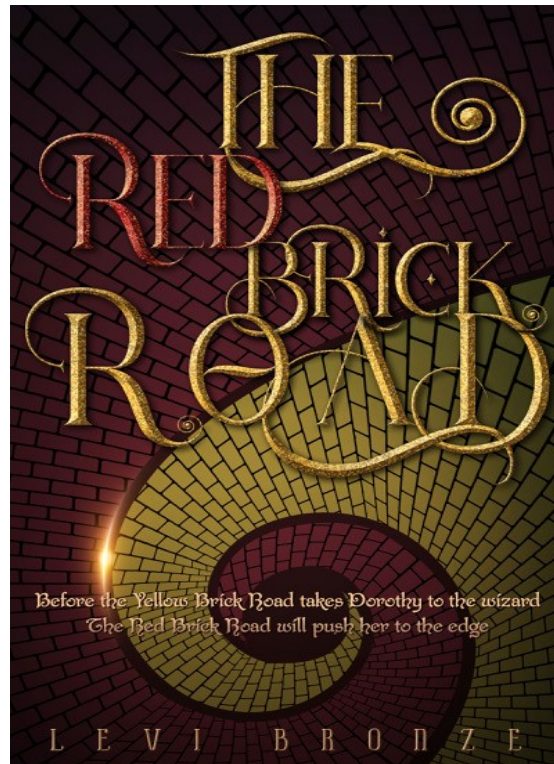


# THE RED BRICK ROAD

By Levi Bronze



And so, with Toto trotting along soberly behind her, she started on her journey. There were several roads near by . . .

-L. Frank Baum

## CHAPTER ONE

Like anyone from Kansas, Dorothy knew a thing or two about tornadoes. She knew they could pick up houses. But she never imagined that they could carry houses to another world—a world filled with odd creatures, peculiar plants, strange trees, little people called Munchkins who lived in a little village called Munchkinland . . . and witches. Bad ones and at least one good one. Dorothy's house had landed on a witch—a bad one who wore THE MOST dazzling slippers. She didn't wear them anymore though. The impact of Dorothy's house vanquished the evil spell caster. Now the slippers were on Dorothy's feet. What use does a dead witch have for pretty shoes?

Donned in sparkling footwear, Dorothy headed out to see the Wizard of Oz. She didn't know much about the wizard other than the fact that he, and he alone, could help her get back to Kansas. At least that's what the good witch had told her. "Follow the Yellow Brick Road," she'd said. "And it'll take you to the wizard." So, Dorothy took her advice. What other option did she have?

Now, Dorothy had no sooner reached the first bend of the Yellow Brick Road till she came to a lone fashion boutique on the outskirts of Munchkinland. The store's eye candy and romantic charm drew her like a magnet attracting a needle. With covetous eyes she gazed through the front window at the beautiful inventory on display. Silk gloves. Satin ribbons. Elegant hats. Ballroom dresses. Some with exotic flowers. Some with colorful feathers. Some with glittery stones.

Dorothy stepped inside to peruse.

A turquoise dress caught her attention. She ran her fingers through its ruffled lace then pulled it from the rack and held it close to her lean frame. "Oh, look at this one, Toto. It's like it was made to be worn with these amazing shoes. It's nicer than anything Molly Anne Brewster ever had," she said as she finger-combed her pigtails. She studied her reflection in the large mirror on the wall. The beautiful dress and her near perfect complexion didn't prevent her from focusing on the bridge of her nose. She wished it were a bit narrower. Dorothy was convinced that, were it not for the shape of her nose, she'd be heaped with ongoing compliments for having a pretty face. People back home were forever praising Molly Anne's fair face, especially when Dorothy was within earshot. Or, so it seemed. Not a day passed that Dorothy didn't wish to be prettier and more popular than her archival. Dorothy was convinced that she'd be everything Molly Anne was and more if only Aunt Em and Uncle Henry owned a business in town like the Brewsters.

After a few spins to see how far the skirt would flare, she returned it to the rack and walked over to the hats. "Toto, this place is utterly fantastic. It has all a girl could want."

"ALL? Did you say ALL?" a man said.

Dorothy turned, caught off guard by the presence of another. He stood before her, his shiny black hair slicked back and groomed with a flawless part, the perfect lines of his manicured beard accenting his smooth, chiseled face.

Dorothy looked down at one of the hats and ran a finger along the edge of its brim. “Well, yes. I guess so. What more could a girl want?”

The man walked over to Dorothy.

“What more? Why, there’s so much more . . . so very much more. Let your imagination run free!” He raised his hands upward, thrusting them open as if he were shooting light from his fingertips. “Muster up your every wish! Life’s too short to deny yourself! Declare what you want!”

“Well . . . I WOULD like to have dresses as fine and as lovely as the kind Molly Anne wears. This old blue and white thing I have on is too plain for me. It’s unworthy to be worn with these beautiful shoes I’m wearing,” Dorothy said, tugging at the sides of her dress. “Same with all my other dresses, which aren’t many at that.”

“You see all these?” the man said while fanning a hand toward the glittering collection. “These are simple, modest dresses for the simple, modest people of Munchkinland. I have more in another territory not far from here where someone of your demanding taste can get a dress even grander than these.”

The man pointed to Dorothy’s shoes. “Ones more in keeping with those magnificent slippers you’re wearing.”

“Really? Dresses grander than these?” Dorothy said. “I can’t imagine.”

“Oh, yes. Ones that would make Molly Anne Brewster’s best dresses look like used dish aprons or tattered house gowns.”

“You can’t be serious!”

The man clutched the black lapels of his burgundy jacket and swelled his chest. "I am indeed. Why, I can see you in one of them right now and Molly Anne standing next to you on the verge of fainting with envy. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I certainly would."

The man cocked his chin and batted his eyelashes.

"Well, it can happen in this land I speak of."

"Where is this land?"

The man snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "I'll make a deal with you. I'll tell you if you tell me the things you desire in life."

Dorothy nodded. "Deal. I'd like to be beautiful. Everyday. So beautiful that people are forever asking to take my picture. And, girls get mad because their boyfriends are always looking at me."

"Absolutely. Why not? Anything else? Surely there's more."

"And, I'd like to be wealthy too. So wealthy I could buy anything I want. Beautiful dresses. Fabulous hats. A big mansion. Have butlers and maids. Anything. And eat meat every day if I choose. I'm tired of eating beans and potatoes all the time and having meat only on Sundays."

The man leaned down and looked Dorothy in the eyes. "I couldn't agree with you more. The place I make mention of is a place where beauty and wealth are just waiting for you. All you have to do is go there and take it. Like grabbing a firefly on a dark night," he said and clinched a fist in the air.

"It sounds wonderful. Tell me where it is."

The man turned on his heels and paced away from Dorothy a few steps, the long tail of his suit coat swaying as he walked. He raised an index finger above his head.

"I assure you we'll get to that in a moment. But, for now, keep on wishing." He made a rolling motion with his hand. "Surely, being the girl from Kansas you are, you have aspirations that go beyond fancy dresses and a pile of money."

"How did you know I was from Kansas?"

The man turned back to her. He put one hand over his heart, stroked his hair with the other and grinned. "I know all kinds of things, but they'll keep for another day. Today is all about you. So, carry on with your wishing."

Dorothy thought for a moment then dropped her shoulders as if defeated.

"What? What? Why such a dreadful countenance?" asked the man.

Dorothy shook her head. "It's no use. No one or no place can give it to me."

"Well, you see now. That's where your thinking is all wrong," he said, shaking an index finger. "But I can understand. You've been told things that aren't true . . . well-meant by some well-meaning folks, I'm sure. But false, nonetheless. What you need is for someone to point out opportunities. Give you a little encouragement. And all your wishes will come true."

"You think so? You really think so?"

"I know so. It's my business to know so. I've been helping folks like you for longer than you've been alive. Believe me, I know a deserving soul the minute I lay eyes on one. And you, Dorothy, are as deserving as anyone I've ever met. So, don't quit dreaming now." He winked at her with one eye.

"You're on a roll."

"How'd you know my name is Dorothy?"

The man gave a tight smile.

"It may seem crazy," Dorothy said. "But I'd like to be famous. So famous that everyone recognizes me wherever I go. Stand in line to see me up close and get my autograph."

The man pulled a stool from under a table and sat down on it facing Dorothy, his eyes changing like kaleidoscopes being turned. The pleasant fragrance of his cologne crept into her nostrils, his scent the same as Uncle Henry's at Sunday morning preaching.

"Listen, Dorothy. Now, you're talking," he said. "Power . . . there's nothing so grand as power. When you have it you can do anything you want. Be anything you want. Have everything you want."

He gazed up at the ceiling and began raising one hand slowly. “This place I speak of is where your star can rise to the heavens.”

He lowered his hand and rested it on her shoulder. “Your only limitations will be those you put on yourself. The only things you’ll miss out on will be those things you deprive yourself of. It’s all up to you.”

Dorothy stared for a moment at his hand touching her then looked back into his fantastic, captivating eyes. “This marvelous place you speak of, where is it?”

The man stood up and rubbed his chin. He leaned against a display counter and peered down at her.

“Before I tell you WHERE, you have to settle in your own mind the matter of HOW.”

Dorothy reached down and picked up Toto.

“How? What do you mean by ‘how’?” she said, holding the little dog close to her cheek.

The man drew down his eyebrows the way Dorothy had often seen Uncle Henry do when he was about to say something important. “I mean the place will not yield its bounty if you’re not of the right frame of mind about things. You have to go about things in a very particular way.”

Dorothy made a rolling motion with one hand. “I’m listening. Go on.”

“You have to relinquish ALL the things you’ve been taught and start living your life by a singular mindset—a simple, rigid motto.” He crossed his arms in front of his stomach. “Until you adopt it fully, you’re bound for a life of just enough and no more.”

“I’m sick and tired of just enough and no more. And, I’ll do whatever it takes to get what I want in life.”

The man smiled. “Very well, then. Here it is. From this day onward tell yourself, ‘*Me first no matter the cost.*’”

Dorothy grimaced and jerked her head back. “That’s all there is to it? Just tell myself that?”

The man sat back down on the stool and pulled in close to her face again. Toto growled at the man. Dorothy stroked the irritated dog's head in effort to calm him as the man continued.

“No, you have to follow it up with action. You have to tell yourself, then obey yourself. At times it'll be easy. Other times it'll be so hard it'll wrench you to the core of your being. You may get hurt and you may have to hurt others. Comes with success I'm afraid. But, if you'll stay faithful to the motto, you'll look up one day and find yourself possessing ALL your desires.”

“I don't know. I've always been taught the opposite. You know. To put others first. That's what Aunt Em and Uncle Henry have taught me ever since I can remember. So have others.”

“And those who've taught you, how much glamour and wealth and fame do they have?”

“Well, not much . . . really.”

“Then such a philosophy hasn't benefited them, has it?”

The man's questions hit Dorothy like hammers. Everyone back in Kansas who'd told her to put others first just barely got by. None had all the things Dorothy desired. Most didn't even have some of the things. Perhaps the man had a point.

“But those who've been teaching me are good people,” Dorothy said.

The man extended opened palms and shrugged his shoulders. “What is good?”

Dorothy felt her moral upbringing starting to fracture. She looked at the man. “What is good?” was a question she couldn't answer.

The man slapped his hands to his knees. “I don't doubt they care for you and want the best for you. They've simply been teaching you what was taught to them. It's an ongoing cycle of misery and discontent. ‘Be good,’ they say. ‘Do good,’ they say. Such proverbs and the like have kept many promising girls like you from the beauty, wealth and fame they've deserved. With my vast experience I can tell you with conviction that being good is overrated.”

“Really?”

“Really. Besides, it’s weak. Good is a servant’s word. Forget about it. Erase it from your vocabulary. Achieving and acquiring are the things that really matter. They sway the world. They make legends. And they only come to those who live by the motto. Life goes on with two types of people: those who get what they deserve and those who miss out. I help determined people get what they deserve. The others,” he said, making a backhanded wave in the air, “Well, they’re just a waste of my time.”

Dorothy wrestled to adapt to what the man was saying.

“I don’t know, Mister.”

The man rose from the stool and started busying himself with his merchandise.

“Maybe I was wrong about you. Maybe you’re not ready for fineries and privileges and power.” He shooed her off with one hand. “You be on your way back to Kansas now. I’m sure before too long you’ll learn to be content with beans and potatoes and homemade dresses.”

Toto began to growl at the man again. Dorothy rubbed her faithful pet and pondered.

She’d never heard such talk in all her life. But the man seemed to have a point. All those who’d been teaching her over the years had none of the things she wanted out of life. She didn’t want to grow up and be like Aunt Em and Uncle Henry. Having to work from sun-up to sundown just to have enough money to barely get by. Being looked down on because you can afford a new pair of shoes but only once a year. Never invited to the ladies’ society meetings because you live on a farm instead of in town like Molly Anne Brewster and her family. Marrying a man who wears dungarees and brogan boots instead of tailored suits and designer shoes. No, Dorothy was determined to have more and better.

She sat Toto down on the floor and walked over to the man. “No! I’m ready, I tell you. I’m ready. Me first no matter the cost. It’s the motto I’ll live by from this day forward.”

The man grinned as he re-arranged a pair of gloves. “Okay, then. If your mind is made up?”

“It is. As made up as it’s ever been about anything.”

“Very well, then,” he said. He motioned with a jerk of his head. “Come outside with me.”



Dorothy followed the man out of the boutique, Toto walking next to her. The man stood on the Yellow Brick Road and spread his hands toward the horizon.

“What do you see? Cornfields? Forests? Hills? Valleys?”

“Yes,” Dorothy said.

The man lowered his hands and put them on his hips. “Uh huh.” He looked down at her. “Of course, you do.” He lifted his eyes and peered into the distance. “But there are other things out there that you don’t see. Things like disappointment. Struggle. Heartache. Broken dreams. Discouragement. Poverty. They’re all out there too. Just waiting in disguise for any fool to come along. But, you’re no such fool. Forget about this Yellow Brick Road. That witch who put you on this road is keeping you from your dreams. The Red Brick Road, on the other hand, is where all your dreams will come true. Take it instead. He bumped her shoulder with the back of his hand. “Go get what you deserve.”

“It’s the better road, huh?”

The man placed his hand on her shoulder again and fixed his eyes on hers. “It’s to die for,” he said, his voice breathy.

Dorothy maintained eye contact and nodded. “I think I’ll get started immediately.”

The man narrowed his eyelids. “I would if I were you.”

“Can you tell me how to get to the Red Brick Road?”

The man’s lips stretched into a grin. “My pleasure.” He turned and pointed. “Go back the way you came. When you get to the other side of Munchkinland, you’ll come to a bridge with a glass bottom. Walk across it and start living by the motto.”

“Me first!” Dorothy said.

“No matter the cost,” the man added, his words deliberate, his demeanor as heartless as a viper’s.

Dorothy started back to the downtown district of Munchkinland, Toto trotting along close to her ankles. She rounded the corner at the Munchkinland Bank. Up ahead, in the middle of the town square,

the good witch talked with the mayor and constable. The clip clap sound of the slippers on the Yellow Brick Road halted their conversation. The good witch looked toward Dorothy. "Why have you returned?"

"I've changed my mind. I'm taking the Red Brick Road instead."

The good witch shook her head. "Foolish. Foolish. You're making a tragic mistake."

Dorothy returned a contemptible look and kept up her purposeful stride. The good witch hurried over to Dorothy and walked along beside her.

"I must warn you," she said. "Once you cross the Sparkleberry River, the Yellow Brick Road will disappear and you'll have to take one of the other roads."

Dorothy kept walking.

"It's the most hazardous of all. I adjure you to reconsider for a road once chosen must be a road then taken," the good witch said. "I have your best in mind. I promise. Besides, you'll only delay your return to Kansas."

Dorothy stopped and thought. She looked down at the slippers. They seem to speak to her. Their shine and sparkle prompted her to think about all the nicer things she wanted but didn't have and would never have unless she charted a path far different than she'd been taught back in Kansas.

"No. My mind is made up. No need in trying to stop me."

The good witch returned a stiff *suit yourself* smile. The mayor and the constable arrived at the scene, both of them protesting.

"You two sound like the folks back home," Dorothy said. He looked down at her dog. "Let's go, Toto." She resumed her trapeze toward the bridge, feeling her pigtailed tapping against her back as she walked.