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BINDING
CIRCUMSTANCE

KELLEY
GRIFFIN

Champagne Book Group
Presents

Binding
Circumstance

By
Kelley Griffin



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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Dedication

To God for my abundant blessings. And to my mom, Nancy Lamberson—my first beta reader who encourages and inspires me daily by her loving example and witty comebacks. *I love you, Mama.* And to my other mama, Nancy Griffin—I miss you every day. Thank you for loving me so well for over 29 years.

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XO~
Kelley

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Chapter One

The numbers were wrong.

Leslie Carroll's thin fingers ached. She pressed them together, then grasped her frayed, yellow measuring tape and took a third stab. Her stomach fluttered, like always when faced with the prospect of handing over her well-worn ID—albeit fake—to a new HR department. Even if nobody else did, she knew who she was and what she'd done.

Her new name, “Leslie,” couldn’t erase the guilt of her twin sister’s death. Anne never slipped far from her mind.

But this was a different kind of nervous.

Leslie’s dream job hung in the balance. The one she’d longed for since she was young, but deep down, knew she didn’t deserve. Maybe this was why she struggled to read the measurements for the man’s waistline.

“You *have* done this before, haven’t you, Miss Carroll?” the infamous Mr. Miller crooned in perfect speech reminiscent of a Shakespearean actor. Condescension seeped through his shiny, plastic looking lips. His phony smile didn’t come close to touching the hint of eyeliner below his gray eyes.

“I’m a little nervous,” she admitted.

“Well, dear, you’d best thicken your skin. This industry eats young women like you for brunch.”

He was right. Designing costumes at Plantation Rock Pictures, the top film production house in Southern California, meant living the dream: sewing fabulous beaded gowns, attending red carpet events, and dressing A-list Hollywood celebrities. She’d even practiced her acceptance speech for Best Costume Designer in her bathroom mirror. But never did she imagine measuring an irritated, impatient executive designer as part of her final job interview.

“There, I’m finished.” Leslie printed the last measurement with slow and deliberate care.

Mr. Miller stuck out his hand. When she passed the paper to him, he wrapped long fingers along the edges of the pale-green notecard carefully, so they didn’t skim hers.

Did he have touching issues too?

He held the card high near his face as if he was nearsighted. But he was known for having a flair for the dramatic. She sucked in a breath and held it. His cold, gray gaze darted back and forth. She stood tall, feigning confidence, yet picked at her fingernails. Mr. Miller lowered the card and glared. Then he lowered it farther below his chin, and a smirk spread across his lips.

“You have my waistline wrong,” he stated plainly, as if he expected an excuse. “You’re off by a quarter of an inch.”

“Maybe you had a big brunch,” she deadpanned, hoping he had some small shred of good humor.

He didn’t.

“Miss Carroll, I don’t deal well with ‘errors’.” Tight-lipped, Mr. Miller tossed the note card on the orange suede couch, then snatched her favorite measuring tape from a side table, snapped it taut, and shot her a look. “I’ve had a twenty-nine-inch waist since before you were born. No amount of charm or ill-placed humor can change that fact.” Nimble fingers stretched the tape out to the side, then around his midriff.

Wonderful. The end of the shortest costume career in history. She shuffled from foot to foot, as Mr. Miller let out a quick, frustrated sigh, shook out the kinks in the tape and re-measured. His even-toned cheeks took on a pink hue. A growl told her he’d gotten a similar measurement to hers.

After a moment, his head snapped up as if he’d forgotten she was in the room. He rolled up her worn, yellow tape and tossed it in her direction. It fell short and landed on the plush white carpet between them.

“When you work for me, Miss Carroll, you’ll need to bring a *new* measuring tape,” he declared. Chin high, he pretended to pull a piece of lint off his pressed, white shirt, rather than meet her eyes again. “Now, make your way back to HR. Get a badge. Finish your paperwork.

Meet
me on the fourth floor when you’re finished.”

“Yes, sir.” Her voice cracked, but she cleared her throat.

After the door clicked shut, her eyes closed, and she bounced up and down—clapping like her Nate sometimes did when he saw trains. She did it. Landed her dream job. Things were finally looking up. New city, new job, new identity, and new start. Even Nate’s new special education teachers were making breakthroughs with him. He’d interacted and talked way more than at his last school.

Maybe this time, she’d plant roots and stay.

Leslie lifted her faithful measuring tape and held it. A slow smile unfolded. “I’d never get rid of you. You’re my lucky charm.” She wanted to squeal. The smile diminished as she looked around. Other than Nate, who rarely understood her, there was nobody left to tell.

Her father, The Judge, would’ve told her she should’ve haggled for a higher salary. That is, if he could remember his own name. What might her sister have said? Would Anne have told her she was proud? That at least one of them lived long enough to go after her dreams?

~ * ~

When Leslie trudged into the HR room, she felt like a dirty penny in a tray of new quarters. Several suited women snapped their

heads up and surveyed her, studying her face as if they knew she wasn't who her ID said. She gripped her badge along with a black pen clipped to a non-disclosure agreement and rushed toward an empty cube.

Gazing at the picture on her badge, Leslie smiled. She no longer resembled the selfish college girl who made bad decisions. For once, her skin had color, as if she'd sunbathed at the beach she was too chicken to go to. Her appetite had waned in recent weeks, so her white button-down and gray pants hung loose around her slim frame. Chestnut hair tucked into a smart bun and black rimmed glasses were supposed to make her look trustworthy and responsible. Bologna. She looked like a geeky librarian.

Leslie read through the lawyerly nondisclosure agreement. Since she'd be working on multimillion-dollar movies, they wouldn't want her leaking plotlines or cast secrets. That made sense. She flipped the papers over and signed—careful to use the correct name. New name for her new start.

As if the past never happened.

~ * ~

Clutching her purse and stocked costume pouch like life preservers, Leslie exited the elevator onto the fourth floor to a sea of stares. After a beat, as if someone blew a silent whistle, the jam-packed cubicles roared to life. Obviously, she was *not* who they expected.

The room resembled a deafening circus of jugglers. Papers flew, employees shoved personal items into open drawers, desktops were decluttered, and cell phones were stashed. Several people sat like ice sculptures, looking as if they had rods pasted to their backs. After their initial stares, nobody paid attention to her. Thank God. Her single goal this week was to fly under the radar.

Faint groans of frustration rumbled as the main receptionist whined for everyone to move faster into their places. Leslie stood, fascinated and open-mouthed. A heavysset, bleach-blonde with a bob haircut, strolled toward her. The woman's smile put Leslie to ease at once.

“Miss Carroll?”

Leslie nodded.

“My name is Dana. Dana Godwin. Mr. Miller wants you to shadow me this week.” Dana seemed to be the calmest person in the room.

The ding of the elevator caused the room to stop again, as if someone pushed the pause button on a remote. It didn't faze Dana. Air

in the room stopped circulating and thickened into stress soup. The noise level died at once. Leslie didn't risk turning or moving. Someone important entered the room behind her.

Mr. Miller strolled between her and Dana and stopped. Like a general inspecting his troops, he surveyed the rows of boxed workspaces. Thick, wavy hair, slicked back off his smooth face, made him seem taller. He held tight to both fashion and his youth. The pungent smell of his black leather shoulder bag and matching Italian shoes filled the air. His eyes were the same gray as his pin striped suit. Blinking twice to make sure, she swore he wore lip-gloss.

Without looking in their direction, he spoke in a low but eloquent voice. "Good morning, Mrs. Godwin, and hello again, Miss Carroll. I trust you completed your paperwork in HR?"

His change of attitude had Leslie struggling to find her voice. "Yes, sir."

He paused. "Well. We have you now, don't we?" A faint smile brushed his lips before he marched toward his glassed-in office. A few employees scurried to look busy as he passed.

Dana glanced at Leslie, rolled her eyes as she shook her head. She walked toward the receptionist's desk, then nodded toward Mr. Miller's office. "Your workspace is the last one on the right, in front of his office. Why don't you get set up, then meet me on the sixth floor? I'll be in workroom number three. Come find me when you're settled." Leslie nodded.

Dana scooted a heavy-looking box sitting on the reception desk toward her and let out a long sigh. "We've got to measure and fit over two hundred extras today. I'll introduce you to the other two on our team when you come up. Hope you ate breakfast; it promises to be a long day." The older woman placed an apologetic hand on Leslie's shoulder before she hoisted the box as if it were filled with air and walked toward the elevator.

Leslie hoped she didn't feel her flinch.

Chapter Two

“Workroom” was hardly a fitting description for this place. The ceiling stood twenty-five feet tall, and the space was ten times larger than Leslie’s new rental in Pomona, easy. The room resembled a football field of concrete. Rows of sewing machines and giant cutting tables lined two sides. Massive fabric bolts of all types and colors stood like guards in one corner. On the other side of the room, lines of actors waited their turn to be measured and fitted. Red curtains swung open and shut at breakneck speed as they tried on their costumes.

Toward the far wall were several large wooden doors, all closed. She spotted Dana next to one of the lines, waving. She jogged over. Dana’s wide grin said she appreciated Leslie’s enthusiasm.

“Pace yourself, dear,” Dana cautioned, blowing her bangs off her face. “This is our busiest day and it happens to be your first. I promise they won’t all be like this.” She glanced at Leslie’s pouch, then pointed. “Oh good, you have your tools. Perfect. Head over to that last fitting line. Angela and Frank, the other two assistants, will show you what to do.

Come find me in an hour—we’ll take a break, okay?” “Yes, ma’am,” Leslie responded.

Dana trotted off toward the sewing machines while Leslie headed for the far line, where the extras gawked at two people arguing. The sea of faces looked puzzled, as if they were watching a professional ping-pong match on roller skates.

“Angela, you never listen to me,” a man—she assumed it was Frank—whined, waving skinny arms. “I told you we’re only fitting good-looking men in this line. Women and fugly men need to wait in line five.” The tall, gangly man chuckled to himself at his own joke. The extra winced as Frank yanked his tape measure around the man’s waist.

“Frank, don’t be a prick,” Angela bellowed between a female actor’s legs as she knelt to measure her inseam, then sat back on her heels. “There’s no reason to make anybody go to another line. Regardless of your horrible taste.” She shot a nod of camaraderie to Frank’s current victim. “We’ve got their paperwork right here. Stop horning in on all the male extras. We’ll measure *everyone* in this line.”

Heavily tatted and sporting bleached, spiky hair, Angela stood, took a gulp of her drink and snapped her fingers. Like magic, the next

person in line ran to her. Without missing a beat, she knelt and measured the next extra's outer seam.

"Hey, guys." Leslie lowered her shoulders and wrung her hands. "Where do you want me?"

Frank turned and stared. Exasperation laced his face, while his gaze raked Leslie up and down. Manicured eyebrows knitted together while his mouth contorted, as if he tasted something sour.

Angela didn't bother turning around. Instead she shouted over her shoulder, "Run and grab us coffee, would you, honey?"

Was she yanking her chain or serious? Setting her jaw, Leslie opened her mouth to reply with her usual smart-ass comment, deliberated for half a second, then closed it. Rash decisions were the reason she was alone and on the run. The last thing she wanted was trouble on her first day. All the same, she shoved aside what appeared to be Frank's coffee, pulled out her tools, placed them on the table, and snapped her fingers high like Angela had. The next person in line came running to her.

Without glancing either Angela's or Frank's way, Leslie took the actor's measurements and wrote them down on the list along with name and employee ID number. Angela stopped moving and glanced over. She nodded. A slight grin crept up her lips. Frank stared for another beat, then apparently satisfied she knew what she was doing, he continued to measure.

Two hours and countless names, faces, and body types later, Leslie forgot to find Dana. Even worse, she needed a bathroom. Now. Grabbing her bag, she tapped Frank and told him she'd be right back. He waved her off like a gnat.

Shuffling through the masses of extras and costume assistants, she came upon a row of drafting tables covered in drawings. Seated were costume illustrators sketching and consulting with one another. She squinted to catch a glimpse of the mock-ups but couldn't see that far.

As a peon, she wasn't told much. She didn't know what type of film, what costumes were to be made, or even the names of the main actors. Talk among the extras told her it was a knight-in-shining-armor type. She spotted Dana waving over the chaos, near a row of glassed offices.

"I'm so sorry I didn't stop earlier and come find you, dear," Dana called out over the noise. "This might be our biggest project yet. How's it going over there?" she asked, yet looked away, distracted.

“It’s...going well,” Leslie fibbed, leaning in so Dana could hear over the noise. “It’d be better if you pointed the way to the restrooms?” “Oh, dear, I didn’t tell you where the bathrooms were? Forgive me.” Dana stood on her toes like a prairie dog and pointed toward the other side of the room. “Beyond that last dressing room on the left. I’ll grab us something to drink. Tea okay with you?”

“Yes, ma’am—thank you.”

Once Leslie navigated the sea of people and made it to the other side of the room, she found only one locked door with the word “storage” stenciled in red. She backtracked a few feet and examined the space. With nobody around to direct her, she hurried down the long row of doors, searching for a sign. No bathroom sign anywhere. Her bladder was now screaming for having had a second cup of coffee.

Had to find a bathroom. Fast. Her head swiveled back and forth as she reversed, searching in the direction Dana pointed. She looked like a lost tourist at Disneyland. She’d misunderstood. Maybe Dana meant the last door on the right. Leslie tried the handle. It turned, so she pushed. The door was heavy, like shoving a cement-block house. Grunting, she dug in with her feet and thrust with her whole body. As soon as it swung open, she regretted not paying closer attention to Dana’s instructions.

Standing a few feet inside the room, wearing only low-slung, faded blue jeans, no shirt, and resembling a Calvin Klein ad in Times Square, was *the* Charles Erickson.

He was only the hottest male actor of the year. Somehow, he seemed taller in real life. Had to be around five eleven. His iconic sandy blond hair was not perfect like on screen, but messy. And his deep blue eyes were the color of the sea next to a tropical island. Rounded, muscular shoulders contrasted with his sharp jawline, which, she noticed too late, was set in anger. He stared like she had three heads.

When their eyes met, he roared, “Hey! This is a closed dressing room!”

The momentum from pushing the door catapulted Leslie, with zero grace, a few steps inside the room. Then, the stupid door clicked closed on its own. When her mind caught up with her body, she wanted to crawl inside a hole. The command from her brain to move her legs and close her gaping mouth was blissfully ignored.

Finding her voice, she rattled out a quick apology, walking backward toward the door. One hand fumbled around behind her to find the doorknob to escape.

“I-I’m so sorry. I’m with the costume department—my first day.

I was trying to find the—” *Bam!*

Bam! Bam!

Leslie yelped, covering her mouth as the large door shook.

“Charlie! Are you in there?” An angry voice yelled through the door.

Charles Erickson took two quick, athletic steps toward Leslie. Her breath caught. His famous face was inches from hers. When he stooped to speak, minty breath tickled her cheek.

One arm held out, he whispered, “Hurry, pull your stuff out, and measure me. Maybe she’ll get the hint and leave.” *Breathe, Leslie.*

Minty air swirled around her face in slow motion. He stood too close. By normal-people standards, the distance was fine, but not by hers. He’d invaded her bubble. And yet, her brain didn’t register panic. No visions, no smell of burnt flesh, and no cold sweat. Definitely not normal. Hell, she must be in shock.

She couldn’t think, let alone understand what this beautiful man was saying. Her mind sputtered. An impatient blue gaze darted from her to the door and back again. What did he want? Whatever it was, she was in—if only she could make herself move.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, stop looking at me like that. Grab your bag,” he ordered.

His tone snapped her back into reality. Moving back to give herself space to breathe, she unzipped her costume bag and pulled out her tools. As she measured the length of his arm, the door flung open.

Christine Langford waltzed into the room with an air of self-importance rivaling the Queen of England. She was every woman’s run-of-the-mill nightmare. Besides being a famous leading lady in numerous box office hits and the daughter of two other world-famous actors, she was stunning. Her body looked like a supermodel’s—tall and thin with her blonde locks falling in classic waves a little past her shoulders.

The actress was picture perfect in every way, from her expertly painted toes to her flawlessly manicured eyebrows. Her features were small for one so tall, but her skin glowed as if tiny lamps were placed strategically to shine flattering light on specific areas of her face. The woman was maddening to behold, even up close. She eyed Leslie, stalking around her like she was a pile of poop. Then she turned her anger on Mr. Erickson.

“So what *exactly* did that last text mean? Are you breaking up with me? Is that it—one *tiny* mistake and I’m out?” She slithered close, toe to toe with him. Her face, pink and contorted, was inches from his.

Tension crackled in the air between them. His body grew rigid. Leslie wanted to run. Nobody should witness this private moment between these two famous people.

She knelt and rushed through the rest of the measurements. Someone would need these, she was sure. If not, she'd frame them on her wall at home. But right now, she had to finish. And escape.

As if he could read her mind, Mr. Erickson shot down a look of warning as if to say *stay put*, then turned to Christine. His voice was smooth and deep. Quiet, yet menacing. "I meant what I said, Chris. I'm done. You think it was a 'tiny' mistake? That's your problem."

Christine stepped back and bent to pick a magazine off the coffee table. She thumbed through it casually as she shot back, "Oh, get over yourself, Charlie. Everybody's done it. I'm sure this girl here has done it." She motioned to Leslie as she emphasized the word *girl*.

Leslie glanced up as Mr. Erickson scowled toward her as if he was angry with her too. Then, in an instant, his eyes softened and held hers. He surveyed her. A curious look crossed his face. His lips upturned slightly. It was as if he hadn't fully seen her until now. Heat rose up her neck. Caught in his stare, she broke the trance and stared down at her fingers.

When Christine cleared her throat, both their heads jerked back toward her. Regaining his irritation, he stepped toward Christine, lowering his voice. "Screwing your trainer isn't something *everyone* does, and it's not a 'tiny' mistake. I want you and your crap out of my house. I'll stay in a hotel tonight. I'm done."

She spun around and stomped back toward him. "Oh, no sir, we are not done!" Her bellowing, angry voice startled Leslie. "*You* want to break up with *me*? I'm Christine-freaking-Langford, buddy. I was getting big money acting jobs when you were still scraping by on commercials! Your pretty face has gotten you far, Charlie, but it was dating me that got you this gig, and you know it."

She paced in front of him like a caged lion, flailing sculpted arms.

"I'm not doing this now," Charlie said through gritted teeth. He eyed Leslie.

"What?" Christine glared at her but spoke to him. "You don't want to do this in front of the *help*? That's your problem, Charlie. Too worried about what the little people think of you. The craft service people and the mousy seamstress might think you're a bad guy. You're pathetic, you know that?"

She rolled her eyes, flung the magazine back on the table, then stomped toward the door. When her hand hit the doorknob, she turned. “That humble, southern boy thing doesn’t work with me, Charlie. You’re just as entitled as the rest of us.” Then she flashed a devilish grin. “And guess what...you’ll call me. You always do.”

Christine stomped out, slamming the door behind her.

Mousy? Wait. Bitch was talking about me?

Leslie’s thighs were on fire. Crouched during Christine’s tirade, Leslie pretended to write his already copied measurements. The muscles in her arms were stiff too. When she stood, her legs jellied, which was in complete contrast to her jaw, now clamped shut. The snobby actress made her feel small. Only one other time in her life had she wanted to pummel another human until they bled.

Unfortunately, her tear ducts and pissed-off-glands were tied together. She had to flee from that room before any of them fell. Away from him. Her face splotched hot. Without looking in his direction, she chucked her measuring tape along with his measurements into her bag.

Charlie let out a long sigh, pulled a T-shirt down over his head, and said to himself, “Good riddance.”

Leslie slung her bag over her shoulder and bolted toward the exit. As she turned the handle and yanked on the heavy door, Charlie called out, “Oh, hey...uh, miss? I didn’t catch your name.”

“Mousy!” she yelled, glaring back as she stormed out of the room. She didn’t care if he thought she was rude. She wished the door would slam shut like before to help make her point, but this time, the hinges caught, and it closed at a snail’s pace. Figured. Charlie strode toward her. To make herself feel better, she added, “Arrogant, pompous windbag actor.”

As she trotted the length of the hallway leading away from what she now knew were private dressing rooms, her ears filled with the welcome hum of machinery. Her eyes stung with pointless tears while her bladder threatened to release. A tiny bathroom sign hidden by an open door emerged. She glared at it.

Charlie yelled in her direction, “I need your name!” She ignored the actor and rushed into the bathroom.

When Leslie emerged, her anger remained, although most of it was aimed at herself. She’d let Christine’s words get under her skin. Truth was, she had become mousy. In high school, she’d been headstrong, bold, and daring. Then in college, thanks to unwise

decisions, unspeakable things happened. Because of those things, she'd become paranoid and cautious. If she was being honest, more than a little mousy.

That was the next item on her bucket list to change.

As she walked back toward the line, the drone of machines had lessened.

Frank's skinny arms flailed around. He looked like a chicken fighting a snake. He spoke to a man, but because of the crowd gathered, the back of his head was the only visible body part. Angela too, appeared wild-eyed and pointing in her direction. Coffee churned in Leslie's stomach. The crowd turned to stare as she trotted up.

Mr. Miller stood like ice. His eyes narrowed. A hush came over the crowd of extras. Folding his arms, he glared.

Great. What now?

She swallowed hard. Mr. Miller cleared his throat and grinned like a cat. Slowly, as if he had nowhere to be, he sauntered toward his prey, ready to pounce. "Miss Carroll," he said, steepling his fingers, "how pleasant of you to join us. Did you have a relaxing break?"

She opened her mouth to explain. He held one finger in the air to silence her, then circled like a shark claiming its lunch. "Did you get autographs from anyone famous? Is that why you're here, dear—to attract an actor? I hired you to do a job, not to *fraternize* with the famed." The thirty or so extras gaped with delight as the torture unfolded. Frank's face was lined with pretend sympathy yet smug, while Angela's seemed more humbled. Blood drained slowly from Leslie's face, and her fists balled. *Damn*. Her only crime was not finding the bathroom. It wasn't as if she sought out the crazy.

Mr. Miller circled one last time. He strutted a few feet from her, head cocked sideways. A faint smile drifted across his lips. Enjoying his assault, he resumed, "Miss Carroll, please share with the group precisely where you went for *an hour* and what you were doing?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but everything she wanted to say, sounded crazy. Then it hit her. Leslie cleared her throat and forced a smile. "Mr. Miller, I'd love to tell you where I've been, but, you see, I signed a non-disclosure agreement. I'm sure you'll understand, the actors I ran into would appreciate my discretion."

He reeled. Anger rolled off his skin like fog. His nostrils flared as he stomped back toward her. His face was inches from hers. "I had such high hopes for you, Miss Carroll. You came with such

recommendation. Now I know you are not a team player, but someone who enjoys the spotlight. I'm afraid, I am going to have to ask you—"

Gasps from the crowd rang out before he finished. She knew. Knew someone walked up and stood behind her. Normal range, but again, too close for her.

"Mr. Miller?" Charlie's familiar voice boomed.

Her back straightened as if someone poked her. Perhaps it was her imagination, but the warmth from his body radiated through the back of her thin shirt. Or she was having a hot flash twenty years too early.

His signature cologne, designed by someone else but stamped with his name, filled the air. A body-awakening musk mixed with a fresh rain. She shuddered. Instinct caused her to whirl around and step to the side, gaining a foot of distance between them. As she did, their eyes locked. Another chill racked her body. If she was lucky, he didn't notice.

One quick look at Charlie's head cocked to the side and the question in his eyes—he'd noticed.

Mr. Miller's demeanor and voice changed, as if someone flipped a switch on his back. "Mr. Erickson, what a pleasure! To what do we owe this visit? Oh, I remember, you were to be measured today, weren't you? Let me get my top assistant, Dana, and we will get that underway right now."

He brushed past Leslie, shooting daggers, when Charlie stopped him.

"Mr. Miller, I've already been fitted by this young lady here." He moved toward her, holding out an arm like an invitation for a side hug.

Great. He was a hugger. When she mirrored his movement, only backward, she crossed her arms and shot him an apologetic nod. Questions arose again in his eyes. But this time, a sign of understanding accompanied it.

Charlie shoved his hands into his pockets and examined her yet spoke to Mr. Miller. "She saved me time and embarrassment today." Charlie's gaze darted from the gawking crowd to Mr. Miller's aggressive stance. Then he added, "I hope she was being commended for her efforts, rather than reprimanded."

Charlie slid a long look at Mr. Miller.

Frank gaped, star struck, while Angela's stare switched from the famous actor to Leslie and back.

Charlie turned toward her. “I didn’t realize—wait, did you say today is your first day?” He shook Mr. Miller’s hand. “Nice catch. She’s an excellent hire.”

Mr. Miller stammered, “Why...thank you, Mr. Erickson. That is generous of you. So Leslie measured you already?” Confusion laced his voice.

“Leslie,” Charlie repeated her name.

His slow, smooth voice rumbled with a touch of his southern drawl. Nothing could stop the flaming in her cheeks. Heat spread all the way to her ears. She wanted to disappear under the concrete floor. Her mind logged and registered all the exits. An old survival habit she couldn’t break.

Fidgeting, she moved a baby-step farther out of his reach. He’d already made her shudder and his mind-numbing scent mixed with his unwavering stare had her terrified he’d touch her, and yet wanting him to at the same time.

Yes, she was aware a costume professional by design must touch people. But it wasn’t her touching others that bothered her. It was not having control of someone else touching her. As long as other people stayed in their bubble, she was fine. But somehow, Charlie seemed unaware of the bubble rule.

“Yes, Leslie did an amazing job of putting up with my shenanigans.” He turned toward Mr. Miller. “Could I have a private word?”

Mr. Miller puffed up like a peacock. “Me? Well, of course, you can, Mr. Erickson.”

Chin raised a notch, he walked a few feet away from the crowd for their chat. When he returned, he waved his hand in dismissal of the crowd. Frank shrugged and turned. Angela actually smiled toward Leslie. She beamed back. They’d not be getting the better of her today.

Mr. Miller turned. His normal intimidating presence softened. “Miss Carroll, I owe you an apology. It was my understanding you’d gone missing.” He glared over at Frank and exhaled. “I should have considered the source. I had no idea you were recording measurements. Will you please accept my request for forgiveness?”

“Of course, sir.”

She offered her hand. Mr. Miller shook it as if it might bite him. Letting go, he raised one perfect eyebrow and added, “Interesting first day, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes, sir.” She exhaled, deeply grateful to still have a job.

Straightening his suit jacket, he reverted to his more formal speech. “Mr. Erickson requested a private word with you as well. When you are finished, I would like for you to find Mrs. Godwin again and speak to her about your next assignment. That will be all, Miss Carroll.” “Of course, sir.”

What does he want now? Leslie made her way from the crowd toward Charlie. He leaned against the edge of a drafting table. Strong arms were folded across his chest, his golden hair still messy, and his legs stretched out. He surveyed her as she came toward him, his eyes questioning, as if figuring out a puzzle. His I-told-you-so smile was enough to make anyone swoon, but she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and pressed her eyebrows together as she neared him.

He chuckled. Then in a low, sexy voice he said, “There she is. My elusive friend, Mousy—I mean Leslie.” “Mr.

Erickson.” She nodded.

“Charlie,” he stated, looking her dead in the eyes.

This was a strong-willed chess match she was determined to win. “*Mr. Erickson*—was there something you needed from me?”

“Not a fan, I take it?”

“Fan of what?”

“Me.”

She shrugged. “I guess so, why?”

He mimicked her shrug. “Just wondering. I know you’re not a fan of being touched.”

He’d nailed her in five seconds flat. Her hackles rose. “Did you need something?”

“You’re a mystery, that’s all. Most people in this town fight to stand next to an actor, name drop, snap pictures, you know the whole not-real fame thing.” He slid her a curious look. “But not you. It’s refreshing.”

She nodded, then raised her eyebrows as if to say, *your point?*

His smile faded, then rebounded as he mouthed the word “lunch.”

Her eyes narrowed. She cocked her head to the side as she placed both hands on her hips. “You expect me to fetch your lunch?”

He pushed off the table and took a cautious step toward her. Both hands raised in surrender, he looked hurt. “No, I want to *take* you to lunch. You know, for being discreet and not telling the world about the arrogant, pompous, windbag actor and his lunatic ex-girlfriend.”

She bit her lip. She wanted to full-out cackle. An unstoppable grin fought its way through. It radiated across her lips, erupting into giggles she had zero hope of controlling. He lowered his arms. His warm eyes danced with laughter along with her.

“I guess I should apologize for the pompous-windbag comment, eh?”

“No way,” he said. “Besides, it was cute.”

He examined her—too closely. The heat in his eyes caused warning bells to clang in her mind. Her laughter faded fast.

Clearing his throat, he continued, “Please let me take you to lunch. Come on, *Slim*, you gotta be hungry.” His boyish grin made her smile. “What do you say? They make a mean salad at the Canteen downstairs.”

Frank watched them with a mixture of respect and jealousy in his eyes. Perfect. Obviously, he was a fan of Charlie’s. Charlie didn’t notice. In fact, he didn’t seem to notice anything in the room but her. A few short years ago, she would’ve jumped at the chance to go to lunch with a famous actor.

Not now.

Shaking her head, she backed up. “Sorry. I just can’t. We’re slammed. Thanks anyway.” She turned on her heels toward the sea of human mannequins.

“Hey, wait.”

She turned back as he stepped close.

“I’m sorry you had to listen to all that—you know, before with Christine. She’s such a…” The struggle between being honest and being kind washed over his face. Charlie tilted his head up as if his answer hung in the rafters. He gave the impression he was searching for the vaguest, yet most correct word in the English language.

“Bitch?” Leslie offered, her lips curved upward.

“Yeah. That’s probably the best one.”

His wholesome laugh softened his jawline and lit up his eyes. She didn’t want to look away. He didn’t seem so intimidating or so famous anymore.

Charlie bent toward her. “Listen, can I buy you coffee and a salad to make it up to you? Please?”

She allowed no one except Nate and her father to touch her or be in her space. Charlie had weaseled his body closer to hers. Back inside her bubble. *Breathe*. Tiny beads of sweat trickled around her temple. He was only being polite, she reminded her brain.

“No thanks, I’m more of a peanut butter and jelly type of girl anyway.” Leslie backed away, winning and grinning. She spotted Dana waving from the other side of the room. “*Mr. Erickson*, I gotta go.” Walking away, she sensed a gaze on her rear. Something about him staring both excited and terrified her.

“Leslie?” he yelled.

She stopped in her tracks and turned, hating how it thrilled her when he called to her. Turning on his Hollywood charm, he declared, “It’s Charlie—and I *will* see you around.”

Chapter Three

He was dreaming.

Couldn’t have been her. Everything in his meticulous, analytical mind told him the girl in the market was *her*. Her cropped cut, shiny and brown, made her look different. The dark didn’t suit her. He wanted the strawberry blonde locks, long like he remembered from the night they met.

She recognized him too; her beautiful dark pools widened when she noticed him. But she fled. Why? Why did she run out of the market? Weren’t there conversations they needed to have? Like, why she left him in the first place?

He drove to his home, giddy with a renewed sense of purpose. She was alive. He’d show everyone. He could keep a girl like that. Superior. Out of all the ones he’d taken and played with, she was distinct. Gentle and fresh. Innocent. Not the usual pub whore he gravitated toward.

He’d resume his internet search tonight with a bottle of wine to celebrate. He’d bought a few more unauthorized database searches on the black market using a pseudonym. This time, he’d find her if it killed him. Then he’d remind her why she couldn’t live without him.

When he got his hands on her this time, he’d make sure she never left him again.

~~~End of Sample~~~

To continue reading Binding Circumstance, please follow the link below:

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## About the Author

Kelley Griffin is a closet romantic suspense author, teacher, mom to five sons, wife to a Marine, and southerner by common law. GO VOLS! She's blessed to be surrounded by testosterone, laughter, and family every day. When her characters fall, embarrass themselves or bumble into a scene, you know it's something she's either experienced firsthand or accidentally caused.

Kelley loves to hear from readers. You can find and connect with her at the links below.

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