

The Z Word

by

Bella Street

Apocalypse Babes | Book One

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Many thanks to my long-suffering crit partner, Diane, and my indulgent daughter, Lindsey.

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And the girl was amazed and reached out with both hands to take the lovely toy: but the wide-pathed earth yawned there in the plain of Nysa, and the lord, the god of the dead, with his immortal horses sprang out upon her—Hades, the Son of Kronos.

Homeric Hymn (abridged)

*"I will knock down the Gates of the Netherworld,
I will smash the door posts, and leave the doors flat down,
And will let the dead go up to eat the living!
And the dead will outnumber the living!"*

Epic of Gilgamesh

Chapter One

Why am I here?

Sighing inwardly, Seffy Carter realized the question went both ways. With regards to Verity, it might mean the blond interloper was getting her claws into Gareth after all. Which begged the larger question: *what have I done to turn Gareth away?*

She tried to focus on the newcomer who'd upset the balance of her carefully proportioned existence. Verity's white blond hair shimmered under the tanning room track lighting. Her dark blue eyes seemed to divine secrets even Seffy wouldn't admit to herself. The woman was beautiful—thinner, tanner, blonder—and, well, Seffy's beauty was a sham at best.

“Are you listening to me, Sef? This doesn't have to be awkward.”

Seffy nodded reluctantly, wishing Verity had found a different tanning salon, a different hair stylist...a different guy. And it wasn't just Gareth who'd apparently hopped on the Verity train. Seffy's besties, Lani and Addison, also thought Verity was all that and a damn bag of chips.

What's she got that I haven't? Wait, don't answer that.

And anyway, there was something about the new girl that wasn't right—something almost threatening in her manner. Seffy played with the J on the zipper pull of her pink Juicy Couture hoody, annoyed by her melodramatic thoughts. *God, it's like I'm still in high school. I have got to get a handle on this. Besides, I need to get my head straight if I'm going to nail my audition in the morning.* The thought of that appointment made her stomach cramp.

Verity tilted her head, her blue eyes emphatic. “And we can be honest, right?”

Yeah, if I were honest I'd tell her off. “Um, sure.”

“The thing is, Gareth prefers a whole woman.”

Seffy felt her mouth open. *What the hell?*

The interloper opened her blue eyes wide, as if stating the obvious.

Verity is whole? What does that make me?

“I'm sure you knew that already, Sef, so c'mon.” She poked her with a French-manicured finger. “It's not like it's the end of the world.”

Seffy pulled so hard on the J it snapped in her hand. She stared at the pink crystal encrusted charm, still stunned by the blonde's words. *Not the end of the world? Gareth doesn't think I'm whole?*

Suddenly a flash of white light eclipsed Verity from sight. Before Seffy could react, a tremendous force hurtled her backwards, followed by a terrifying weightlessness which could only end badly. Seffy's head swam as she sailed through the atmosphere. The velocity of her descent increased and ground whooshed up to meet her. She threw out her hands to break her fall. Crunching her eyes closed, she let out a keening cuss word. The ground came closer still.

WHUMP!

Seffy landed hard, the breath rushing from her lungs. The impact made her eyes water. Coiling herself up in a ball, she gasped for air in between coughing spasms. After several excruciating moments, her lungs began to slowly inflate. *What the hell happened? Did the salon explode?* The pain ricocheting throughout her huddled frame made coherent thought difficult. With her eyes squeezed shut, she lay on the ground sipping the oxygen in measured amounts. It smelled funny. Like burnt ozone, sharp and metallic...with a hint of almond.

Seffy finally unscrunched her eyes to get her bearings. The first thing she noticed was the sky. Pearly pink light shimmered overhead and the sun was a neon magenta color. Turning her head, she saw what appeared to be a tract of desert, with a bit of smoldering rubble in the distance. Where the

hell was West Hollywood?

Okay, I'm just disoriented from whatever happened. I will close my eyes and when I reopen them, everything will be back to normal.

She closed her eyes, focused on a mental picture of Dorothy clicking her ruby slippers, then opened her eyes.

Oh, crap.

Nothing had changed. Seffy bit her lip, struggling to take stock of her situation while her heart pounded out a rhythm of dread. But there had to be a rational explanation. After a moment, things became obvious. She was either dead, drunk, or dreaming. Or at least two out of three. Heaven or hell was probably a bit more interesting than this wasteland, so she was most likely alive. She didn't remember drinking anything harder than lemon water today, but either way, it still pointed to the dream explanation. That had to be it. *Hey, maybe that whole episode with Verity was nothing more than an unpleasant dream.*

"Seffy? Oh my God, is that you?"

Seffy jerked at the sound of Gareth's voice. What was he doing downtown? No wait, this was make believe. She watched his silhouette approach against the pink sky. Her heart thumped like the tail of a hopeful dog. Tall, dark and more gorgeous than Johnny Depp, Gareth was her ideal in every way. Was it any wonder the idea of Verity claiming him made her sick?

He sank to the ground next to her, his breathing jagged as if he'd been running. "I can't believe I found you! What happened?"

At his nearness, her gut knotted with emotions old and new. *Exactly. What happened, Gareth? Why did Verity say what she did? Is it all in her head or are you actually into her?*

Am I not whole?

Her gut recoiled at the idea. She let out a groan.

"Sef, are you all right? Look at me!"

His golden brown eyes stared down into hers. She offered him a weak smile. "Hey, babe."

A puzzled look crossed his face. "Did you hit your head? C'mon, Sef, if you're hurt, you need to tell me."

"I'm just...winded." Her voice came out in a streppy croak. "What are you doing here? Not that I'm complaining." A bark of laughter escaped her. She slapped her hand over her mouth.

"Okay, I'm thinking you hit your head pretty hard. Can you sit up?"

Seffy tried to move and was rewarded with pain slicing along her ribcage. "I think I'm fine right here for the moment."

"There was some kind of blast. Are you sure you're all right?" He scanned her features, then ran his hands down her arms looking for injury.

"I'm okay." When he started in on her legs, she batted his hands away. "*Really.*"

Doubt eclipsed the worry in his eyes. "I'm just...concerned. After your last episode, I..."

Her face grew hot, all romantic musings diffused. *Well, I guess that answers my question.* Would she always be the same head case from sixth grade to him? "That was an anomaly," she said in a low voice. "I'm fine now, just a little shaken up—and envisioning some chiropractic visits in my near future."

Gareth's long look told her he wasn't impressed with her lame attempt at humor.

Time to change the subject. "I was in the salon with—" *No, don't go there, either.* She compressed her lips to avoid finishing the sentence. Suddenly she remembered breaking the zipper pull. Seffy looked over the area where she was sitting. A pink sparkle caught her eye. When she reached for it, her ribs protested, but she managed to grasp it with outstretched fingers.

"What is that?" Gareth asked, frowning.

"The little charm that goes to my suit." The pink rhinestones winked in the light. *This was just part of the dream, right?* She looked up at him. "I wonder if you could fix this for me."

His shocked expression surprised her. “Seffy, look around! Something is *wrong*! How can you think about your clothes at a time like this?”

Closing her fingers over the rhinestone pull, she followed his gaze and was met with the same view as before.

Rusted piles of construction debris and small fires burned against what looked like a low budget backlot sound stage. She shook her head. “The salon. It’s gone. Where did everything go? God, this is just so weird.”

Gareth scowled, perspiration beginning to dot his upper lip. “Stay calm. We can think this through.”

Seffy frowned, annoyed by the word *calm*. Dream Seffy was handling things pretty well, all things considered. “What’s thinking got to do with it? This can’t be real.”

His respiration increased. “None of this can. And I wasn’t anywhere near you girls when the blast happened.”

“Where were you?”

“Radio Shack.”

“What! Someone could’ve seen you there!”

He snorted. “I know, I know, but they were having a huge sale on computer parts.”

Seffy sent him a chastising look. “You need to decide whether you’re in the closet or out with that whole thing.”

Gareth took in the landscape again. “Nah, it keeps me mysterious.”

She saw the faraway look in his eyes. Mysterious wasn’t the right word. Unattainable was more like it. She bit her lip in dejection.

He turned back to her. “The next thing I knew, there was the blast and I was thrown like a rag doll through space. Or something.”

Or something. Seffy straightened despite the screaming of her ribs. Gareth put his gym-enhanced arm around her, encouraging her to lean against him. She took the opportunity to press her cheek against the soft brushed cotton of his designer turtleneck and inhale his cologne. Hopefully Verity wouldn’t suddenly appear and spoil the moment.

That’s big of you. She could’ve died in the blast. If it was a real blast, that is. Seffy peered around Gareth’s shoulder, unable to process the sight of desert terrain that met her eyes.

“You were with Verity, right?” he said. “Addison said you two were going to tan this morning.”

Seffy shifted at the mention of the ‘V’ word and let out a whimper of pain. Gareth soothed her for a moment, which gave her a chance to think. After all, when did she have a chance to cuddle with a dreamy hunk—even if was pretend? “Um, yes, she was there...but I don’t know what happened to her.” She peeked up at him to gauge his reaction to her words. Why did he care so much anyway? Sure, Verity was gorgeous, but she was more Pamela Lee than Marilyn. Seffy made a face. Maybe that was the problem.

Dammit.

Gareth shook his head as he looked around. “Man, where *are* we? There’s no way this is downtown L.A.”

She closed her eyes again, knowing she should be freaked, but her head hurt too much to think. Besides, her new tracksuit now had a huge hole in the knee, not to mention a broken zipper pull. Thank God this wasn’t real. On her salary from the clinic she couldn’t afford a new one.

Gareth carefully released her and stood up. “I have to try...to figure this out.”

Seffy noticed the way his Adam’s apple bobbed in the strong column of his throat. “Gareth, this is obviously a dream, right? I mean, if it was a real explosion, I’d be in the salon lobby, or at worst, the parking lot. *Not* some desert.”

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice hoarse as he stepped away from her.

As Gareth left to search through the rubble nearby, Seffy rested her head in her hands. This

couldn't be happening. She had to be in REM mode after a bender. In fact this event resembled her last unfortunate lapse in alcohol-related judgment. Except in that dream, talking birds and monkeys had abounded. She groaned, telling herself she'd soon wake up—chagrined and in need of Tylenol and white bread—but back in Normal Land. That awkward little chat she'd been having with Verity? All in her head.

Seffy tested her legs to make sure they worked, then checked the rest of her body and didn't find any wounds. How had she escaped bodily harm? *Duh, it's a dream. You always wake up before you fall.* She wrinkled her brow. *Except my butt hurts.* Struggling to her feet, she attempted a deeper breath. The pain had lessened a bit, but the air felt thick and hot, and tasted like burnt chemicals.

She watched Gareth paw through some rubble, but the debris could not possibly represent the strip mall where she'd been that afternoon, much less an entire city. If this was real and there had been some kind of mega blast, the buildings must have—

"It's like they vaporized, Seffy!" Gareth yelled in a strangled voice. He hurried back to her and braced his hands against his thighs, breathing hard. "It doesn't make sense! Verity, the girls. Do you think...?"

Seffy touched his shoulder, trying to be supportive. "Don't say it." He looked up at her and she offered a reluctant smile. "Let's go and see if we can find...the others."

Gareth straightened and took her hand. His touch made her want him all the more. They walked around fires burning in random spots and nudged through what little rubble littered the ground.

Shielding his eyes from the glare of the pink sun, Gareth blew out a breath. "Are we even in L.A.? I mean, where are the fire trucks and ambulances? The skyscrapers? Where are the cars?"

"I know, right?" She stared at the glittering dirt, sage scrub, and angular bluffs stretching to the sherbet-hued horizon. "God, it's just so detailed." At his confused look, she shrugged. "Do you, uh, think it was a nuclear bomb or something?"

Gareth shook his head. "Doesn't make sense that we'd survive. Remember, you and I weren't even in the same vicinity when the blast happened. And we're both more or less unharmed."

"Riiight." Seffy fought down a rising rush of panic. Maybe abject terror would force her awake. "Uh, you said something about Addison? And was Lani working today?" She rubbed her temple. "My head is killing me." More evidence of drunkenness. *Any minute now this will all fade away. And Gareth will remember he prefers me to Verity. I hope.*

Gareth squeezed her hand. "Yes. Lani was working at the spa and Addison was supposed to meet me for lunch at Yoshi's."

"Wow, I really could go for some good sushi." She bit the inside of her cheek at Gareth's bleak expression. "Sorry, I guess levity's not such a good idea right now."

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "I just want to find our friends and figure out what happened."

"Yeah." *But this is okay, too, right? We never get to be alone. Addison and Lani are always underfoot and then there's Verity...and dammit, this is MY dream.*

Seffy watched as Gareth flipped open his cell phone. She realized she didn't have her purse. No phone, no makeup, no saline solution, no money. She wouldn't be caught dead without her stuff In Real Life, so that just confirmed the obvious.

This was a dream.

Or a dream within a dream. Seffy suppressed a hysterical snicker.

After attempting to make a call, Gareth frowned and shoved the phone back into his pocket. He shook his head. "Nothing. Not even a network busy signal."

Whoa. Her technology-challenged brain was getting it right even while unconscious.

Gareth looked up at the cotton-candy sky. Seffy watched his brows draw down over his chiseled yet sensitive features. The mellowing light tipped his fashion-mussed dark hair with a rosy glow. He was breathy-sigh handsome and they had nearly a lifetime of memories together. Something Verity couldn't touch. *And here he is. I have him all to myself. Anything goes in a dream, right? So should I*

jump his bones or play along? Or maybe Dream Gareth is too much like Real Gareth.

He cocked his head. "Did you hear that?"

Heat bloomed in her face. "Uh...what?" *My lustful thoughts?*

Gareth squinted into the distance.

She listened hard and was able to pick up a far off crying sound. "A wounded animal?"

Symbolizing my sad lament that you won't take what's right in front of you?

"I think someone is hurt. C'mon." He gripped her hand and pulled her along with him. Seffy gasped—a little louder than necessary—as her rib cage protested. He led her up and over a hill. Below was more glittery dirt and some scrubby blue and yellowish-green vegetation. She spotted a flicker of purple through a clump of bushes. The sound got louder. Down the hill they went. *Ouch ouch ouch. Okay, time to wake up.*

"It's Addison!"

Seffy squinted at the prone figure Gareth had identified as their friend. The red hair *could* be called a clue, but lots of people were redheads—

The figure scrambled to her feet at their approach. Damn, it was Addy. *This dream now officially blows.* Addison was not on her Favorite Persons List at the moment. The redhead been just awful lately. And since she had always been the prickly type, that was saying something. But that still didn't explain her bitchy attitude. Even the usually calm and serene Lani hadn't been herself. In fact everyone had been on edge in the last few months...right about the time Verity had shown up.

"Gareth? Oh, thank God!"

They were close enough now to see Addison's face streaked with glittery grime and her eyes shiny with tears. She glanced at their clasped hands and frowned. Seffy lifted her chin. Even dream Addison intimidated her. "Are you okay?"

Addy motioned behind the bushes. "I'm fine, but I don't know about *her*."

Gareth dropped Seffy's hand and went to investigate. Seffy followed, wishing she was still connected to him. She found Gareth kneeling next to an outstretched figure. "Lani?"

The brunette lay splayed in the dirt, her teal flowered dress covered in what looked like red diamond dust, her blue eyes wide, staring upwards. *God, could this get any more bizarre?* "Is she, uh, breathing?"

Gareth patted Lani's face. "Are you still with us, sweetie?" Addison came around the bushes and crossed her arms over her chest, emitting a snuffle.

"Bonnie Bell."

Seffy peered at Lani. On a good day she didn't know whether her xippie friend was right in the head. "Bonnie Bell?"

Lani tilted her head up at Seffy. "Like the pink lip gloss we used in middle school. The sparkly stuff."

"Okaaay."

"She means the sky, you dolt."

Seffy sent Addy a dark look. "Whatever."

"How did you two get here?" Gareth brushed some dirt from Lani's cheek.

Addison scrubbed the tears from her face. "I don't know. One minute I was visiting Lani at Euphoria's—"

"You mean hitting her up for a free spa treatment."

"*Sef*," Gareth said in a low voice.

"Yeah, shut up, Sef." Addy took a deep breath. "The next minute there was this huge roar and we were yanked, thrown, whatever, from where we were. We woke up right here on the ground."

"That's what happened to me, too," Seffy said, nonplussed. "How weird is that?"

Turning to Gareth, Addison pushed her hands through her hair. "What happened? Where *are* we?"

Lani smiled, staring up at the sky. "It was so cool. There was this white light, then an explosive noise, and flashes like disco lights from an 80s nightclub."

Addison scanned their surroundings. When she turned back, there was moisture in her eyes. "I guess I was too freaked to take in all the details, but yeah, that sounds about right."

Lani threw her arm over her head and began to sing.

"I am breathing and the earth glows for me right now all at once I'm in this place."

Seffy's brows went up. "You're going to sing? God, all we need now is a herd of unicorns."

Addison regarded her as if she were insane. Shouldn't she be directing that look at Lani instead?

Lani's thready voice ascended. *"Misplaced in a different sphere, many miles from earth but what about it? I am breathing, I am breathing I AM BREATHING!"*

"Okay, so you're breathing." Addy looked at Gareth. "This is what I've been dealing with instead of figuring out where the hell we are."

Gareth's gaze softened at Lani. "I remember that song, too. But sweetheart, we have a big problem to deal with."

"Disco," she whispered. "I miss it." Lani struggled to her feet and began a slow spin, singing,

"I am breathing."

Seffy looked around in alarm. "Okay, this needs to stop now. Someone might hear you."

"It looks like we're pretty much alone out here in case you haven't noticed."

"Yes, Addison, I noticed. But we can never be too careful even if it's pretend." Seffy pinned Lani with a gentle glare. "Understand?"

Lani didn't appear to hear her, but spun into a kind of skip-dance, her arms outstretched. "Don't you guys hear it?" She twirled past, her feet kicking up a cloud of sparkle dust. "Don't you remember the old days?"

"Lani," Addison said, "this is not the time for nostalgia. This is the time for panicking!"

Lani's blue eyes came to rest on her. "Panic?"

Addison clenched her fists. "Look around! Something *bad* has happened!"

The brunette pressed her hands together. "Or, this is a new opportunity we've been presented with."

"Have you been sniffing the botanicals again? We're in the middle of a crisis!"

"Addison," Gareth said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Seffy tucked her hands in the kangaroo pockets of her top. "Okay, we're all stressed out. We just need to stay calm and...wake up."

Addy spun around, her green eyes flashing. "So you're the leader now? And where's Verity? I thought she was with you."

Seffy stared at her for a long moment. "I don't know where she is."

The redhead shoved her hair behind her ear with shaking hands. "I just think you're getting high-handed."

"We're in the middle of a friggin' dream. I'm sorry you didn't like my tone."

"You think this is a *dream*?"

Seffy regarded Addison with mounting fury. "And here I thought you considered yourself the smart one of the bunch."

Addison rolled her eyes. "God, one of you is mental and the other is just plain nuts. I don't know which is worse!"

Gareth came up to them with Lani in tow as she continued to hum and swirled her hands about. "Okay, we don't know what happened or where Los Angeles went, but if we're all here together, on some level it's reasonable to think we'll find Verity, too. So let's look before it gets dark."

"Verity?" Lani's expression faltered and her movements ceased.

Addy crossed her arms, her face pale under the dirt. "She was with Seffy."

"Look, I don't have a clue where she is." Seffy struggled to maintain a blank expression under

Addison's penetrating stare. "Anyway, this is stupid."

"Interesting," Addy said. "And I see you didn't waste any time."

Seffy blew out a tired sigh. "What are you talking about?"

Addy's gaze swiveled to Gareth before returning to hers. "You know what I mean."

Seffy made a face. "I'm ignoring that." She turned to the others, deciding if she couldn't wake herself up, she might as well avoid Addison's veiled accusations. "Let's go back up onto the hill. We'll have a good vantage point up there. Maybe we'll see Verity in the distance."

"I hope for your sake we find her."

"God, Addison, what is with you?" Seffy pivoted and marched back up the hill, the soft dirt sending up little glistening clouds under each step. Her throat was parched, her body ached, and now to complete the package, she had a serious pain in the butt following right behind her. Just like in real life—except for that whole sparkle dirt and pink sky part.

When she reached the top of the hill, she did a full sweep and saw nothing but colored sand, rocks, small fires, and inconsequential piles of debris. It just couldn't be West Hollywood, even in a post-apocalyptic scenario. For one thing, there'd be more survivors. And maybe a burned-out food coach or two.

The others reached the summit and stood following her line of sight.

"No Verity?" Lani asked.

"I don't see another soul," Seffy said, moistening her dry lips. The big magenta sun quavered low in the sky. Light-headed and shaky, she wished she'd splurged on that pumpkin cranberry muffin for breakfast. Instead she'd had ice water with lemon. Dieting never seemed to do any damn good anyway and this just proved it. Then again, a lot of things might've changed had she known she was going to survive an explosion-thingie. Seffy smacked her hand against her forehead. *Get a grip. This isn't real.*

"It'll be dark soon," Gareth said, coming up behind her. "Maybe we should try to look for shelter."

Addison let out a sharp bark of laughter. "I'm looking. Not exactly seeing."

"Well, let's walk toward the sun to make the most of the remaining light," he said, anxiety bleeding through the evenness of his tone. "Looks like there might be another hill in the distance. Maybe there's something at the bottom of it."

Addison pursed her lips. "Fine."

Seffy pulled in a deep breath, wondering if the air was eco-friendly, and trudged down the hill toward the setting orb. As the others followed, she tried to make sense of their predicament. How could any of it be real? If there had been an explosion, there'd be more evidence—like raging infernos, twisted buildings...dead bodies. And the sky wouldn't be the wrong color. Ergo, dream.

Pushing a windblown lock of hair from her eyes, she focused on a point in front of her, noticing it didn't change much over the course of a mile or so. Lani continued to hum that tune, which probably explained why her skin felt full of the crawlies. Verity's last words rang in her mind. *It's not the end of the world.* But it just might be if Lani persisted in bringing up those stupid songs. Some things were best left in the past. As they'd agreed.

"Do you think it runs?"

Seffy turned to Lani. "Huh?"

Lani pointed down the second hill. "There's a car down there behind those trees. Maybe it can take us home."

Seffy refrained from pointing out that cars in dream world blast zones didn't run. They mostly loomed, or in this case, squatted...menacingly.

"Looks like a Caddy," Gareth said. "An old one."

They headed down the hill and toward a straggly grove of pine trees, which cast long, gnarled shadows in the purpling light.

"A Coupe de Ville," Gareth said. "Circa 1971."

"Uh oh, maybe this is real," Seffy said. "My dream would've featured a BMW 650i."

"Good choice," Gareth said, a tense smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"Will it drive?" Lani asked in a nervous voice.

"Doubtful," Gareth said, sounding discouraged. "But it will be a good place to spend the night."

"*Spend the night?*" Addison said, her eyes shiny with moisture. "Are you serious? Let's keep walking until we find civilization—"

"Or at least a modestly priced hotel," Seffy said, raising a brow.

"With a pool," Lani added.

Gareth turned to Addison and put his hands on her shoulders. "Look around you," he said gently. "We can see for miles. There are no roads and we don't know what direction civilization is in."

Addison chewed her lip, tears spilling down her cheeks. She dashed them away with the back of her hand. "It just feels like we're totally giving in here and going all survival modey."

"It's getting dark. We just need a place to regroup and figure out what happened and how to get home."

"And then what?" Addison said, her voice shaky. "What happens in the morning? Help arrives?"

"We wake up," Seffy said. "We go back to our real lives, and refrain from wallowing in the past as we've agreed." She cleared her throat. "Besides, I have an audition I cannot miss."

"Another 'audition'?" Addy said. "Watch out for that casting couch, sweetie."

Lani gasped. "What a horrible thing to say!"

"Addy," Gareth chided, making her blush. "We're supposed to be supporting each other with our goals, remember?" He turned to Seffy. "That's great news about the audition. You didn't mention it earlier."

Seffy lowered her eyes, her pleasure at his warm tone at odds with what he didn't know. There were a whole lot of auditions she hadn't mentioned to him. Maybe it was because she never got the gig...or worse.

Gareth sighed. "Look, I know we're all scared and upset, but let's take it down a notch, okay?"

Addison looked away, her mulish expression contrasting with the trembling of her chin.

Seffy didn't want to feel a pang of sympathy for the redhead. If only Addison understood the challenges of trying to get an acting gig when millions more wanted the same thing—which sucked. But Addison was apparently too busy with her successful exercise classes at an exclusive club to worry about stuff like that. Seffy pushed a lock of hair from her face. She needed to make that audition. If she was chosen for the part, it would take her one step further from all she longed to leave behind...not to mention alcohol-induced dreams and grouchy friends.

And maybe it would bring her one step closer to Gareth's admiration.

He pulled Addy close in a side hug. "At least we're together. That's something to be thankful for."

Addy shrugged away from his touch. "Except for Verity."

"Except for Verity," he echoed in a hollow voice. He shook his head. "You know what, I'm just going to assume she's okay, wherever she is. I mean, she's not the only person who didn't show up with us. We have to assume L.A. is fine and we're just...someplace else."

Addison shot Seffy a sharp look. "Which means Verity is probably drinking a tonic tea at Elixir right now, all safe and sound. Right, Sef?"

"I told you, I don't know where she is!"

"I think you do! I think you're hiding something!"

Seffy gritted her teeth. "Hey, if anyone has secrets around here, it's *you*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Seffy refrained from answering, knowing she'd earn a dark look from Gareth.

Lani clasped her hands together, her pretty face pinched. “What if this is L.A? All that's left of it?”

“I thought you said this was a new opportunity?” Addy said, her lip curled.

Lani dropped her gaze and plucked at the folds of her skirt.

Distancing herself from Addison's insinuations and Lani's fears, Seffy walked up to the old car. She peered in the dusty windows and tried the rusted handle. She was shocked when the door creaked open. Beating away some of the cobwebs and dust on the seats, Seffy stuck her head inside for a quick look. “It's got a leather interior.”

Gareth joined her perusal then checked along the dash and visor for keys, but found none. His lips quirked in a humorless smile. “It works in the movies.”

She sighed. “Yeah.”

“And unfortunately, I don't have a clue how to hot-wire a car.”

“Me, neither.”

He slammed the front door shut.

“Anyway,” Addison said, “the thing is probably full of snakes.”

Seffy edged away from the car. “Hey, you'll freak Lani out.”

“Lani's already freaked,” Lani said. “Gareth, can you check for snakes?”

He nodded and grabbed a stick from the ground. After poking and prodding under the seats, he declared the car snake free.

“You just stirred up all the black widows.”

“Okay, Addison,” Seffy said, glaring, “*you* can sleep outside with the wild animals.”

“There aren't any wild animals in WeHo, dummy.”

Gareth's brows lifted. “You weren't with me on the Strip last weekend.”

Seffy rolled her eyes. “You guys, none of this is real.”

“Maybe we're in some other dimension,” Lani ventured, blinking hard. “You know, a time wrinkly thing.”

“Gee, I thought Gareth was the only one in touch with his inner geek,” Addison said.

“Hey!” Gareth said with mock offense. “Let's not get nasty.”

Lani lifted her lips in a wobbly smile. “So we're not mad anymore? I just wanted things to be the way they used to be. I miss the old us.”

“I'll be sticking to the new and improved version, thanks,” Seffy said, wondering why they were having this conversation in the first place.

Addison looked up. “What does it mean when the sky turns green?”

Seffy looked up. Indeed it was. And green coming off of purplish-pink just could not be good. “Can this dream get any creepier?”

“Why do you keep talking about a dream, Sef? Wake up!”

Seffy sent Addison a weary look. “I plan to, real soon. And when I do, hopefully you'll be gone from the house so I can get some peace and quiet.”

“Gareth, she thinks this is all in her head.”

Gareth turned from Addison to Seffy. “This isn't a dream, Sef. We're really here in this place—wherever it is.”

“Want me to give you a hard pinch?”

Ignoring Addison, Seffy said, “I'm going to get in this old beater and close my eyes. When I wake up, I will regale this bizarre dream to you all over bubble tea and muffins in the morning and you will think it's hilarious.”

“No one except you drinks bubble tea anymore,” Gareth said with a weak grin.

“A dream,” Addison said. “Leave it to Sef to go into denial mode during a crisis.”

Seffy was about to deny the charge, but instead slid into the backseat of the car. The leather was warm, the air musty. Exhaustion made her sink into the squeaky upholstery. Lani scooted in next to her,

her hair emitting a passion fruit scent. “You using a new shampoo?”

Lani's bright blue eyes shone in the gloom. “Yes, it's one of the new botanicals the spa is carrying.”

“It smells a lot better than the inside of this car.” *Are smells common in dreams?*

“And it's on sale.”

Seffy laughed, then her smile faded. “When I wake up, I'll buy some.”

Lani looked down at her hands. “Yeah.”

“Addy, after you,” Gareth said.

“Should you and I sit in the front?”

Gareth wrinkled his brow. “Since it seems like we're in some kind of desert, we might all want to be together for warmth if it gets chilly.”

Seffy suppressed a snarky comment about Addy's machinations and tried to get comfortable. Lani leaned her head on her shoulder as the other two got in and pulled the door closed.

A muffled silence fell once they were settled.

“I'm hungry,” Seffy said after a minute, hoping to lighten the mood. “Think there are any sushi restaurants around?”

“Look at the bright side, Sef. This way you might lose that last fifteen pounds you're always yammering about.”

Seffy mashed her lips together. She'd always been jealous of Addy's whipcord lean physique and the redhead knew it.

“Not nice,” Lani scolded in a sleepy voice.

“Agreed,” Gareth said from the other side of the seat. “Let's not get into body image issues tonight.”

At his wry voice, Seffy felt a pang of pity for the man. He sounded more like a brother than a roomie. She wondered if he'd ever think of her as more than a friend—at least while Verity was out of the picture.

Seffy leaned her head against the back of the seat and watched the remnant of the neon sun sink below the horizon as an eerie green glow descended on the land. *Where in the world are we? When will I wake up?*

Her heart began to pound out an odd rhythm. She swallowed hard, her throat dry.

Lani's voice broke the silence. “Is it the end of the world?”

No one answered the question.