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Glinda's Ruby Slippers
First Two Chapters, 5,000 Word Sample

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Chapter One

"In ten," Victor Fleming, the director of the Wizard of Oz, barked. He leaped up from a canvas-backed chair, waved to his assistants, walked onto the yellow brick road, and paced. His face was intense sitting atop a corded neck.

The assistants grouped and pointed at the set.

Billie Burke, playing Glinda, froze.

Judy Garland standing next to her stood still. She played the Kansas lass.

The room went silent.

They'd just finished the fourth take of the Munchkinland scene, and was headed for a fifth, and maybe a sixth. Oz was two months behind schedule and \$200,000 over budget.

Victor stormed up and down the road pushing his thick hand through black hair grayed at the temples.

The assistants scattered.

He'd been scolded by MGM studio boss L. B. Mayer and told to work harder, faster, and to spend less money. She'd heard about the boss' rant from an eavesdropping stagehand who'd seen the arms swing, the face turn red, and the fist pound the desk. She'd had her own run-ins with L. B. and was glad this wasn't her problem. She'd been in this business since 1899--40 years. She knew her lines. She knew what she was supposed to do and did it. She could become Glinda in a snap. The problem was that Oz was complicated, and the first film they'd tried in color. Problems were bound to happen. Whenever you try something new, rough patches emerged.

Victor grunted.

Billie stayed still, not wanting to attract attention.

"In nine," he barked.

There was a collective sigh, and Billie took a deep breath. The announcement meant that nobody was going to be in trouble. Now, it was time for water. The temperature in Studio 26 was like Death Valley's at noon, thanks to the extra-bright, color-illuminating lights. She'd never felt lights this hot.

Four male assistants drenched in sweat scattered to repair a hanging doorknob, a piece of fence sticking out, and silk leaves laying on the floor. These must have been the problems, thank goodness. One hundred and twenty midgets broken their silence as they moved to their marks, chattered among themselves, and practicing dance steps. They played the Munchkinland townspeople, known as Munchkins. Billie loved their Bavarian-style costumes --animated, exaggerated, and colorful. Even the set reminded her something from the Brothers Grimm.

Billie took a deep breath and reached around a nearby tree for her glass of water. Judy ran for the water table, her pigtails jiggling and checkered jumper flapping. Toto, her character's dog ran to keep up. It was a black terrier.

Billie chugged the water. The temperature was still cool. She closed her eyes and smiled.

"In three," Victor said.

Billie examined the front of her fairy princess dress for spilled any water on it. She'd downed the water so quickly, she hadn't paid any attention, but the dress was fine. She loved this

gown. She liked frilly things in general, and was intrigued with the embroidered butterflies all over this one.

She also liked the role. It was a nice departure from the addled, middle-aged ladies she'd been playing, the women who ran around the house, arms flapping and their mouths squawking things like, "Oh my, oh my" while others tried to calm them down with, "Oh, now Mother. It isn't that bad." Glinda was centered, powerful, respected, and could control things with the flick of a wand. It was the kind of role she'd played on Broadway, until MGM made her a comedienne. She sighed. Alas, it was a job, and in the middle of an economic depression, she was glad for it. Not too long ago, she'd been a widow, a single mother, and unemployed. And she couldn't go higher than MGM. It was the industry's Palace of Versailles.

"Excuse me, Miss Burke," a skinny carpenter said. "I need to fix this tree behind you." He held up a silk leaf the size of a pharaoh's fan. It had fallen on the floor from one of the many trees and bushes around her.

She put her hands to her mouth. "I'm so sorry," she said. She must have bumped it. Her liberty bell-shaped dress was so wide at the bottom that she couldn't sense its edges.

He gave a quick smile. "Just part of the biz, Miss Burke," he said, and then crouched down work on the plant's wire. "Third time this week for this one."

"I did this three times?"

"You and everybody else. Only take a second."

Billie closed her eyes and remembered the good old days at the Empire Theatre in New York. In one of her earlier plays, a small plant had fallen off a table. She'd simply picked it up and caressed the leaves as she spoke her lines. That's what artists did, but in film, a dropped leaf meant "start over." There were hundreds of leaves and pedals attached by wire or glue to these Oz plants.

She shook her head. She missed working on the live stage.

"Three minutes," Victor said.

The carpenters frantically called out to each other, "Need a hammer," or "I'm out of wire."

Judy returned to her side, looking relaxed and carrying Toto, scratching the dog behind his ears.

Billie massaged the girl's shoulders. The girl had been a bit too playful, earlier, and she needed to focus.

"Sixty seconds," Victor said.

"You look cute today, dear," Billie whispered into her ear.

Judy turned and smiled.

The Klieg lights flashed with clicking sounds as the electricians tested the bulbs. They were as bright as the sun.

"Ready," Victor said.

Billie turned herself into Glinda and set Miss Billie Burke aside. She silently reviewed her opening lines; they were in place. A happy scene was coming up. She remembered her daughter's first step and smiled. Patty was technically 22 years old, but she was still her baby.

"Action," Victor said.

The cameras purred like giant cats, and the lamps sent out a heat wave. Billie took a deep breath, transformed into Glinda, and delivered her first line.

"Are you a good witch, or a bad witch?" Glinda asked the Kansas girl.

"Who, me?" the girl said. She raised her eyebrows and took a step back. "Why, I'm not a

witch at all. I'm Dorothy Gale from Kansas."

Glinda pointed her wand at Toto; the dog was on the floor.

"Is that the witch?" she asked in a lilting voice.

"Who, Toto? Toto's my dog."

"We wish to welcome you to Munchkinland," sang three Munchkins dressed like back alley toughs dancing with a "put 'em up" swagger.

The girl politely listened to the serenade as Glinda looked on, proud of her town folk and waving her wand to the beat.

"We welcome you to Munchkinland; Tra la la la la la; Tra la la tra la la; Tra la la la la la la," sang the Munchkins.

"From now on you'll be history," the top-hatted Munchkin mayor proclaimed.

"You'll be hist--, you'll be hist--, you'll be history," sang his subjects.

A cloud of red smoke interrupted, puffing up from a ring of holes thin the floor. The Munchkins screamed, ran, and hid behind buildings and plants. Glinda pulled the girl closer and shielded her with the wand, the smoke filling her nostrils as she struggled not to cough. She swallowed hard as she tasted the mineral oil churning her stomach.

"Cut," Victor shouted and held up his hands.

Billie held her breath and looked down at the plant. The leaf was attached.

"Miss Burke," Victor said. "I need you to move closer to the fire ring. Judy, too."

Billie placed her hands on Judy's shoulders and squeezed. Fires were dangerous. Judy was 16, and she didn't know how to say "No."

Judy stepped forward.

Billie put a finger to her mouth. The fire ring was a circle of holes in the floor for fire and smoke to spew. There was a lift in the middle to bring Maggie Hamilton, who played the Wicked Witch, up and down surrounded by flames.

"Miss Burke. You too," Victor motioned.

Billie bit her lip. This stage fire was especially dangerous. Earlier, it had burst through the holes off-cue, causing everyone to shriek. If it happened once, it could happen again.

"I'm sorry. I can't," Billie said, trying to sound soft and sweet. She couldn't afford burn scars on her face. If she got them, her career would be over, today. Yes, her contract demanded she do as ordered, but there were basic life limits.

"Miss Burke. I'm going to ask you one more time," Victor said with arms folded across his chest.

"No," Billie said, biting her lip, hoping he'd back down. "It's too hot."

"Just a foot."

Judy scratched her neck.

"No. Could you hire a stunt double?"

"I promise. You won't get hurt."

Billie pursed her lips. Men didn't understand about these things. There should be more women directors in the business. They'd understand. There was only one, her friend, Dorothy Arzner, and she didn't work for MGM. Powerful women in the front office were as common as 90-degree temperatures in the Arctic.

Her shoulders dropped, and she looked to the side. "No," she said. "I can't." She crossed her arms over her chest and waited. Victor wouldn't pull her out. He had a film to finish, and as for the next film, she'd have to take her chances. She'd survive L. B.'s fit, and then things would go on. She had a contract. He couldn't get rid of her that easily.

Victor's eyes narrowed, he summoned an assistant, and then jotted a note on a pad and handed it to him.

The assistant jogged off the set to the glass-walled sound booth and picked up the phone. There were nervous coughs here and there.

Victor scratched his head and looked down. "We'll deal with this later. Get into your places."

She breathed and checked to be sure that she was on her mark. This wasn't over. That note was headed to L. B., but at least her skin was safe.

"In three," Victor said.

Everyone took their places, including Judy, who gave an "I'm sorry look," to Billie.

Billie gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulders, then closed her eyes to get back into character and review her opening line. Her muscles tensed. She couldn't remember her line. Was it, "This is the Wicked Witch of the West?" or "Bring the carriage around?" or "That's your sister under that house, and I'm glad she's dead." She'd look unprofessional if she didn't get it right. She never missed an opening line.

"Ready." Victor called out.

The line had something to do with the witch, but that's all she could remember.

The cameras rolled and the lights clicked on.

What was that line?

Red smoke spewed through the rings as Maggie appeared from below on the lift, her face and gloved hands green, her black dress a Southern widow's, her hat a tall cone with a wide brim. Maggie was one of the kindest people on earth, but she made a formidable witch.

The Munchkins scattered and screamed as the witch swirled, growled, and stormed toward a prairie house. Out from under the house was a protruding pair of striped-stockings legs.

The line. What was the line?

"I thought you said she was dead," the quivering girl said to Glinda.

Billie opened her mouth, and the right line came to her. She tried to hide a smile.

"That was her sister, the Wicked Witch of the East." Glinda pointed to the red shoes with her wand. "This is the Wicked Witch of the West, and she's worse than the other one was."

The witch turned from the house and walked toward them, pointing a crooked finger at the girl.

"Who killed my sister?" the witch said. "Who killed the Witch of the East? Was it you?"

The girl froze. Her shoulders shook as a grin spread across her face.

"Cut. God damn it," Victor barked, pulling on his sweater vest as if he wanted to yank it off.

Judy's face turned red as she bent over in a laughing fit. She closed her hand over her mouth.

Billie put her hands on her hips and squeezed. This was the third time this week that Judy had burst out like this. The girl needed to get the adolescent giggling under control. Patty had never been like this, at least not in serious situations. She'd known the difference between work and play and could control herself. Judy was taking acting lessons, at least, but she'd better learn fast. If she kept this up, they'd send her back to the music hall to sing with her sisters. That's where they discovered her. Judy had to realize that it was 1939, and there was an economic depression going on. Every workday along Washington Boulevard, hundreds of out-of-work actors lined the sidewalk hoping for a tiny part in an MGM picture.

Victor walked toward Judy with a measured calm on his face. He stopped one foot in

front of her.

There was silence on the set.

Billie bit her lip.

"Now darling," he said, "this is serious."

Judy dropped her hand from her mouth.

He raised his right arm, and then faster than a tennis swing, he slapped Judy across the face. The "whack" was loud enough to wake Beijing.

Everyone gasped.

Billie put her hands over her mouth.

Judy's jaw dropped, her cheek turned pink, she put her hand over the spot, but she didn't cry.

The man's face was a blank--no shock, remorse in it.

Billie reached out to pull her in. Judy felt rigid; the girl shrugged off her touch. Billie opened her mouth to say to him, "You stupid brute," but she closed it, knowing it would do no good and could create trouble, but she also shared his frustration. Acting was a job, a profession, and it should be taken seriously. Violence, however, crossed the line. A man should never hit a woman, especially a child. Judy couldn't defend herself, and no woman of any age could match herself against a man as strong as Victor.

"See everyone back here tomorrow, 5:30 a. m., sharp," Victor said, walking away and shaking his head.

Judy raced for the exit.

Billie prepared for her punishment.

After filming, she stopped by wardrobe to get out of her costume and into her real-life clothes, and then headed for her dressing room. Outside the door was a white envelope sticking out of the iron mailbox. She pulled it out, recognizing the stationary as The Mount's, L. B.'s executive secretary. Her real name was Ida Koverman, but everyone called her "The Mount" because she was impossible to get around.

Billie took a deep breath and tore the envelope open. The handwriting was in The Mount's D'Nealian script, an old world style meant to look dignified. The note read, "Please call me to set up an appointment with Mr. Mayer."

She closed her eyes, bunched the envelope up in her hand, and imagined that L. B. would force her to play the wife of the hunchback in The Hunchback of Notre Dame. Victor Hugo had made him a bachelor, but L. B. would make him a married man and require that his wife be as ugly as her husband was. L. B. had punished people before by giving them career-slapping roles. She couldn't think of an instance, but she knew it had happened. He was aware that maintaining Billie was strict about maintaining her youth and beauty everywhere. She was 54 in real life, but she played 35 as Glinda. She was a comedienne, but a beautiful one. She'd stand her ground. She was a star, and she made money for the studio. He wasn't going to throw her around like that.

Billie yanked the door open, stepped into her dressing room, slammed it shut behind her, and charged toward the phone on her end table. Her shaky index finger struggled to find the right holes to dial.

"Mr. Mayer's office," The Mount answered. She sounded calm and happy. She'd been at this secretarial business for over 30 years.

Billie spoke politely. "You wanted to talk to me?" She wrapped the cord around her wrist.

"Tomorrow after filming? Around 4:30?"

"How about now?" she said, trying not to snap.

"He's here. I'll ask."

Billie reminded herself that she had a signed, exclusive contract with MGM and a nonverbal agreement about her roles. Then, she remembered what had happened to Ray Bolger, the Oz scarecrow. He'd been told to play the Tin Man, but had refused. Ray was a dancer by training and heart, and he didn't want to be trapped in a can. He wanted to play the Scarecrow, instead. His request had begun polite, but it grew into a shouting match. Ray had won the battle, but maybe not the future. There was a rumor floating about that L. B. was waiting for Oz to end, and then he'd deliver his blow. MGM employees were betting on the outcome, and their money was on L. B.

"He wants you to come on down," The Mount said. "Are you out of costume? Can you be here in 15 minutes?"

"Yes on both," Billie said. As the phone clicked silent on the other end, her heart races. Billie grabbed her purse and then stormed out onto The Alley, MGM's Main Street.

Chapter Two

As Billie walked briskly to the Thayer Administration Building, she passed a pharmacy, a newsstand, a restaurant, and the costume shop. People called out to her, "Miss Burke, how are ya?" and "Billie, slow down. You're going too fast." But she ignored them. When she'd made it as far as the commissary, she heard a young man's voice call out from 10 feet ahead. She'd ignore him, too, but she didn't recognize his voice so she snuck a look. She didn't recognize his face, either. She sped up and looked away.

"Miss Burke, wait," he said again, but this time with urgency. "I want to talk to you."

She tried to keep her eyes straight ahead, but to her right in front of the commissary door was Bert Lahr, Oz's lion character, still in costume. He waved his arms at her as if he needed help. She couldn't stop. She didn't want to be late, and her adrenaline was pushing her forward. Standing in front of Bert was the young man she hadn't recognized, and he had Bert cornered.

Bert would have to fend for himself. She'd apologize to him later.

She crossed the street in front of an electric cart and made it to the left sidewalk. There, she bumped into a group of actors standing in front of the barbershop--one cowboy, one monk, and two civil war soldiers. She pushed through them as best she could, and on the other side was Bert's nuisance, a red-haired young man in a suit that was two sizes too big for him. She looked at the commissary door. No Bert.

"Excuse me," the young man, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry to bother you." He took off his Stetson hat and bowed.

"I'm in a bit of a hurry," she said. "If you don't mind."

"Only take a second."

"Excuse me." She tried to get around him, but he stepped in front of her with his hands up. She froze, and her eyes searched for help. Two executives rolled by in an electric car, but they didn't even look. She didn't see any security guards.

"Miss Burke," he said, half out of breath. "Gosh, it's good to meet you. May I ask a question?" He removed his hat and revealed yam-colored hair. He took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," she said, forcing a smile, reminding herself of rule number one: Never be rude to a fan. Yet she held back an urge to push past him. "I wish I had the time, but I have to be somewhere."

"I'm Tom O'Donough. I'm a publicist. My office is at Vine and Hollywood." He pulled a calling card from inside his jacket.

He wasn't old enough to be a publicist. He was barely old enough to wear a Stetson. He looked more like a college chess team player. Publicists had potbellies around their middles from 20 years of beer, and bald spots on their heads from scratching scalps for ideas.

"That's lovely. Perhaps another time," she said.

"I'm sorry to be so abrupt Miss Burke. I'm sure you have important business to attend to--"

"I do."

"If I could just have a second of your time."

"You asked for that already." Maybe he'd go away if she gave him a second. She held up an index finger and sighed. "Very well. I'll answer one question."

"I want to represent you. I could do a lot for you."

"Is that what you tried to sell Mr. Lahr?" she said.

"That's what I'm offering any big star who will listen."

She glanced at her jeweled wristwatch. "You one question has been answered."

"I haven't asked you anything, yet."

"Yes, you did, and the answer is 'no.' MGM handles that."

"Are they doing a good job?"

That question snagged her, because the answer was "No," they hadn't done a good job. They were sharp at promoting her films, but not her or life, which was something the fans needed to see to stay interested. There was nothing she could do about it. She was MGM's property. But then again, her contract didn't forbid from hiring someone. She shook the thought from her head and crossed her arms over her chest. He was adorable, but this wasn't going to happen.

"How did you get past security?" she said.

"I came in with a friend."

"Hiding in the trunk, no doubt."

"Trade secret."

"Well, Mr. O'Donough, thank you for considering me, but your question was, 'Will you let me represent you,' and the answer is 'No'. I don't need a publicist. I'm sorry to cut you off, but if you'll excuse me." She took one step forward.

He took one step back. "You haven't heard what I can do for you."

She looked around his shoulder. Two security guards shaped like professional boxers with turned down mouths were coming up behind Tom, one with blonde hair, the other with black. They gripped the young man's arms.

Tom's eyes bulged.

Billie put fingers to her lips.

"Come with us," the black haired man said to Tom.

"But I was only talking to Miss Burke," Tom said, looking frail in their grasp.

"It's okay," Billie said to the men.

"He's trespassing," the blonde haired man said. "The front office received three complaints."

The two men picked Tom up by the arms and started to cart him off.

Tom shoved his calling card out to Billie.

She grabbed it.

"Call me," he begged.

Billie breathed heavily as she turned the knob to The Mount's office. She looked at her watch. She was three minutes late.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she said to The Mount.

"Hardly," The Mount said as she looked up and over her glasses. "He's running late, anyway. Please, Miss Burke. Have a seat." She motioned to a chair across from her desk as she went back to her work.

As Billie sat, she took quiet breaths, crossed her legs, and picked lint off her hose. She felt like a schoolgirl waiting to be punished by the principal. As her mind finally quieted, she looked around the room. She hadn't been in here for six months and had forgotten how bright the place was. Everything was white, from the tile floor to the plaster walls, from the leather furniture to The Mount's hair. The only thing of color in here was The Mount's eggplant-colored dress. You needed sunglasses to endure it.

The Mount granted as she read a letter.

"Something funny?" Billie asked as she straightened her pink skirt over her knees and gave her matching jacket a quick pull down.

"In a way," she said and went back to reading. The Mount was never much for words.

The office decor had been L. B.'s choice. To him, white represented the company's product--pure, clean, virginal, All-American. He wanted his employees pristine, too, which was a joke, really. Employees laughed about it behind his back. L. B. was nothing more than a drugstore cowboy hiding under a rabbi's kippah. Just ask the dozens of women he'd had sex with while married to his dedicated wife. And that reminded her of Flo, her husband, dead since '33, but his affairs were fresh in her mind.

Her neck tensed. She tried to forget about it, but she couldn't.

The Mount opened a ledger on her desk.

"What are you working on?" Billie asked, trying to sound interested.

The Mount looked up and pushed her horn-rimmed glasses up her nose. They were attached to a pearl chain on either end. "Mr. Mayer's expenses."

She wanted to ask which ones, but The Mount was L. B.'s Praetorian Guard. Billie left it to her imagination, given what some of those expenses might be: a necklace for his current lady-friend, expenses for his beach house, feed for his racehorses.

The Mount went back to work.

Billie shuffled in her seat. "I love that dress," she said. It was a freshly pressed rayon suit.

The Mount didn't look up, but managed a two-second smile.

She wasn't going to be able to start a conversation to pass the time, so she prepared lines for the worst she might hear. Whatever L. B. had to tell her, it was going to be bad. He'd called her in, and he seldom did that with talent.

The first line she thought of was, "You don't want to do this to the widow of Flo Ziegfeld." That one had worked when he tried to put her into an unflattering role. She'd use it again.

Flo had been the most creative and famous Broadway producer of the century, and maybe of all time, after Shakespeare, of course. He'd been an equally famous womanizer and gambler. She'd stayed by his side through 19 years of marriage and 40 affairs, and after they'd lost everything in '29 crash thanks to his bad investing. She'd held on, chin up high, supporting him while she rode out a series of the disasters all the way to a good contract with MGM. She'd done it because she loved him. She'd done it to save herself. The public respected her for that, and they'd defend her if she were wronged. L. B. knew that. In the past, he'd feared it.

The next line was something she could use to distract him. "I hear you want to do Flo's show Whoopee," She didn't have them, the Shubert brothers did. She'd turned them over to pay back the money they'd lent Flo. L. B. the Shuberts hated L. B.

She couldn't think of more lines, so she'd try one more thing. She pushed her knees together, crossed her ankles under the chair, and closed her eyes, repeating in her head the good luck mantra, "rabbits, rabbits, rabbits." When she got tired of it, she opened her eyes.

The Mount was still working in her ledger.

"Will it be soon?" Billie asked.

The Mount didn't look up. She didn't say anything.

Billie tried to fill herself with positive thoughts, and remembered a line that an Indian yogi had taught her: "Remain calm, serene, always in command of yourself. You will then find out how easy it is to get along."

He'd never worked at MGM.

She balled her hands into fists. If he tried to hurt her, she'd pay him back. She had a reputation for creative revenge, too. Ask Flo's mistresses. She'd humiliate them in the papers, and would get them drunk at parties and then throw them in the shower. She'd see to it they were fired, too, and then had them blackballed in New York. When she was through with them, they were sewing buttons on dresses down in Chinatown.

The intercom buzzed on The Mount's desk.

Billie jumped and grasped the chair's arms.

L. B.'s tenor voice scratched through the tinny speaker.

"You may go in now, Miss Burke," The Mount said. She rose, walked to L. B.'s door, opened it, and waved Billie in.