



**FINDING
DOROTHY**



ELIZABETH LETTS

Quercus

There is a word sweeter than Mother,
Home, or Heaven. That word is Liberty.

—*Matilda Joslyn Gage*

The story of “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz” was written solely to pleasure children of today. It aspires to being a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heart-aches and nightmares are left out.

—*L. Frank Baum*

I tried my *damndest* to believe in the rainbow
that I tried to get over and I *couldn't*.

—*Judy Garland*

CHAPTER

1

HOLLYWOOD

October 1938

IT WAS A CITY WITHIN A CITY, A TEXTILE MILL TO WEAVE THE gossamer of fantasy on looping looms of celluloid. From the flashing needles of the tailors in the costume shop to the zoo where the animals were trained, from the matzo ball soup in the commissary to the blinding-white offices in the brand-new Thalberg executive building, an army of people—composers and musicians, technicians and tinsmiths, directors and actors—spun thread into gold. Once upon a time, dreams were made by hand, but now they were mass-produced. These forty-four acres were their assembly line.

Outside its walls, the brown hills, tidy neighborhoods, and rusting oil derricks of Culver City gave no hint of magic; but within the gates of M-G-M—*Metro*, as it was known—you stepped inside an enchanted kingdom. A private trolley line that cut through the center of the studio's back lots could whisk you across the world, or back in time—from old New York's Brownstone Row to the Wild West's Billy the Kid Street to Renaissance Italy's Verona Square—with no stops in the outside world. In 1938, more than three thousand people labored inside these walls. Just as the Emerald City was the center of the Land of Oz, so the M-G-M Studios were the beating heart of that mythic place called Hollywood.

MAUD BAUM HAD BEEN waiting on foot outside the massive front gates of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer for almost an hour, just another face among the throngs of visitors hoping for a chance to get inside. Every now and again, a gleaming automobile pulled up to the gate. Each time, the studio's guard snapped to attention and offered a crisp salute. Whenever this happened, the fans waiting around the entrance, hoping to catch a peek of the stars, would leap forward, thrusting bits of papers through the car's windows. As Maud observed this spectacle, she couldn't help but feel a pang for Frank: his doomed Oz Manufacturing Film Company, a single giant barn-like structure, had been just a short distance away from the current location of this thriving metropolis of Metro. In 1914, when Frank had opened his company, Hollywood had been a sleepy backwater of orange trees and bungalows, and filmmaking a crazy venture seen as a passing fad. If only he could have lived to see what a movie studio would become over the course of the next two decades: another White City, a giant theater stage. This fantastical place was the concrete manifestation of what Frank had been able to imagine long before it had come to pass.

At last it was Maud's turn. As the guard scribbled her a pass, her stomach fluttered. Inside her purse, she had the small cutout torn from *Variety*. She didn't need to look at it; she had long since memorized its few words: "OZ" SOLD TO LOUIS B. MAYER AT M-G-M. As the last living link to the inspiration behind the story, she was determined to offer her services as a consultant. But getting access to the studio had not been easy. For months, they had rebuffed her calls, only reluctantly setting up a meeting with the studio head, Louis B. Mayer, because the receptionist was no doubt fed up with answering her daily queries. Today she would make her case.

If Maud's suffragist mother, Matilda, had taught her anything, it was that if you wanted something, you needed to ask for it—or *demand* it, if necessary. True, Maud would far rather be reading a book at Ozcot, her Hollywood home, but she had made a promise to her late husband that she aimed to keep.

The guard pushed her day pass through the glass-fronted window and gave her a nod.

“Where is the Thalberg Building?” she asked.

He jerked his head to the left—a gesture that could have pointed anywhere. “White Lung? Just head that way. You can’t miss it.”

White Lung? What a peculiar name for a building. Maud was about to ask him why, but as she’d aged she’d learned to keep her thoughts to herself so as not to come off as a doddering old fool.

Inside the studio’s gates, the paths and private roads were crowded with people and vehicles. A knot of actors hurried by, costumed in elaborate ball gowns, paste jewels, and powdered wigs, followed by painters in splattered coveralls, a man humming a tune to himself, and another fellow, likely a writer, with a furrowed brow and a pencil tucked behind his ear. Maud leapt out of the way as three girls whizzed past on bicycles. Having spent much time in the theater, she was reminded of the bustle of backstage, but this—this was such an immense scale—*all the world’s a stage!* Frank had loved to quote Shakespeare. Here, it seemed to be literally true.

The Art Moderne Thalberg Building was dazzlingly white, its fresh exterior paint as clean as snow. A few scaffoldings still crept up one side—the building was clearly brand-new. When she stepped inside the polished lobby, she felt a chill prickle her skin and heard an odd wheezing sound like an old man breathing. She pulled her cardigan tighter around her shoulders as the receptionist gave her a sympathetic look.

“It’s the air conditioner,” she said. “Like a heater for cool.”

Maud suppressed a smile. Such a Frank-like idea. A heater for cool. He was always saying backward things like that.

“May I help you?”

“I am here to see Mr. Louis B. Mayer.” Maud made sure that her voice conveyed no hint of hesitation. *She who hesitates is lost.* That was another of Matilda’s expressions. Seventy-seven years old and Maud sometimes still felt as if her mother were perched just behind the wings, whispering stage instructions.

The receptionist was a young woman with a well-coiffed platinum bob. “Actress?” she asked.

“Most definitely not.”

The girl raised a stylishly penciled eyebrow and gave Maud the once-over, from her gray curls down to her sturdy brown pumps.

“Are you . . . ?” She leaned in. “His mother?”

To her credit, Maud did not show her irritation. “Mrs. L. Frank Baum. I have an appointment.”

The young woman narrowed her eyes, the rubber tip of her pencil ticking down the list. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Baum. You aren’t on Mr. Mayer’s schedule.”

“Check again,” Maud insisted. “One o’clock. I made this appointment weeks ago.” She wouldn’t let them turn her away now. She’d been waiting too long for this day to arrive.

“You’ll have to speak to Mrs. Koverman . . .” She dropped her voice. “Mount Ida. No one gets to Mr. Mayer without going through her first.”

Maud smiled. “I’m quite adept at going through people.”

“Take the elevator to the third floor. Mrs. Koverman’s desk will be right in front of you.”

As Maud waited for the elevator, her blurry reflection looked back at her from the shining brass of the twin doors. She hoped that her expression reflected a resoluteness of spirit, rather than the trepidation she was now feeling as this important meeting was at last upon her.

“Third floor,” she said to the uniformed elevator man, stepping inside.

When the doors slid open, she faced a secretary’s desk with a plaque that read MRS. IDA KOVERMAN. A stout matron with bobbed brown hair inspected Maud.

“Maud Baum,” Maud said. “I have an appointment with Mr. Louis B. Mayer.”

“On what business?”

“My late husband . . .” Maud was horrified to hear her voice squeak.

Mrs. Koverman looked at her with no trace of sympathy.

“My late husband, Mr. L. Frank Baum, was the author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.”

Mrs. Koverman's expression did not soften.

Maud had long since noted that there were two kinds of people in the world: fans of Oz—those who remembered their childhoods—and those who pretended that they had never even heard of Oz, who believed that adults should put away childish things. From the look on her face, Mrs. Koverman fell into the latter category.

“Have a seat.” She cut off any further conversation with a vigorous clacking of her typewriter keys.

Maud sat, feet crossed at the ankle, handbag and a well-worn copy of *Oz* balanced on her lap, hoping to convey that she wasn't planning on going anywhere.

Every now and again, Mrs. Koverman would stand up and rap upon the door with the brass plaque on it reading LOUIS B. MAYER, then enter with a piece of typed paper or a phone message. Each time she emerged, Maud looked at her steadily while Mrs. Koverman avoided her gaze. Once in a while, Maud glanced at her wristwatch. Soon one-thirty had come and gone.

The two women might have remained in their silent test of wills had not a large commotion ensued from the elevator bay—a loud *thwack* and a cry of “Bugger all!” filled the room. Maud was astonished to see a giant young man—well over six feet tall—rubbing his head, then bending over to gather up a scattered pile of papers from the floor. Most surprising, a brand-new edition of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* had skidded across the floor, landing almost at Maud's feet.

She picked it up and approached the man. “I believe you've lost this?”

“Right,” he said with a British accent. “Just give me a minute. I'm a bit dazed.”

Maud watched with alarm as the lanky man swayed like a tall pine on a windy day. But after a moment, he straightened his tie, took the book from Maud, and held out his other hand in greeting. “Noel Langley. Scenarist.”

He noted the faded clothbound volume Maud held in her other hand. “Doing a little homework, I see.”

“Homework?”

“Let me guess. Are you playing Auntie Em?”

“Auntie Em?” Maud was startled. She peered at the man, confused. “But how could you . . . ?”

“Clara Blandick,” Langley continued, not seeming to notice Maud’s reaction. “I presume . . .”

“Oh, the actress?” Maud said, gathering her wits. “You mean the actress?”

“Yes, the *actress*,” Langley said, louder this time. Maud blinked in irritation.

“Not at all. I’m not an actress,” Maud said firmly. “I’m Maud Baum—Mrs. L. Frank . . . ?”

Langley returned a blank look.

“My late husband, Frank—L. Frank Baum? Author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*?” Maud held up her book and pointed to the author’s name.

Still looking puzzled, he scrutinized Maud as if seeing her for the first time. She twisted the emerald she wore on her fourth finger and smoothed the folds of her simple floral dress, aware how out of place she must appear to this elegant young man.

“But the book was written before I was born . . .” Langley said slowly, as if trying to solve a difficult math problem in his head. “Surely his wife must be . . .” As he spoke, his head cocked progressively more to one side, until with his long limbs and small tilted head, he looked like a curious grasshopper.

“I’m seventy-seven years old,” Maud said. “Not dead yet, if that’s what you were thinking.”

“Certainly not, of course not,” Langley stammered, his face now beet red. “It’s just that I imagined the book was published years ago? I guess, I assumed—oh, never mind what I assumed . . .”

“Not to worry,” Maud said soothingly. “*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was published in 1900. The turn of the century.”

“Ah, yes . . .” Langley said. His blush had faded, but the tips of his auricles remained pink.

“Must seem like ancient history to a young man like you.” Maud’s heart sank at the thought.

Langley nodded in agreement.

“Which brings up a good point,” Maud said. “It’s a lucky chance I’ve run into you. You see—”

Before Maud had a chance to finish, the elevator doors slid open again and a brown-haired man seemed to blow out as if pushed by a strong wind.

“Langley!” he cried out.

“Hello,” the tall fellow answered. “Look what we have here . . . if you can believe it. It’s Mrs. L. Frank Baum. Mrs. Baum, this is Mervyn LeRoy. He’s the producer.”

LeRoy skidded to a stop in front of the pair and looked Maud up and down.

“Well, I’ll be,” he said, appearing mystified at her presence.

LeRoy’s gaze fell upon the faded green book Maud clasped in her bony, spotted hands.

“Well, now, look at this.” LeRoy reached out. “This looks like the exact same edition I had when I was a kid . . . sat on the shelf right by my bed. Loved that book so much.”

Maud sensed an opening. “Would you like to take a look?”

She held out the worn volume, the color leached from its cover and its edges frayed. Before cracking it open, LeRoy inhaled its papery scent, then reverently brushed the palm of his hand across the stamped green cloth. Flipping it open, he perused the color illustrations one by one, a half-smile on his lips.

“I grew up reading this book. Loved it! It’s hard to explain. I almost felt as if the characters were part of my own family.”

“I am glad to hear you feel that way. So you’ll understand why it’s so important to stick to the author’s vision.”

LeRoy tore his eyes away from the volume in his hands and returned his gaze to Maud, whose corporeal presence he still seemed to find puzzling. “The author’s vision? Tell the truth, I never gave a moment’s thought to the person who wrote it. Oz always seemed so timeless—eternal, really. Funny to think it started out as the idea of an unknown person with a pen in his hand.”

“I assure you, my husband was a very celebrated man in his day.

The newspapers used to be full of stories about him. Headlines. Mr. L. Frank Baum, celebrated author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz . . .*” She looked at LeRoy expectantly, but he maintained the same bland expression. Even though this one wasn’t as wet behind the ears as Langley, he had most likely still been in knee britches when Frank Baum’s name was on every lip.

“Perhaps a young man like you wouldn’t remember . . .” Maud was unable to hide the discouragement in her voice.

“No, ma’am. This is all news to me. But I promise you, it doesn’t matter one bit. I may not recall anything about the author, but I’ll definitely never forget that story!”

It pained Maud terribly to think that Frank could be forgotten, and yet, she wasn’t entirely surprised. Now, almost twenty years after her husband’s death, many people didn’t recognize his name, but was there anyone, big or small, who didn’t know Dorothy and the Scarecrow, the Tin Man and the Lion? Frank’s creations had grown more celebrated than their creator, bursting out of the confines of the pages to which Frank had entrusted them. Of all people, Maud knew best that none of it—the Wizard, the Witches, the Land of Oz itself—would have existed were it not for the real flesh-and-blood man who had walked this earth, who had lived and laughed, and sometimes suffered . . .

“Mrs. Baum?” LeRoy was holding the book out to her. Maud realized she had been lost in her thoughts.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure.” He turned to go.

“Mr. LeRoy?” Maud held out her hand.

“Yes?”

“Do you think that you could . . . Well, it’s just that . . . You see . . . I’m the last link to the author of this book, and yet I can’t even get permission—”

“*Mister LeRoy,*” Ida Koverman interrupted.

He pivoted to Mrs. Koverman as if surprised by her presence. “Well there, Ida,” he said jovially. “Do you know who we have here?” He held up the book. “This is Mrs. L. Frank Baum! Can you believe it?”

Mrs. Koverman’s eyebrows remained fixed in a straight line,

matching exactly the cast of her mouth. "Mr. Mayer will see you and Langley now."

At the mention of Mayer's name, the two men were suddenly all business. Langley muttered, "Good day," LeRoy tipped his hat, and Maud realized that their brief conversation was over. The two men hurried inside the confines of Louis B. Mayer's office without a backward glance, leaving Maud no choice but to return to her seat. Half an hour later, when Mayer's door pushed open and the two men emerged, Maud stood up expectantly, hoping to engage them once again, but this time, deep in conversation, the men barely nodded to her as they passed, and she soon found herself alone with Mrs. Koverman, who was typing with a rapid-fire *clickety-clack, clickety-clack, zing*.

After what seemed an eternity, Ida Koverman stood up and beckoned. The door swung open upon an office so vast that Maud could have ridden a bicycle across it. At one end stood a pearly grand piano; at the other was a massive white semicircular desk. Behind the desk sat a round-faced, bald-pated man with equally round spectacles. To Maud, he looked like a prairie dog just emerging from his hole. He seemed to take no note of her at all but was rummaging around on his desk, leafing through some papers that might have been a script. Behind her, Mrs. Koverman exited, leaving the door open. Maud stood still, waiting for some sign of acknowledgment; at last, certain that none was forthcoming, she approached.

Louis B. Mayer looked up, as if startled to see her there. "Mrs. L. Frank Baum," he burst out, jumping up from his seat. "Mrs. Oz herself." He stood up and reached across the desk, pumping Maud's hand warmly, then dropped it suddenly, taking a step back as if seeing her for the first time. "So tell me, Mrs. L. Frank Baum. What can I do for you today?"

"I'm here to offer my services," Maud said. "I called the moment I saw the announcement in *Variety*." Maud did not mention that the studio had been rebuffing her overtures for months. "I want to be a resource to you. I can tell you all about Oz, and about the man who created him. Nobody knows more about the story than I do—"

Mayer cut her off, calling through the open door.

“Ida?”

Mrs. Koverman popped her head in.

“Mr. Mayer?”

“Bring that box of letters in here, will you?”

A moment later, the secretary deposited a large box on the desk.

“Be a doll and read us a couple.”

She sifted through the box for a minute and pulled out an envelope, from which she extracted a letter.

“Go on,” Mayer said.

Mrs. Koverman began to read in a high-pitched singsong: “‘Dear Mr. Mayer, please make sure that you don’t change anything in the book. Sincerely, Mrs. E. J. Egdemane, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.’”

Maud sat up straighter in her chair. “Ah yes, the mail. We used to receive it by the wheelbarrowful. The fans are so passionate. Did you know that my husband used to incorporate suggestions from children into the storyline whenever he could?”

Mayer sat impassively, hands folded on the desk in front of him. Maud couldn’t decipher his expression.

Mrs. Koverman rummaged around and plucked out another, as if picking numbers for a game of Bingo. “This one’s from, let’s see . . . Edmonton, Washington. ‘Dear Mr. Mayer, Nobody can play the scarecrow like Mr. Fred Stone from the Broadway show. Please see to it that he is cast in the movie.’”

Mayer grinned. “No matter that old Fred Stone has hardly been able to walk since he got wrecked in that airplane stunt, never mind dance.”

“Stone is quite recuperated,” Maud said tartly, but Mayer was still nodding for Mrs. Koverman to continue with her recitation.

“‘Dear Mr. Mayer, My name is Gertrude P. Yelvington. I’ve been reading the Oz books since I was a young girl. Judy Garland does not look like Dorothy. P.S.: Please see to it that the characters look like the illustrations done by W. W. Denslow . . . I like those the best.’”

She dropped it, fluttering, back into the box.

“You see what I’m up against,” Mayer said. “Everyone has an opinion. I’ve been told that more than ninety million people have read one or more of the Oz books. Of course I don’t need to tell *you* that, Mrs. Baum. Oz is one of the best-known stories in the world. That’s both our blessing and our curse. So, you have opinions about how the movie should be? Well, take a ticket and stand in line.”

Maud tried to keep her composure. She had not known what to expect from Mayer, but she had not contemplated such an abrupt and thorough disregard.

“But, Mr. Mayer—”

“Is that all, Mrs. Baum? I’m a very busy man.”

Maud looked at him steadily, her mother’s daughter, even now. “No, Mr. Mayer, I’m not finished. Please hear me out. You need to understand that you have an obligation. To many people, Oz is a real place. . . . And not just a real place—a better place. One that is distant from the cares of this world. There are children right now who are in difficult circumstances, who can escape to the Land of Oz and feel as if—”

“Of course, of course.” Mayer waved his hand dismissively. “The story is in the best hands. You have nothing to worry about, Mrs. Baum. Thank you so much for visiting today—if something comes up we’ll call. . . . Ida, take Mrs. Baum’s phone number, would you?” He had already disengaged.

So much was riding on this encounter, Maud found herself grasping to explain. She wanted to say that she was the only person who could help them stay true to the spirit of the story, because she was the only one who knew the story’s secrets. Yet it was difficult to articulate such an imprecise thought, especially to such an abrupt and dismissive little man. So, instead of making a reasoned argument, Maud defaulted to the truth.

“I’m here to look after Dorothy.”

Mayer regarded her skeptically.

“Dorothy?”

Maud nodded. “That’s right.”

Mayer chuckled. "Judy Garland has a mother, Ethel Gumm, I'm sure you'll find she's quite involved in taking care of her daughter. I'd suggest you not get in her way. She's a real fireball, that one."

"Well, it's not the actress I'm concerned with . . ." Maud said. "It's Dorothy."

"The character?"

"Without Dorothy, the story is nothing."

"Mr. Mayer—" Ida Koverman interrupted, glancing at her watch. "You wanted to see Harburg and Arlen? They're working in Sound Stage One. If you leave right now, you can catch them."

Mayer jumped up and spun from behind the desk. "Why don't you come with me, Mrs. Baum?" he said. "I'll introduce you to our star. One look at our Dorothy and I'm sure your mind will be set at ease. I'm telling you, she's divine."

CHAPTER

2

HOLLYWOOD

October 1938

MAUD COULD BARELY KEEP UP WITH THE SMALL MAN as he bounded onto the elevator. When the twin doors slid open, she raced after him as he crossed the polished lobby floor. They emerged into a crowded alleyway where the air was, thankfully, a bit warmer than inside. After waiting for so many weeks, rehearsing her speech in her mind, she had clearly not gotten through to him. How could she explain that she wanted to be a governess to Frank's unruly ménage of fictional creations and to fulfill her long-ago promise that she would look after Dorothy?

But she didn't have long to dwell. Mayer was ducking in and out of the throng, striding past four costumed centurions carrying shields and swords, darting around a group of jaunty sailors, and whizzing past two ballerinas walking flat-footed in their ballet slippers and pink leotards, their pointe shoes slung over their shoulders. Soon Mayer led Maud to a large building with *STAGE ONE* emblazoned on the door.

"The girl is going to sing," he said. "Big star, big star. Biggest voice you'll ever hear. She'll knock your socks off."

On a stage at the far end were two men. One held a pad of paper in his hands and had a pencil stuck behind his ear; the other sat at a piano tapping out chords.

Mayer showed Maud to a seat near the back—there were rows of empty chairs, each faced by an empty music stand. He then hurried up the three steps onto the stage. He looked over the shoulder of the piano player, fidgeted with some papers on top of the instrument. He did not take a seat. His sudden appearance in the building seemed to fluster the musicians. The piano player fell silent and his head sank down on his neck, a half-submerged vessel between the oceans of his shoulders.

At first Maud thought they were alone in the room—piano player, pencil-behind-the-ear man, Louis B. Mayer, and herself—but then her eye was drawn to one corner of the stage, where a bored-looking teenage girl straddled a stool, one arm tightly folded across her chest, as if she were embarrassed by the suggestion of breasts that showed through her blouse. Could this really be Dorothy?

“Shall we take it from the top then? A one, two, three . . .”

The piano player warmed up with a few bars, and the girl squinted at a pad of paper she held in her hand, then put it down on her lap. The man with the pencil behind his ear looked up and caught Maud’s eye—as if he had not noticed the old woman’s presence until now—then turned back to his notepad as the piano player continued.

For a small girl, she had a big mouth, and when she opened it, the sound she made was twice as big as she was.

The notes started low and then took flight, showcasing the girl’s voice as it ascended. Maud could feel it vibrating deep within her chest, an emotion as much as a sound. She was so struck by the tone that at first she didn’t think about the words, but as she tuned into the lyrics, her face flushed. The song was about a rainbow? Where on earth had those lyrics come from? There were no rainbows in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Nobody knew about the rainbow—besides herself and Frank. She felt a momentary flicker—that there was something familiar in this girl, in this tune—but the piano hit a false note, the girl frowned, and the sensation faded.

The piano player stopped, trying out several chord progressions. Maud looked around the room, half-expecting to see Frank.

Wouldn't that be just like him? Popping his head out from behind a doorway, eyes a-twinkle. Maud loosened her collar, slipped off her sweater. Of course, Frank was not going to appear here, at *Metro*, in 1938. He'd been gone for almost twenty years; Maud knew that perfectly well. She was not crazy. Her mind was sharp as ever. She shifted in her seat, corrected her posture, folded her hands in her lap.

After several false starts, the piano player went on, sounding out complex, resonant chords that shifted through elegant progressions. The girl's big voice effortlessly filled the room. When she stopped singing, the silence that followed seemed like the plain sister of a beautiful girl.

Peering at Mayer from under her dark fringe of lashes, the girl was clearly hoping for a note of affirmation.

"Oh, my little hunchback can certainly sing! Come over and give Daddy a hug," he said.

She slowly uncoiled from her stool, unveiling a glimpse of the woman she would soon become; then, younger again, she rushed toward him, flinging her arms around the short man, so that she knocked his glasses askew. Maud watched the spectacle uncomfortably. The girl looked to be at least fifteen and was surely too old to be quite so affectionate to a grown man. Who wasn't her father.

"And the song?" the piano player interjected.

Mayer dropped his embrace of the young actress and turned to the fellow at the piano as Judy, suddenly subdued, slunk back to her perch on the stool.

"Perfect. Excellent. Very good. Everything she sings is perfect."

"I think the song isn't quite right," Maud said.

Mayer turned and stared at her, as if he had forgotten she was there.

"Perhaps just a little bit faster next time," Mayer said.

"Not faster," Maud said, annoyed that her voice had emerged like a mouse's soft squeak. She cleared her throat. She had never had trouble speaking her mind—but the devil of old age was that sometimes she sounded frail when she didn't feel it in the least.

“The song,” Maud said. “Where exactly did you say it came from?”

“Where exactly, didja say?” The piano man stood from the bench and crossed the stage, shading his eyes and peering into the darkness. “I can tell you where. I was in the car, idling at the corner of Sunset and Laurel, right in front of Schwab’s . . .”

Maud was instantly intrigued. “Go on.”

“That’s where it came from . . . popped right into my mind. I scribbled a few bars on a receipt—right there on the dashboard of my car—and as soon as the light changed, I rushed back to the studio.”

“Sunset and Laurel?” Maud said. “That’s the last trolley stop.”

“With all due respect, there’s no trolley there,” the man with the pencil behind his ear said. “The Garden of Allah Hotel is on that corner. Never seen a trolley near there.”

“I’m quite aware there is no trolley there *now*. I’m speaking of the year 1910. My husband and I got off the trolley there on our first visit to Hollywood.” An image of Frank rose up in front of Maud: his dust-covered white spats, crumpled gray suit, and the impressive fountain of his brown moustache as he stepped off the trolley car, onto a dirt road surrounded by orange groves, and crowed, “So this is Hollywood!”

The girl turned and stared, blinking into the dark. “Who are you?”

“Oh, we have a visitor from the Land of Oz itself—this is Mrs. Maud Baum. Her husband wrote the book,” Mayer said. “Mrs. Baum, meet Judy Garland. She is going to be a huge star!”

“My *late* husband wrote the book,” Maud corrected, the vivid momentary vision of Frank already fading.

“And, of course, being the widow of a man who wrote a book does not give you the slightest expertise in music,” the piano man muttered, just loud enough for Maud to hear.

But the girl seemed interested. “Why? Why do you say the song is not right?” Judy stood up from her stool and walked to the edge of the stage, peering into the shadowy hall.

“Well . . .” Maud breathed in slowly to calm herself, collecting her thoughts. “It’s lovely, it’s just . . . something about the manner. There’s not enough wanting in it.”

“Not enough wanting?” the piano man said. “That’s preposterous.” He played a few bars, heavy on the pedal, for emphasis.

But the girl was listening. Maud could tell.

“Have you ever seen something that you wanted more than anything, but you knew you couldn’t have it? Have you ever pressed your nose right up to a plate-glass window and seen the very thing you’re longing for—so close you could reach out and touch it, and yet you know you will never have it?”

The girl’s eyes narrowed. A faint blush crept along her cheekbones, and one corner of her mouth tugged down. She twirled a lock of hair around her finger.

“Sing it like that.”

Maud studied the girl’s expression. Would this girl, this would-be Dorothy, understand? Could she understand?

“She can sing it however you want!” a woman’s voice called out from the shadows behind the stage. “Just say it, and she’ll do it. Do what the lady says, Baby. Sing it with more wanting.”

The girl’s forehead puckered, and her mouth pinched into a pout. She whirled around and hissed, loud enough for Maud to hear, “Be quiet, Mother! I’m trying to listen to the lady.”

“Just trying to help,” her mother stage-whispered back.

Maud could now make out a middle-aged woman wearing a pink blouse and white pedal pushers, standing in the shadows at the side of the stage.

“Pardon me, ma’am,” the fellow with the pencil behind his ear said to Maud. “What was it you were saying? I’m Yip Harburg, lyricist. I wanted to hear what else you had to say.” The pencil man had a shock of dark hair, and the warm flash in his brown eyes was visible behind his spectacles.

“Well, about the words . . .” Maud said softly. “When she sings ‘I’ll go over the rainbow,’ isn’t that a bit too certain?”

“Too certain?” Harburg said. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“Shouldn’t a song about a rainbow have a little more doubt in it?” Maud said, starting tentatively but getting a little louder as she spoke. “Just because you can see a rainbow doesn’t mean you know how to get to the other side. Think about it. That pot of gold—you can’t ever see it, right? You have to take it on faith.”

The pencil man nodded, then slipped the orange stub from behind his ear and scratched a few words on his pad of paper. “You know, I hadn’t thought of it quite like that, but you could be on to something.”

Maud turned back to the girl, to see if she understood, but the girl’s mother now stood next to her on the stage, fussing with her hair and whispering to her in an agitated hush.

Louis B. Mayer clapped his hands twice. “Splendid! Splendid! We must be going. Keep working on it. Just continue to do as you do. . . . Don’t you worry, Mrs. Baum. Chances are this song won’t even make it to the final cut. No reason to think about it now.”

Mayer put his arm through Maud’s, directing her toward the door. As he hustled her out into the bustling alley, Maud craned her neck, trying to catch a last glimpse of the girl as the heavy sound stage door swung shut behind them.

“L.B. . . . !” someone was shouting.

“A moment, please!” Mayer said, then hurried away from Maud without even saying goodbye, leaving her alone in the crowded alley.

“But, Mr. Mayer!” Maud called out to his receding back.

“Come around whenever you like!” he called out to her. “Just don’t get in the way.”

Maud headed home, feeling unsettled. She’d known from the moment she’d seen Judy that she was too old to play Dorothy, who was but a girl in pigtails, forever young. But that soaring voice . . . somehow this girl, a stranger to Maud, had conveyed exactly what it felt like to be just spreading her wings, waiting to fly. Even now, in her eighth decade, Maud had not forgotten those complicated emotions: the desire to escape, to get away, to grow up—the fate of every girl.

Every girl except Dorothy.

Something had pierced Maud deep down. Was it the girl? Or was it the song, whose odd melody had burrowed into her ear and now seemed to play in the background? She drove home unable to forget the tune's haunting effect, like a Broadway overture teasing at what was to come.