THIS WICKED FATE

Also by Kalynn Bayron

Cinderella Is Dead

This Poison Heart

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KALYNN BAYRON

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CHAPTER 1

Chrysanthemum sinense. Common name, mum.

White mums symbolized grief, death, bottomless unending sorrow. The house at 307 Old Post Road was festooned with them. They twisted themselves around the exterior like a cocoon. Tendrils of mulberry purple bougainvillea writhed like snakes, intertwining with arms of Devil's Pet, crimson thorns bared like teeth, leaves so deep purple as to be black. Inside, rumbling groans from the wooden frame protesting the worried embrace of the foliage echoed through the darkened halls. The plants had come to shelter me from the agony of grief. But that was like holding back the tide—pointless and, ultimately, impossible.

Mom was dead and the goddess Hecate herself was holding her somewhere in the underworld for one full cycle of the moon. I could get her back but only if I could do the thing that had never been done—bring the six pieces of the Absyrtus Heart back together. It was an impossible task. At least it had felt impossible until I walked in on the scene unfolding in the front room.

Circe, my birth mother's sister, a relative I'd thought to

be dead until that very moment, stood in front of me like a ghost. But she wasn't spectral, she was living, breathing, and full of confusion if the pained expression on her face was any indication of what she was feeling inside. Tears clouded my vision and made a hazy outline of her frame.

I couldn't make sense of her. She looked like me—same deep brown skin, dark brown eyes; she even wore a pair of oversized glasses like me. I hadn't been in the presence of someone I was related to by blood since I was a toddler, and I had no clear memory of that time anyway.

Circe's gaze swept over me and her lips parted then closed again, like she was struggling to find the right words. "You're not supposed to be here," she said, her voice choked with emotion. "How—why—I don't understand. What is going on here?"

Dr. Grant, the head of Rhinebeck's Public Safety department, stepped forward and straightened out her blazer. She spoke gently to Circe, as if she was worried about how she'd react. "We knew something wasn't right but we didn't know exactly what. I've been here trying to piece it all together."

Circe bristled, like Dr. Grant's voice irritated every fiber of her being. She didn't turn to face her but instead kept her eyes locked on me.

Mo put her arm firmly around my shoulder. "I think we need some introductions."

Circe glanced at Mo and her expression softened immediately. "Of course. I'm sorry—I—I'm Circe Colchis. That's Persephone Colchis." She gestured to the tall woman with the braids next to Marie, and her—well I still wasn't sure what Nyx's title might be, but "bodyguard" seemed like the right thing.

Persephone.

That was a name I knew, and even in the midst of a million complicated feelings my mouth opened into a little o.

Circe blinked a few times and took a deep breath. "Not *that* Persephone." She smiled a little, but it was all nerves. "She's your—" She stopped herself. "She's a distant relative."

"This is my mom, Angie," I said, gripping Mo around the waist. "I'm Briseis Greene."

"You are," Circe almost sighed. "You really are. Briseis. Standing right here in front of me." She opened her mouth then closed it. Words seemed to fail her.

I glanced at the two padlocked cages sitting in the front entryway. The pulse emanating from them rattled me, literally. I could feel the slow steady rhythm reverberating in my bones. "You have other pieces of the Heart? How many? Two?"

Circe nodded. I tallied up the pieces in their various forms. We had the Living Elixir, the two new pieces in their cages, and we had Marie, who had been transformed by the Heart's power. I didn't know if that counted anymore, but that's where we were at, and that only gave us four pieces in total. We needed all six if we had any hope of bringing my mom back from whatever in-between place Hecate was holding her in.

Circe turned to Dr. Grant. "I think you should leave."

Dr. Grant shook her head.

"She's been helping us," I said.

"Helping?" Circe asked. She took a step toward Dr. Grant. "Just how have you been helping, Khadijah?"

Dr. Grant patted the air in front of her. "Circe, please. I have been busting my ass to figure out what was happening here.

I knew there was no way you could be involved, but I couldn't put it together until it was too late."

Circe turned away from her, her eyes brimming with angry tears.

"Please don't shut me out again," Dr. Grant said. Her tone was pleading, like her heart was breaking. "You know I tried to help Selene. I'd give anything to bring her back to you."

"You got one more time to say her name in front of me," Circe warned with a kind of sharpness in her tone that sent a stab of fear through me. This woman was not to be messed with. "I'm not saying we won't speak, but it's not gonna be right now and it's not gonna be with you pretending you've been doing me a favor. I need you to leave."

Dr. Grant nodded and slowly edged past Circe. She put her hand on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Briseis. But if anybody can help you right now, it's Circe." She nodded at Mo, then left without another word.

We stood in silence for a moment as Dr. Grant's car pulled out of the driveway.

"Khadijah said someone came after you," Circe said. "She said you showed up here under the impression that I wanted you to come."

Her voice set off something deep in my memory, something I couldn't quite retrieve. It was familiar and not at the same time. Did I know her? Was there some image of her locked away in my mind? Some memory of her voice? "There was a woman," I said. "She was calling herself Melissa Redmond, but her real name was Katrina Valek. She said she was the one who killed Selene."

Mo gasped. I didn't understand her reaction at first, but it

only took me a second to fit it together. While I was running around lying to my parents, something I'd never been good at or had reason to do too often, I realized I'd left out that very important piece of information. Mo had only come into the apothecary after Karter's mother had admitted out loud that she'd murdered my birth mother, Selene, in an attempt to force Circe to retrieve the piece of the Heart locked in the Poison Garden.

"Bri," Mo sobbed as tears welled in her eyes. "My god. Why didn't you tell me? How long have you been keeping that from us?"

"She told me right before she—right before—" I bit the inside of my lip until the coppery taste of blood filled my mouth. I didn't want to say the words "right before she killed Mom" aloud. It was too much.

The vines encasing the house crept through the crack under the front door, pulling themselves toward me. Circe's jaw tightened and made hard angles of her chin as she watched the plants react to the surge of grief coursing through me. She suddenly wobbled on her feet and her legs folded under her. The woman she'd called Persephone was there before I could blink. She'd crossed the room at an inhuman speed and caught Circe as she nearly collapsed. I exchanged glances with Marie, and she nodded once, confirming what I suspected. Here was another person changed by the Heart. Another living piece of it. Our total had come to five.

Mo let her gaze drop to the floor, and she shook her head in silent confusion. She must've been struggling with all the things she was seeing and learning about for the first time. She hadn't seen Marie's speed and superhuman strength yet

either. We were going to have to have a serious conversation about that at some point, and soon. I squeezed her hand.

Persephone eased Circe onto the couch, and she leaned forward, cradling her head in her hands. She was clearly still grieving her sister, Selene, and my heart ached for her. I was grieving her, too, and in a way I'd never expected to. I was processing so many things at once I worried how much more I could actually take.

"Where is she now?" Circe asked through clenched teeth, her dark eyes narrow. Her entire frame trembled. "The Redmond woman—where is she?"

A shudder moved through me as images of her wild, terrified eyes flashed in my mind. "She's dead."

Circe glanced up. The dark brown headscarf she had twisted around her head brought out the brown in her eyes—eyes that were so much like mine. "Dead?"

Outside, there was a rustling, and a tangle of vines crowded the window. The red fangs of the coiling Devil's Pet scraped against the glass like fingernails. Circe lifted her hand and without even looking toward the window, flicked her wrist. The vines shrank away from the glass. She was in complete control of her power—a power that appeared to be the same as my own.

"After all this time," Circe said, more to herself than to anyone else. "I thought I'd left it in the past, moved on but—" She stopped short, then leaned forward. "How much do you know? I don't want to do or say anything that's gonna upset you, but there is so much."

I steered Mo, who seemed to be drifting in and out of a daze, to the couch opposite Circe, and we sat down.

"I'll tell you what I know," I said. "Then maybe you can fill in the blanks?" Circe nodded and I tried to think in a straight line. "Mrs. Redmond found out about me. I don't know exactly when or how, but a few weeks ago she came to our apartment in Brooklyn. She said you'd died and left me the house and the keys. She also said you left me a set of letters that were only for me to read." I pulled the lanyard that held all the keys I'd collected from around my neck and set it on the coffee table. "She lied about everything, and now I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

Circe shook her head and pushed the keys back toward me. "You can keep the house, Briseis. You can have everything I own. I don't care about any of that. I walked away from this place many, many years ago." She sighed heavily. "I don't know how to say this, and I hope it doesn't come across the wrong way, but I didn't leave the house to you or anyone else. I'm clearly not dead and I didn't write the letters."

"I know," I said. "I figured all that out. Well, most of it. I didn't expect you to show up, that's for damn sure. I thought I was seeing a ghost."

Mo squeezed her eyes shut. "Please, Lord, don't let her be a ghost."

Circe pressed her lips together and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Don't worry. I'm not." The way she said it wasn't like she didn't believe in ghosts, just that she wasn't one. I had to stop myself from thinking too deeply about what that meant. After everything I'd seen, nothing was impossible. "What did the letters say?" she continued.

"They were instructions. Like a scavenger hunt." I realized

Mrs. Redmond really had no clue as to what I could or couldn't do. She assumed I'd inherited my gifts from my birth mom, but she didn't know that for sure. Walking into the Poison Garden could have killed me if I wasn't immune, and she had treated it like it was a game. The thought made me hate her even more than I already did. I gripped my hands together in front of me until my knuckles ached. "You—I mean Mrs. Redmond—said there was a place on the grounds where I'd find the answers I was looking for. I followed her instructions and found the garden and everything hidden inside it."

Circe sat back and ran her hand over her mouth, then crossed and uncrossed her legs. She angled her head toward the apothecary. "And did you find the answers you were looking for?"

I hesitated. What I found was a place that made me feel like I wasn't alone—a place to stretch, a purpose for these extraordinary gifts, and a little bit of stability for my moms. But I'd also discovered a secret so profound that even the threat of its revelation had caused a living, breathing goddess to intervene.

"I found the Heart." I took out the vial of Living Elixir and held it up to the light. The viscous red liquid stuck to the inside of the glass like honey. Both Circe's and Persephone's expressions twisted into masks of complete and utter shock. Marie closed her eyes and shook her head.

Circe got up and came over to the couch, where she crouched in front of me. As she eyed the glass vial, I took in all the little details about her. She looked like she was only a little older than Mo, even though the date of birth on her gravestone would make her a full decade her senior. A set of matching smile lines framed her mouth, and a few of the coils of hair escaping her head wrap

were a mix of black and gray. She had the look of someone who knew what it meant to be exhausted. I gently set the elixir in her outstretched hand.

"Mrs. Redmond, Katrina Valek, whatever her name was, forced me at knife point to get the Heart." Saying her name was like speaking a curse, like it might conjure her from the dead to hurt me and my family even more than she already had. "She cut open my hand and I bled on it. It started to beat." I held up my bandaged hand. Blood had begun to ooze through the dressing. The physical sensation of what the Heart had done to me as Mrs. Redmond forced me to touch it with my bare hands lingered in my bones. It ached. "I brought it back here, transfigured it, and then she—she killed my mom." The words sounded like somebody else said them. They didn't feel real. I didn't want them to be.

Circe looked to Mo and then back to me. "I—I am so sorry." She wept, wrapping her arms around her waist, rocking back and forth like she was trying to soothe herself. "It leaves nothing untouched—the Heart. It affects everything and everyone it comes in contact with. It brings death but not always as a result of the poison pumping through it." She wiped away her tears. "I can't count the number of deaths in this twisted family tree that were a result of other people trying to get their hands on the Heart. They are relentless in their pursuit of it."

We sat for a moment as I tried to claw my way up from a descending spiral of pain and grief. I struggled to put into words what had happened after that, but I couldn't think straight. "Hecate was here," was all I managed to say. I hoped it made sense to her because it still didn't make sense to me.

Circe met my gaze, and I knew right away that while she

might have been shocked, she believed me. Her wide brown eyes glinted in the dim light. She gently put her hand on my knee. "She revealed herself to you? You saw her?"

Persephone leaned against the wall like she might fall over without its support.

I nodded. "She had a giant black dog with her. She told me she was Medea's mother, that we come from her. And she took my mom."

Circe's fingertips pressed into my knee. "What do you mean, she took her?"

"I asked Hecate if we could use the Living Elixir to bring my mom back, but she said that wouldn't work. She said she would keep my mom, and if we could find a way to do the thing that has never been done—"

Circe's lips parted just enough for her to whisper in a tone that was like the rustling of dead leaves in the wind. "She wants you to bring all the pieces of Absyrtus back together."

She already had a deeper understanding of all the things I was just learning about, and she still said it in a way that made me feel like it was going to be impossible to do.

I leaned closer to her. "Can we do that?" A knot made its way to my throat. I didn't know if I could handle any more disappointments. It took me a second to understand that her hesitation wasn't because she thought it was impossible, but maybe because she was thinking of how we could do it. "It's possible, isn't it? Please tell me there's something we can do."

Circe and Persephone exchanged glances, and Circe proceeded carefully. "Absyrtus, whole, would be the master of death. It can be done, but it's not as simple as that."