone silent, it struck him as horribly abnormal, like seeing rain fall upward into the sky.

"He's here," Kaleigh announced. She released everyone's hands and placed her fingertips on the spirit board's heart-shaped planchette. She motioned for the others to follow suit. Alyssa's fingers touched the planchette with all the graceless annoyance of someone stamping paperwork. Donnie's followed after a long pause, quavering enough to rattle the whole board. Alyssa gave his knuckles a reassuring pat.

“It’s okay, Dad. She’s faking it.”

“See for yourself,” Kaleigh said. “Rest your fingers lightly on the planchette. Barely touch it, just enough to make the slightest contact. If you move it, the spirits will be *very* upset.”

“Will they boycott our Christmas party?” Alyssa asked.

Kaleigh ignored her. “Brian McCollum, give us a sign of your presence. Is that you contacting us?”

The planchette stirred. Like a finger wiggling on a corpse, it gave the slightest creak of movement.

“Kaleigh...”

“It’s not me.”

The planchette dragged itself a centimeter. Then an inch. Then two. Donnie’s skin blanched. The wooden pointer crossed the Q and the C and crept, spider-like, over to the “YES” sitting beside a smirking sun in the corner of the board. Fear played the xylophone on Donnie’s spine.

“I told you he was here,” Kaleigh said.

“You’re moving it,” said Alyssa.

“I think we’ve seen enough,” came Donnie’s quavering baritone. “How about we turn all the lights on and make some popcorn balls?”

“And leave Brian in suspense?” Kaleigh asked. “He came a very long way to talk to us, Dad. A *very* long way.”

“Except there isn’t a Brian McCollum,” Donnie said. “I mean, there was, but this is just a board game.”

The planchette performed a spasmodic jerk. Donnie snapped his mouth shut and stared at it. It drifted along the alphabet arranged in a double arch on the board, like a mourner going from tombstone to tombstone to find his lover’s grave.

“It’s spelling something,” Kaleigh said.

The planchette shambled to life in fits and starts. Donnie watched the girls’ knuckles for signs of muscle movement. Amazingly he found that one of Kaleigh’s hands wasn’t even touching the device. A numbness washed over him like a wave from a December sea. What if this was real? What had he gotten his daughters into?

Kaleigh followed the planchette with charged excitement. “M... U...”

The pointer accelerated, rocking from letter to letter like a head swaying on a broken neck. Donnie’s numbness turned to cold dread as a single word pieced itself together.

“R... D...E...”

The planchette stopped on the final letter. Everyone released the breaths they had been unconsciously holding. The candlelight sputtered, threatening to go out altogether, before surging in intensity, scaring away the shadows so there could be no mistaking the planchette’s message. The final letter was R.

“Murder?” Alyssa asked.

The three looked at each other. Donnie shook his head in a silent appeal not to ask the board anything else.

“Were you murdered, Brian?” Kaleigh asked.

The planchette tore over to the “YES” so quickly, it ripped itself out from under their fingers. Donnie gasped like a drowning man cresting the waves. He pushed his chair back but Kaleigh stayed him with a raise of her hand.

“Do you even need our power to move?” she asked.

The planchette stabbed at the “NO” in the opposite corner.

“There’s no way,” Donnie gibbered.

“Who murdered you?”

The planchette began to spell. Alyssa slapped her hand over it before it could move past the first two letters.

“I don’t know how you’re doing this, but stop it.”

“It isn’t me!” Kaleigh said.

“Put the board away,” Donnie said. “We’re done here.”

He stood up from the table and started blowing out candles.

“But we need to close the circle!” Kaleigh said.



Alyssa leaned forward and looked her in the eyes. “It’s over.” She followed Donnie’s lead, standing up and taking the board with her.

“I’m telling you, we need to close the circle!”

“I don’t know what that was, but we’re not messing with it anymore.”

“If we don’t close the circle...”

Something blew out the last candle. Donnie’s sense of time and place went with it. There was a strange dizzying sensation, a vertigo not brought on by anything in Donnie’s body. It came, rather, from something in his vision. Alyssa was off the ground—high off the ground, and kicking her legs. Donnie saw it but didn’t see it. Or rather, he saw it but didn’t comprehend. It was like watching tissue paper flush down a drain pipe. One minute Alyssa was dangling in the air, the next she flew up the staircase. Gone. Yanked away like footage of a parachute being rewound and disappearing back into its bag. Donnie had never seen the human body move like that. Funny, *was* it a human body?

He felt the empty space Alyssa occupied just moments ago. He thought of saying, Hey, Alyssa, did you see that? Weird thing for a body to do, isn’t it? But his words became dumb and his hand patted futilely at the emptiness. He heard Kaleigh hyperventilating through her clenched jaw and wondered if he had ever seen her scared before. Maybe he should be scared, too.

“Run,” Kaleigh seethed.

Donnie almost laughed. Alyssa had moved so *fast*. He had never seen anything like it—like a nightgown sucked into a jet engine.

Kaleigh's hand clamped around his wrist. He looked at it and then met his daughter's wide, tear-brimmed eyes. He understood. Run. Of course. Why hadn't he thought of that?

"Run!" Kaleigh repeated in a high scream.

The two broke into a sprint, Kaleigh in front, Donnie stumbling behind her. They crashed through the back door, past the broken screen that groaned as they left it behind. Into the black October they plunged, sucking down air tinged with the earthy smell of fallen leaves. The lunatic moon seemed to watch them from mere inches away. Its nightlight glow blanketed the yard. The grass under their feet was wet and matted, like trampling on millions of eyelashes. Kaleigh pulled her father toward the shed, which looked silent and dead in a world that had suddenly become all movement. She threw its wooden door open and shoved her father inside. When she closed it Donnie found himself in total, all-encompassing darkness.

He heard himself wheezing in the musty atmosphere. The shed stunk of gasoline and the oxidized tinge given off by metal tools. His breathing sounded wet and teary. Maybe he was crying. It was impossible to tell. Kaleigh's breath came in whimpers. And Alyssa... Up the stairs. Blink and she's gone.

"We have to get her," Donnie said, sounding distant. Then, with more conviction, "She's still in there."

"You saw what it did to her," Kaleigh said. Each breath was a stutter, a cold motor failing to start. "What can you do against it?"

"I can't leave her," Donnie said.

Kaleigh grabbed his arm, somehow finding it in the darkness. She has cat eyes, Donnie thought. She can see in the dark.

“I don’t want to be left here alone,” Kaleigh said.

The fiber in Donnie’s muscles weakened. Tension dropped its iron rungs from his backbone. His shoulders slumped. Tears flowed anew—he could feel them now. How much did Kaleigh mean to him? More than Alyssa? Was that a fair question? Was there even an Alyssa left?

“What happened?” Donnie asked in a broken sort of way.

“I have to tell you something,” Kaleigh said. She sounded so small and fragile in the dark. Donnie couldn’t leave her behind. She needed him. Popsicles and sundresses on the summer lawn. Still a little girl.

“I’m listening,” he rasped.

“I knew Brian McCullum better than you think,” Kaleigh said. “Something happened between us, something bad.”

Donnie nodded. Somehow he felt she could sense his nodding the way she had sensed the candles.

“I was walking home from school when he cornered me with his football cronies. He kept tugging on my sweater and asking if I needed to be anywhere. I told him to go beat off in the locker room. He didn’t like that. He knocked me down and I landed on my elbow. Then he called me dirty names while his friends egged him on. I found the word ‘tease’ painted on my locker the next day. Let’s just say his crew wasn’t too kind to me from then on.”

Donnie stared into the confined nothingness that filled the shed. He pictured Alyssa being sucked up the stairs again. Then he pictured Kaleigh in the dust with a scuffed elbow and the football team laughing at her. Why hadn't he been there? Why hadn't he been there for both of his daughters when they needed him?

"I didn't know," he said, half aloud, half to himself.

"I never told you," Kaleigh said.

"Why? Why didn't you tell me you were being bullied?"

"I guess the same reason I never told the neighbors, the dental hygienist, and the ice cream man. I didn't feel like you knew me well enough."

Donnie stood silent for a long time. In fact everything was silent. Even the screen door at the house had stopped its repetition of moan and rattle. If the wind blew, the windowless shed made it impossible to know. Donnie had nothing but his thoughts here.

"I *want* to know you," he said quietly.

"Even if I like horror movies?"

"Especially then."

Donnie felt Kaleigh wrap her arms around him. They remained in that position for a long time. How long, Donnie couldn't tell, but it felt like the longest moment he had ever spent with Kaleigh. Maybe it was. But he hoped there would be many more like this, maybe some that made this moment feel like the blink of an eye.

"Dad?" Kaleigh said. "Are you sure you want to know me?"

“Of course. I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

“Even if all of this was a hoax?”

The shed door swung open. Donnie shielded his eyes from the dim moonlight that seemed blinding after total darkness. Alyssa leaned against the doorframe looking pleased as punch. Donnie gasped and nearly tackled her.

“Oh, thank God,” he said. “Thank God, thank God.”

“Did it work?” Alyssa asked.

“Like a charm,” Kaleigh said. “Bonding achieved. I declare daddy daughter time a success.”

Donnie let go of Alyssa. He looked from one daughter to the other, feeling like his head was in his stomach and his feet were in the clouds. The daughters grinned back at him and led him out of the shed. One put her hand on his left shoulder and the other on the right.

“You were gone,” Donnie sputtered. “I saw you... Up the stairs...”

“Sorry, it needed to look authentic,” Alyssa said.

Donnie drove his heels into the damp earth. He and the two girls skidded to a stop. “What in the name of God happened here tonight?”

“Mom wanted us to get closer,” Kaleigh said, “so I found a way to do it.”

“It was too much, wasn’t it?” Alyssa asked. “I told you it would be too much.”

“What are you talking about?” Donnie asked, his voice becoming shrill and hysterical.

Kaleigh looked him calmly in the eyes. “Dad, we faked the whole séance. The planchette moving, the door opening, Alyssa getting pulled upstairs—all of it. We didn’t think you’d get the picture without some... unconventional methods.”

“We went too far, though,” Alyssa said. “We’re sorry.”

“We’re not *that* sorry. It worked, didn’t it?”

Donnie put up his hands. “No, no, I saw the spirit board move on its own. I saw Alyssa get zip-lined up the stairs. There’s no way you could have faked that.”

“Well,” Alyssa said, “it wasn’t exactly ‘fake’.”

“It just wasn’t Brian McCollum who did it,” Kaleigh said. “Come on, Dad. You don’t really believe in ghosts, do you?”

The back door opened without being touched. The lights turned on inside. The kitchen came alive like an animatronic in a theme park.

“You want some tea?” Kaleigh asked as a teapot floated past the window. “Let’s have some tea.”

“No, no,” Donnie gibbered. “How are you...?”

“Come on, Dad, witches don’t need to use their *hands* to move things.”

“Or to get rid of douchebag football players.”

Donnie stared at his daughters as if they were globs of amorphous ooze festering on the beach. A Jack-o-lantern gravitated over to Kaleigh and twirled on her index finger. Alyssa lifted

off the ground and silhouetted herself against the moon. Donnie dropped to his knees, watching her rise to the treetops.

“Alyssa, too?”

“You said you wanted to know us, right, Dad?” Kaleigh asked.

“Do me a favor,” Alyssa said, just a shadow against the stars. “Tell the football team to leave my sister alone next time.”

##