

“ECCRACE”

By

Nichole Currier

2117 33rd Rd. Apt. 3
New York, New York 11106
603-657-0566
ncurrier24@gmail.com

Chapter 1

Kelly laid in her bed, wishing she could fall asleep for a nice mid-day nap, but instead finding herself staring out the window at the colorful fall leaves as they danced together outside. She was, for once in a very long time, alone. She could hear the other eight kids of the house running around downstairs, but none of them came to bother her as they normally did. It was rare to find a moment of solitude in Flynn's Foster Home. She was eager to soak it in and enjoy the quiet for at least a few minutes.

However, no sooner had she closed her eyes than the sound of small footsteps could be heard bounding up the stairs. Kelly sighed and rubbed her slender hands over her tired face. She should have known the moment would be fleeting.

"Kelly!" a young voice called out. Kelly sat up slowly, swung her legs over her top bunk, and watched as her small roommate came running through the door, nearly falling over herself as she did, and headed straight for the bunk bed. Kelly rested her chin in her hand and looked down at a mess of wavy, carrot colored hair.

"How do you always have so much energy?" she asked.

"I was wondering where you went!" Casey exclaimed, ignoring the question. "Anna's looking for you because Meghan and Mia just got here and everyone's in the living room and you're really missing out because..." Kelly blocked out her ramblings as she slid off of her bunk, landing hard on the wooden floor. She took a seat on Casey's bed and reached underneath the wooden frame to pull out her old, tattered sneakers. The sneakers that had been through three hand-me-downs before her.

"Alright, slow down," she finally said once Casey had strayed completely off topic. Casey smiled, causing the freckles on her face to scrunch at the nose, and bounced on the balls of her feet as she watched Kelly put her shoes on.

"Just hurry up," she pleaded. "Everyone's waiting for you. It sounds like Anna has some exciting news. I'm not really sure what it is, but I think that it might have something to do with that book she was talking about from class. Or was it a movie? All I remember is that there was a dog and it—" Kelly stood up, putting one hand over Casey's mouth.

"Ready?" she asked. Even with the hand keeping her quiet, Casey nodded ecstatically and led the way downstairs.

It was always exciting when Meghan and Mia came to visit. Being a foster kid in small town New York meant that they were different from a lot of the other kids in their neighborhood. They were seen as outcasts in school and outside of school they were avoided by all the other children on their street. Rumors had gone around about the past children of the Flynn's Foster Home, many of whom seemed to take a liking to stealing and vandalizing other people's property. Parents quickly became wary of the foster children and often reprimanded their 'normal' kids from associating with anyone living there.

Most days, Kelly was only left with Anna and Casey for company. Sharing a room had made the three girls close, and it made school a bit easier knowing they had each other to rely on. While Kelly and Anna were in the same year, however, Casey had the difficulty of being three grades younger. Kelly was always worried about Casey being alone at school, wondering if bullies would start to target her, until the ten-year-old came across Meghan and Mia. Since they were only a grade above Casey, they had the same lunch period, as well as a few classes

together. As soon as they started school in their small town, they became extremely close with Casey. Now the twins spent more time at the foster house than they did at their own homes.

"It's about time you got downstairs," Anna called out as the two entered the living room. The lanky brunette was sitting cross legged on the couch, her arms reached behind her head as she tried to tie her long hair into a ponytail.

"I had to get my shoes on," Kelly sighed, falling onto the cushion beside her.

"How long does that take?" Mia teased. Kelly shook her head with a smile, when her eyes landed on a thin scar on the small girl's arm.

"Ouch, that looks like it hurt," she said, reaching out to be sure she didn't need a bandage. Mia glanced down at the mark, an irritated pink line that stood out against the contrast of her dark brown skin.

"You should have seen it yesterday," her sister spoke up. "It was bleeding and everything."

"Shush, Meghan," Mia said, pulling her arm back. "It's nothing, really." Kelly frowned, sensing from her tone that it wasn't actually nothing. It was no secret that the twins came from a rough home. Their parents were prone to fits of violence, leaving both girls with various bumps and bruises.

"Hey, so listen," Anna spoke up, trying hard to change the subject back to something lighter. "I found something in my locker today." Reaching into her back pocket, Anna pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. After taking a moment to flatten it out, she handed it over to Kelly.

"An invitation?" she asked.

"Oh, we got one of those too," Meghan spoke up. She, Mia, and Casey each pulled a similar invitation from their sweatshirt pockets.

"Wait a minute..." Reaching into the school backpack she'd left by the front door, Kelly produced a pink envelope with her name scrawled across the front. After tearing open the top, she revealed an identical invitation as well. After falling back against the couch again, she began looking at the piece of paper more carefully. "A sleepover," she read, then gave a snort of laughter. "Who would invite *us* to a sleepover?"

"There's no name or return address on it," Casey pointed out.

"But it's tonight at the haunted house down the street." Everyone looked up to see Anna smiling deviously. Everyone in town had heard stories of the supposedly haunted house on Oak Street. It had been vacant for decades and quickly became a spectacle for the school kids. Rumors were always being spread about the old man who used to live there.

"The haunted house is creepy," Meghan protested with a pout. "I don't want to spend the night there."

"Come on, it'll be fun," Anna said, sitting up straighter. Her eyes were alight with excitement from the thought of finally having an adventure. "We should go, all five of us." Kelly inspected the invitation more closely. It seemed generic enough, the outside read *Sleepover*, while the inside simply produced a location and a date. On the back was a single word written in beautiful cursive; *Mine*. Kelly wasn't sure what it meant, but she was amused. A smile started to form as she looked up at her friends.

"It would be fun," she said. She knew the invitation couldn't possibly be real. No one would be crazy enough to hold a sleep over at the haunted house, nor invite the five of them

for that matter, but curiosity got the better of her. She wanted to know who sent the invites, and what kind of trick they were planning for when they got there.

"If you're going I want to go," Casey exclaimed. "We'll be okay with all five of us there," she said pleadingly to Meghan. After a glance to her twin, Meghan shrugged and nodded her head.

"Okay, fine. Let's go," she added, though there was still a trace of anxiety on her face.

"Then I guess it's decided," Kelly said. "We'll meet at the haunted house at 8:30 tonight." With varying degrees of enthusiasm, the others nodded in agreement.



That night, the three girls dressed in dark clothing before sneaking silently through the foster house. "Just step exactly where we do," Kelly had whispered to Casey before leaving their bedroom. The little girl gave a slight nod, her eyes filled with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. While Kelly and Anna had snuck out numerous times in their past, Casey had never been invited. She'd done as told, though, and stepped lightly through the old, wooden hallways while hardly making a noise. Before long, the three had made it unnoticed to the front door.

"Alright, let's go. We're running late," Kelly whispered as she silently shut the door behind them. The three turned, running quickly down the sidewalk. Three blocks later, they could see Meghan and Mia waiting just across the street from the haunted house. Their eyes were wide as they looked up at the house, each obviously becoming more apprehensive by the moment.

"You ready?" Kelly asked as she came up behind them. Meghan jumped as Mia gave out a high pitched shriek.

"Don't *do* that!" Meghan swatted at Kelly as the older girl tried to suppress her laughter.

"It's not that scary," Anna reassured them. "Come on." She turned and led the way confidently across the street and up to the front porch of the house. The wood was old and creaked loudly as they stepped onto it, old leaves scattering over their shoes in the light wind. Mia yanked her windbreaker tighter around her small frame as Kelly pulled the invitation out of her pocket and looked it over. She couldn't help but notice how there were no other kids in attendance for the 'sleepover'. Not even a single light was on in the withering house, all the windows dark with fraying curtains pulled shut. Still, they were there and she was curious to see if anything awaited them inside. So she didn't suggest backing out. Instead, she shoved the piece of paper back into her pocket and took a deep breath.

"Alright," she muttered. "Let's try this out." Reaching up, she took the dented doorknob in her hand. It was stiff as she turned it slowly, squeaking as it went. Then, having to use her shoulder as the wooden frame had swollen from years of rain, she shoved the door open.

A blanket of dust fell on the girls as the hinges protested the slow arc the door was making to the back wall. It hit with a low thud, causing Casey to jump. Reaching out instinctively, she grasped onto Kelly's jacket, none of the other girls having moved a muscle. Everyone was too busy letting their eyes adjust to the pitch black room before them.

"Hello?" Kelly called out after a moment, not daring to step foot past the door jam. No one answered.

"This place is creepy," Casey whispered, half her face hidden in Kelly's side.

"Oh, come on. You can't chicken out now," Anna said, giving the small girl a light shove.

"I wasn't going to!" Casey yelled defensively with a stomp of her foot.

"Let's just go in," Kelly said, still staring into the house, intrigued. The other girls looked at her, Anna with a smirk and Casey with wide, uncertain eyes.

"Lead the way," Meghan muttered, staying safely behind the older girls.

Tightening her hands into fists to resist the urge of giving into her fear, Kelly took a step into the old home, each floor board signaling the sound of her presence as she went. The others followed close behind, glancing around the house in amazement.

The front foyer was large, with a grand staircase directly across from where they stood. On either side of the staircase was a door, and beside each door was what appeared to be a love seat couch. These, as well as every other piece of furniture in the room, were draped with white sheets. Everything was coated with a thick layer of dust that puffed up wherever someone stepped.

"This place—*achoo*—smells bad," Casey said, rubbing at her eyes and nose.

"It's a lot bigger inside," Mia said, her neck arched back as she looked up at the high ceiling and the beautiful chandelier that hung down. Even covered in dust and cobwebs, it was gorgeous. "They must have been rich!" she exclaimed, looking over at Kelly in excitement.

"Let's go up the stairs!" Meghan shouted, pointing at the staircase. The sight of how big the house was and how much there was to explore had erased the small girl's fear, leaving a giddy thrill in its place. Without waiting for an answer, she hopped up the first step, pausing momentarily to see if it would give way, and then bounded up to the second story. After exchanging glances and the hints of smiles, the other girls followed quickly behind her.

At the top of the stairs, the five girls found themselves in a long hall surrounded by closed rooms. The red rug was covered in faded patches and scattered burn holes. The once beautiful white walls were peeling, but that didn't lessen the excitement of the younger ones at all.

"Look at all these doors," Casey exclaimed, running up and down the hallway, running her fingers over the various rooms as she went. On either side of the girls stood numerous doors, all with paint that matched the rug, peeling just as badly as the walls were, and dusty golden knobs.

"A lot of them are locked," Mia spoke up, her hand hovering over the handle of a door farther down the hallway.

"This one isn't," Meghan called out, the smile evident in her voice. She glanced at Kelly, as if asking permission, before shoving the door open and stepping inside. Anna and Kelly followed close behind, Casey and Mia trailing in soon after, their voices mixing together with questions and laughter.

They stood inside a master bedroom with a grand bed and two oak side tables standing opposite them. The two windows were boarded shut with rusted nails. To the right side of the room loomed a large wooden dresser, its doors looking as though they hadn't been touched in years. Heat hung down in the room, making Kelly roll her shoulders in discomfort. Everything smelled of stale dust and mold. She didn't care for the room much, but Casey and the twins were still having fun, so she kept her mouth shut.

"Think there's anything in here?" Casey asked as she pulled one of the bedside drawers open, finding nothing more than cobwebs and a long dead cockroach. Anna stepped back in disgust.

"What *would* be in here?" Meghan asked, getting on her hands and knees to scan underneath the bed. "A dead body?" Finding nothing of interest, she put a hand down on the comforter to pull herself up and was rewarded with a cloud of dust that brought on a round of coughing from her and Casey.

"Not even a single hanger," Mia noted disappointedly from the dresser, both doors open wide in front of her.

"Sorry, guys," Kelly told them, crossing her arms and leaning back against a wall.

"It doesn't look like anyone's ever really lived here," Mia continued, giving the entire room a glance.

"Not for a while, anyway," Meghan agreed. "Just like the kids at school say."

"Let's go back to the hallway, then, and look in the other rooms," Anna offered. The younger ones looked up at her and smiled, being reminded that their adventure wasn't over yet.

"Yeah, maybe we missed another door that's unlocked," Meghan said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. She turned quickly and headed towards the door. Just as she reached the jam, about to set her foot on the other side, the hinges swung without warning and the wood smacked shut in her face.

Meghan stumbled back, screaming out in surprise and pain. Immediately, Kelly rushed to her, bending down and peeling her small fingers away to be sure she wasn't bleeding. A red patch was already growing on the little girl's forehead, but other than that she seemed to be alright.

"What was that?" Meghan demanded, pressing a hand to her sore head again. She looked up at Kelly, her eyes filled with both shock, pain, and the smallest hint of fear. Kelly rubbed her back, not wanting any of the kids to start panicking because of a simple door.

"It was probably just the wind," she assured the twelve-year-old. "One of us probably forgot to shut the front door." Meghan nodded lightly, though she still seemed doubtful. Kelly stood, pulling the small girl up behind her. "It's fine, we'll go back downstairs and just—"

"I'm not sure that's going to be possible," Anna interrupted. Everyone turned to see Anna by the door, her hand gripped tightly on the handle. "Locked," she informed them, her eyes meeting Kelly's in concern.

"How is that possible?" Mia asked, her voice reaching a higher pitch than usual.

"It's...it's an old house, it probably just got stuck," Kelly said, trying to force the door open. Mia came closer, her arm outstretched as if to try the door herself, then took a quick step back as a thought occurred to her.

"What if it's a ghost?" she asked, her brown eyes wide and frightful.

"It *is* a haunted house, what if it's the old man that used to live here?" Meghan asked. Mia shrieked, hiding her face in both hands.

"Don't say that! It can't be!" she cried.

"It's *not* a ghost," Kelly said loudly, bringing all eyes to her. "There's no such thing as ghosts. I don't think that story of the old man dying here is even true. It's just stuck, okay? We just have to..." Her sentence ran off as she stuck a foot up on the door jam and pulled hard one

last time. There was a loud crack as the handle popped off in her hand. The girls stared at it, not sure what to make of it for a moment. Kelly turned back to the others, her hands starting to sweat. "Right. See? Old house," she said, trying her best to keep everyone calm. She dropped the useless handle to the floor with a dull *thud*. The others stared at her, their eyes wide in unconvinced panic.

"How are we going to get out of here now? The windows are boarded up and there aren't any other doors," Casey said, her green eyes filling with tears. Kelly opened her mouth to reassure her, but Anna interrupted.

"Guys...look at this," she spoke up. Everyone turned to see her peering behind the empty wardrobe, her hands pressed flat against the side of it and her face held just between the wood and the wall. Kelly walked over and peered around her friend, standing on tip toes to see over Anna's head. In the dark space between the wardrobe and the wall, she could just barely make out the glint of a door knob.

"No way," she muttered in disbelief.

"Help me out with this," Anna said, her voice layered with excitement. She ran to the opposite side of the wardrobe and gripped the sides with her fingers. Following her lead, Kelly dug her feet into the floorboards and shoved at the wardrobe with all of her strength. Being empty, the wardrobe wasn't nearly as heavy as it could have been. Even still, the labor took a fair amount of effort from each girl and, with the room being as hot as it was, they were each wiping at their foreheads by the time they were finished. The exertion was hardly noticed, though, with the hidden door now in plain sight.

"I wonder why it was blocked," Anna said, staring up at the door before them. There was nothing special about it, in the sense that it looked like every other door had in the hallway. Still, the girls paused as they glanced between the dresser and the previously hidden doorway.

"Well, let's see what's in there," Mia said, glancing at her sister.

"You do it," Meghan told her, reaching up to touch her still red forehead. "I'm done with these doors." Mia reached out her small hand and grabbed the handle. Hesitating only a moment, she attempted to turn it. The door opened easily, swinging lazily in to what appeared to be another hallway. Mia glanced up at Kelly, unsure whether to be relieved or apprehensive. Kelly met eyes with Anna, hesitant to bring the others any further into the house. Anna gave a light shrug of uncertainty, though a thin smile still played on her lips.

"Well, it's better than being locked in this room," she said. Kelly nodded in agreement, then took a deep breath and led the others into the hidden hallway.

Unlike the first hall they had come upon, the walls of this hallway were bare of any doors except for a single one at the very end. The girls exchanged uneasy glances, but kept walking. Casey's small fingers wrapped tightly around Kelly's hand, her face trying to show bravery but falling short.

"I hope there's not, like, a dead body or something in that room," Meghan murmured, pointing to the door they were now headed towards.

"That's not funny anymore," Mia insisted, giving her sister a light shove as Casey stuck both fingers in her ears to resist hearing anymore of Meghan's antics. The twelve-year-old laughed, spitting out half hearted apologies as Kelly shot her a wary look. The idea had already

been stuck into each girl's mind, though, and they now stood at the foot of the door without any of them wanting to be the one to open it.

"There can't really be a dead body in there," Anna said after a moment. "Somebody would have found it before. I mean, don't dead bodies stink?"

"Gross," Casey muttered, wrinkling up her nose at the thought.

"She has a point, though," Kelly said. She looked the door up and down, taking in the white paint that seemed to contradict it from every other door they had seen so far. Then, deciding it would be better to just go in fast and get it over with, she swung the door open and stepped inside.

"What the hell...?" Anna whispered, following close behind Kelly as she walked to the center of the room. Plastered on one wall was a map. Various stars and red markers were drawn over locations all over the world, many also containing red strings that connected the pinpoints off to pictures and lists and other, more detailed maps. The only piece of furniture was a desk that sat directly beneath the only window which, unlike the others, was not boarded up. Papers, folders, and pictures were scattered across this as well.

"What is all of this?" Mia asked as she pushed some of the pages around on the desk.

"I have no idea." Kelly admitted as she examined the wall with the map. The red strings pulled off in every direction, creating a perplexing web. Faces of various people were linked to certain areas, while other areas were accompanied only by endless amounts of hand written notes.

"Kelly..." Anna spoke up from the other side of the map. She was staring up at the northern half of the United States, very close to where they lived. Taking a step closer, Kelly could see that there were numerous strings leading out from their state of New York. As she followed the strings off towards their accompanying notes and pictures, Kelly realized she knew the faces that she was looking at. Anna, Meghan, Mia, and Casey each had their picture on the wall. The locations were varied – Meghan through a classroom window, Anna walking down the sidewalk, Casey at soccer practice, Mia sitting in the library with an open book – but Kelly quickly realized that none of them were looking directly at the camera, as if the pictures had been taken without their knowledge. As she continued to look she found a picture of all of them, sitting in the living room of Flynn's foster home. Stapled to the bottom corner was a polaroid of Kelly, her face circled in red marker. Reaching up, she yanked the photo down and stared at it, her heart picking up speed in her chest.

"Guys," she said quietly, "I think we need to get out of here." Just as she finished the sentence, the door leading back towards the hallway slammed shut. Meghan shrieked, sending a few papers flying from the desk. No one made another sound as they watched the dust settle from the aggressive slam, so it was easy to hear the lock click into place and footsteps as they began walking away from them, down the hallway and back to the master bedroom. Each girl held their breath as they came to the realization that they were not alone.

"Something's really wrong," Anna said, giving Kelly a panicked look. None of the younger girls had seen their photos on the wall yet, and Kelly wasn't sure she wanted them to before they could get out alive.

"Was that the ghost?" Casey whimpered.

"Probably was," Mia moaned, covering her face with her hands.

“It wasn’t the ghost,” Kelly snapped. “But we need to leave.” Reaching up, Kelly ripped the remaining photos of her group off the wall, along with a few of the notes, and stuffed them into her pockets. Mia sniffed, holding back tears. Taking a step towards the desk, Kelly shoved the various papers and folders onto the floor so she could climb up and access the window. With one hard tug, it slid upwards and out of the way. Kelly stuck her head outside to see the long drop down from the second story. Glancing over to each side, she searched for anything that would help.

“What about the drainage pipe?” Meghan asked, sticking her head under Kelly’s arm. Kelly looked up and followed the drainage pipe with her eyes to where it ended at the corner of the roof and flowed all the way down to the ground. “It should support us,” Meghan said as she examined the metal brackets that held it in place.

“Better hope so, looks like it’s our only option,” Kelly said. Before long, Anna had shimmed her way through the window and onto the teetering pipe. Moving as quickly as she could without falling, she made her way down the side of the building and back onto the grass. Casey followed clumsily behind her, falling back on top of Anna once she was five feet from the ground. The twins had an easier time, having taken a similar escape route from their own home in the past. Then it was Kelly’s turn, as she slipped her feet through the open window and stretched out to grab onto the metal piping. It was cold in her fingers, and she hoped the sweat on her palms wouldn’t be enough to make her slip.

As she took her first step down the pipe, Kelly could hear the footsteps returning from down the hall. Her heart seized in her chest as she realized someone was coming back for them. Climbing as quickly as she could, she got to the bottom and grabbed Casey by the wrist. “They’re coming back. We need to run, *now*.” She looked up just long enough to see a silhouette in the window frame, but didn’t keep her eyes raised long enough to see more than that. The five girls crashed into the forest that laid just behind the house. Kelly glanced behind them as they ran, certain that the stranger would follow, but she saw nothing as they raced deeper and deeper into the trees.

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NCURRIER24@GMAIL.COM**