



# Chapter One

LOS ANGELES

FEBRUARY 1939

Victor Fleming banged his fist on the wall and yelled, “Cut.” He’d never punched a wall before during filming, at least not that Billie knew about. But then again, *The Wizard of Oz* was a whole new experiment to direct. Color. Delicate sets. Delicate people. Delicate budget. Pieces that only sometimes seemed to fit together.

Would there ever be an end? Some people had been working six days a week.

Billie stood on a platform playing Glinda the Good Witch, wand in hand, holding her breath. Sweat formed on her brow and pushed through the thick makeup, that kind that would make a fifty-four-year-old woman look thirty-five. Hopefully, this “accident” wasn’t her fault. She’d been an actress for forty years and knew enough to avoid

mistakes, but with a hoop skirt this wide, who knows what she may have banged into, especially since she was on the border of being lost in the scene? Filming had been stop-and-go, stop-and-go. She'd lost her place once, something a professional never did, something *she* never did, or at least not since she was in her twenties.

Victor swung his arms and paced. He was a thick-muscled man in his late forties, calm when things were calm, a tornado when they weren't.

The room was silent as if everyone in it had been caught in mid-breath, but then a clipboard fell on the floor, startling Billie and making her heart race. The klieg lights clicked as if tapping their toes, waiting.

Victor ran his hand through graying hair and barked, "In ten."

Billie felt the collective sigh and was glad she wasn't to blame. If she were, Victor would have said something by now. *Oz* had already been delayed twice, and was now three months behind schedule and two hundred thousand dollars over budget. Billie could buy a Bel Air estate with that amount of money. She could also buy back Berkeley Crest and restore it. Her energy dropped as sadness crept in over the loss of her home. She shook her head and took a deep breath. She was a professional, doggone it. If she thought about her former home, she'd cry. But she was Glinda the matriarch now, and Glinda never cried.

Assistants scurried about checking and fixing things. Billie touched her wig. Good. It was in place.

She used the break to get back into character. Thinking about the past always sunk her, making it take longer to find her way back. She relaxed her shoulders and became one with a set that looked like a page from the Brothers Grimm. One hundred thirty dwarfed people dressed in colorful clothing were about, talking to one another. Most of them weren't professional actors. They were just interesting folks bused in from circuses and vaudevilles across the country. Here, they were *Oz's* villagers, her subjects as Glinda the Good Witch. They were her children. Her responsibility. It was time to turn on "the mother."

She closed her eyes to slide back into Glinda, but someone tapped her shoulder. She tensed. Was she partly to blame for the delay after all? It wasn't that studio head L. B. Mayer kept score, but Billie knew she was viewed as less valuable to the studio at her age, so she needed to be careful. She opened her eyes and saw Judy Garland before her, the girl playing the lead role in the movie. Judy stood in her cute gingham dress, hair braided, with Terry the dog in her arms. Judy played twelve, but she was actually sixteen, her bosom strapped tight to her chest. Billie had been there. Most actresses had, and thinking of it made her breath quicken. The poor girl was locked up like Spam in a Hormel can.

Billie smiled. "Yes, dear?" She rubbed the terrier's chin. "Sweet Toto," she said. It was the dog's character name, and she wanted to help keep him in character, too.

"Do I look okay?" Judy asked.

Billie motioned. "Turn around." She held onto her wand with her right hand and lightly touched Judy's shoulders with her left to give her a gentle steering.

Judy made a slow turn as Billie inspected her. Stops these days worried professionals on the set, and Judy had caused more than her share. It was forgivable, Billie believed. The girl was so young in many ways, though she acted younger than Billie's daughter had at the same age. When Patty was around Judy's age, Billie and her husband, Flo, had lost everything—the theater, the house, Billie's Broadway career. Patty had handled it all so maturely that Billie worried about what was really happening inside. But now, at twenty-three, Patty still seemed fine.

"I don't see anything," Billie said, shaking her head.

Judy's shoulders relaxed. Her brown eyes asked: When will this end?

"Maybe this will be the last time," Billie said.

Judy frowned and shook her head. "I doubt it." She adjusted Terry's position in her arms. "This dog is heavy, and I can't let him down. I need to keep him out of the way of things."

Billie wanted to hold the dog, but she was still working to stay in character. She also wanted to keep her dress clean.

"Two minutes," Victor called out through a megaphone.

Judy turned. "Excuse me for a minute," she said. "I'm going out in the hall to the fountain."

"You don't have time," Billie said.

Judy left with the dog. They'd better not have to wait for her.

"In one," Victor yelled.

The townspeople, called "Munchkins," hurried into place as the klieg lights flashed and clicked.

Victor looked left and right, then his face turned apple-red. "Where's Miss Garland?" he bellowed.

Billie shook her head. That girl had been responsible for almost half the stops so far. Billie had been on the stage since age twelve, and never had she been so careless.

"Here, here," Judy called, running onto the set, the dog squirming in her arms.

Victor's chin dropped. "Good grief."

Judy took her place in front of Billie. "Sorry," she said as she set the dog on the floor.

"Thirty seconds," he said as he scanned the room.

Heads shook, but everyone seemed to be in place.

"Action," Victor said. He turned and walked to the director's chair.

The cameras purred like giant cats. The lights clicked rhythmically to the heatwave.

Judy, the Kansas girl, turned to Glinda.

Glinda tilted her head and asked, "Are you a good witch or a bad witch?"

"Who, me?" Dorothy raised her eyebrows and stepped back. "Why, I'm not a witch at all. I'm Dorothy Gale from Kansas."

Glinda pointed her wand at the dog. “Is that the witch?” she said in a lilting voice.

“Who, Toto? Toto’s my dog.”

Three Munchkins pranced up to Dorothy with “put ‘em up” swaggers and thumbs in their pockets. “We wish to welcome you to Munchkinland,” they sang, rocking back and forth.

Billie held her wand in front of her chest and smiled.

“We welcome you to Munchkinland,” they continued. “Tra la la la la la. Tra la la tra la la. Tra la la la la la la.”

The top-hatted Mayor stepped up. “From now on, you’ll be history.”

“You’ll be hist—, you’ll be hist—, you’ll be history,” sang the hundred-plus Munchkins.

A cloud of red smoke puffed up through the floor, followed by a flash of fire. The sulfur smell reached Billie’s nose. She tasted mineral oil, which made her stomach curl. She swallowed to keep her insides down.

The Munchkins screamed and scattered, hiding behind buildings and plants. The leaves quivered.

The cameras rolled as vomit surged up from Billie’s stomach. She swallowed again to force it down. There was something suspicious about the smell. It was more pungent than usual. Judy stood in front of her, facing the cameras. Billie gently pulled the girl toward her to protect them both and backed up a step. The move didn’t help. She backed up again, and her hoop skirt hit a plant behind her. The leaves on those plants were Egyptian fan-size, and she

thought she heard one hit the floor. Hopefully, the camera (and Victor) hadn't noticed.

"Goddamn it," Victor yelled. "Cut."

Billie let Judy go, closed her eyes, and dropped her chin to her chest. Film was so different from theater. On stage, you continued in front of an audience even when something unexpected happened. You figured out how to work around the problem and then you just did it. You kept going. In film, however, they spliced the scenes together in a lab. What appeared in the theaters was nothing like what had been filmed. The pieces were assembled like a puzzle. Billie had learned to suspend her character through a stop, using intention and holding on to the last memory. Doing so was becoming increasingly complex with *Oz*, though. It was like having a conversation with someone only to be stopped mid-sentence and then, twenty minutes later, being asked to pick up where you left as if nothing had happened.

She opened her eyes, half-expecting to see an assistant or someone patiently standing before her with hands folded in front of his heart, waiting. But nobody was there. She sighed in relief, turned to look at the plant, and saw that the leaf was intact.

Oh, thank God, she thought.

Victor unbuttoned his vest and looked up. "Miss Garland," he said in a measured voice, making Billie think an explosion was coming. "I need you to move closer to the smoke ring. Just a foot." He held his hands up to show