

THE WRONG NAIL HOLE



66

A Mother Road Mysteries Preview

Route 66 turns 100. The old road still has secrets.

The Wrong Nail Hole

Preview draft / Act One

Clara Bell Bishop trusted pencil marks more than speeches, because speeches dried clean and pencil marks kept the pressure of the hand that made them.

That was why she disliked the packet on her desk before she had cut the twine. The top sheet was too clean. The county seal had been pressed hard enough to bruise the paper. The mileage column was copied in a careful office hand, one of those dutiful little scripts that never admitted rain, mud, bad bridges, or the men who lied about all three. Beneath it, however, the corner of a field note showed a smear of blue pencil and two words written so hard the point had torn the page.

wrong nail

Clara touched the words with the side of her thumb.

The St. Louis Motor League had been loud all morning. Men came through the front room with wet hats and cigar breath, speaking of modern America as though modern America were an engine they had personally assembled. A new numbered highway system had been adopted. U.S. 66 would run from Chicago toward Los Angeles, if all the old roads, county roads, mud roads, bridge roads, and proud little towns could be persuaded to behave like one continuous thing. There had been coffee, handshakes, newspaper men, and a ribbon of red-white-and-blue bunting hung across the map cabinet.

Clara had been given the actual work.

She corrected road logs.

Not maps, the men said. Maps were drawn by engineers, printed by companies, approved by boards, and praised at luncheons. Clara corrected the thing a traveler trusted when the map failed: mileage from courthouse to bridge, bridge to schoolhouse, schoolhouse to filling station, filling station to fork, fork to town line. If the log said turn left after the white church and the white church had burned in August, Clara marked it. If the log said six miles and the road gave seven, Clara marked it. If a creek had three bridges and only one of them held a loaded touring car in winter, Clara marked it twice.

The packet said a field inspector named Walter Keene had died near Brush Jack Creek while checking new route shields.

The packet also said the road was correct.

Those two facts did not belong in the same envelope.

Clara slid the field note free. It had been folded once in haste, then again by someone who wanted the tear hidden. Beneath wrong nail was another mark, shorter and darker.

right road

She read it aloud under her breath.

“Miss Bishop?”

Mr. Ellery stood in the office doorway with his celebration smile still fitted over his mouth. He had never liked her habit of reading paper as if it might answer back.

“Yes, sir.”

“That Keene matter is for filing, not correction.”

“It has a correction note.”

“It has a dead inspector.”

“Then I would prefer the correction be made before another motorist becomes one.”

Ellery's smile thinned. Behind him, the front room laughed at something a state man had said. They were still toasting the road.

“The county report says Mr. Keene slipped near the low-water bridge during the storm. There is no defect in the route.”

Clara turned the top sheet toward him. “The county report gives the mileage from Rusk's Filling Station to the bridge as one and eight tenths.”

“So?”

She laid an older road log beside it. “Last month it was two.”

“Roads are improved.”

“Not by shortening creeks.”

Ellery looked at the numbers, then at her. “Clara.”

He used her Christian name only when he meant to be kind in the way a door could be kind by closing slowly instead of fast.

“There are governors and commissioners arguing over these numbers. There are towns that have printed handbills already. We cannot send every smudge back through committee because a clerk dislikes the handwriting.”

“I dislike the nail.”

“What nail?”

She held up the torn note.

Ellery did not take it. “Mr. Keene was an experienced man. Experienced men write all sorts of things in weather.”

“Experienced men also know which side of a post they nailed a shield to.”

“Enough.”

The front room quieted for half a breath, then grew loud again. Ellery lowered his voice.

“File it.”

Clara folded the note along its original crease. She did not say yes.

That was how she found herself two hours later in the passenger seat of Emmett Hale's truck, with Ruthie Voss sitting between the camera case and a tin of glass plates in the back, while the new U.S. highway system turned to Missouri mud under the wheels.

Emmett drove like a man in conversation with the road. He did not fight the ruts. He let the truck settle, corrected when it slid, and cursed only when the road deserved language more exact than engineering. He was broad through the shoulders and narrow in his patience, with a mechanic's hands and the habit of listening to machines before men.

“You know,” he said, “when Ellery finds out I took a League truck, he will say I stole it.”

“You borrowed it for official correction work.”

“Did he make it official?”

“He made it necessary.”

Ruthie laughed from the back. “That is not the same thing, Clara.”

“It often is.”

Rain swept over the windshield in tired gray sheets. The road beyond St. Louis had not yet learned that it was destined for legend. It was clay, gravel, standing water, farm track, old plank, new ambition. Here and there a fresh shield appeared on a post, bright against the winter hedges. Some were straight. Some leaned. One had been nailed so high a driver would miss it unless he were looking for birds.

“There,” Clara said.

Emmett slowed. A new shield stood at a fork where one road dipped toward timber and the other climbed along a ridge. The shield sent motorists down.

“That the creek road?” Ruthie asked.

Clara checked the log. “It claims so.”

Emmett spat out the window. “Claims don't hold tires.”

They followed the sign downhill.

Rusk's Filling Station appeared first as a yellow square through the rain, then as a low building with a pump, two oil drums, a sagging porch, and a hand-lettered board promising clean coffee and honest measure. A woman in a man's coat stood under the porch roof watching the road. She did not wave when the truck pulled in.

Clara stepped down into mud that took the shape of her shoe and kept it.

“Mrs. Rusk?”

“Widow Rusk, if you believe the tax man. Alma if you are buying coffee.”

“Clara Bishop. St. Louis Motor League.”

The woman's eyes went to the League marking on the truck door, then to Emmett, then to Ruthie's camera.

“You people already came.”

“Mr. Keene?”

Alma Rusk's mouth tightened. “He came alive.”

The rain made a steady clicking sound on the porch tin. Inside, a stove smoked badly, coffee boiled too long, and three men at a side table stopped speaking when Clara entered. One had county boots. One had a hotelman's pink cheeks. One was too clean for the room.

The too-clean man stood.

“Harlan Pritchard,” he said, as if the name had been printed on the county itself. “Brush Jack Improvement Committee.”

Clara had heard of him. Every new road produced men like Pritchard: boosters, chairmen, luncheon voices, citizens who carried progress in one pocket and somebody else's deed in the other.

“We are looking at the route shield near the fork,” Clara said.

“Then you have found it. New paint, straight post, visible to motorists. We are proud of it.”

“Who placed it?”

The county-boots man pushed back from the table. “My crew.”

“Your name?”

“Silas Bragg. County road foreman.”

“When?”

“Before the storm.”

“Before Mr. Keene died?”

“Most things were before Mr. Keene died,” Bragg said.

Emmett's eyes moved from Bragg's boots to the mud dried on the cuffs. Clara saw him see something and say nothing.

Pritchard put on a sorrowful face. “Walter Keene was a capable inspector. But that bridge is a hard place in rain. Nobody should have been out there after dark.”

“Why was he?”

“Duty, I suppose.”

“He wrote wrong nail before he died.”

The men at the table did not move. Alma Rusk did.

It was small: her hand tightened around the coffee pot handle, just enough to tilt the spout. One black drop fell on the stove and hissed.

“Did he?” Pritchard said.

“He did.”

“A strange thing to write.”

“Not if a sign was moved.”

Bragg laughed once. It had no humor in it.

“Lady, signs get moved because roads get fixed.”

“Was the road fixed?”

“It will be.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the county answer.”

Ruthie shifted behind Clara. The camera case knocked softly against her knee. Pritchard noticed it.

“No photographs inside, miss.”

Ruthie smiled. “Then I will take the rain. It is more honest.”

Outside, the three of them crossed the road to the fork. The signpost stood where the ditch widened. It was new cedar, set deep, with the earth tamped around it too recently to have settled. The U.S. shield was nailed on the creek side, its paint glossy beneath the rain. An arrow board below it pointed toward the low-water bridge.

Clara took off her gloves.

“You will freeze,” Emmett said.

“Paper cuts hurt worse in gloves.”

“That don't mean anything.”

“It means I cannot feel what I need to feel.”

She ran her fingers down the post. The new nail heads were cold and round. Above them, half hidden beneath the lower edge of the shield, was a shallow crescent in the wood. Not a crack. A mark.

She leaned closer.

There were old scars where some previous sign had hung. Those did not matter except to prove the post had been used before. Below the old scars were two fresh holes, dark with rain. Those were the first placement. To the right of them, one new nail held the shield where it now stood.

Three fresh wounds for a two-nail job.

“Ruthie,” Clara said.

The camera came out without another word.

Emmett stood in the road watching the station porch. Bragg had come outside. Pritchard stood behind him with one hand on the porch post and the other in his coat pocket.

“See it?” Clara asked.

Ruthie bent under the focusing cloth. “I see a post.”

“You see a confession.”

Emmett came close enough to look. “Shield was here first.” He tapped the paired holes with one knuckle. “Then moved over.”

“In haste,” Clara said.

“How do you know haste?”

She pointed to the right nail. “They did not pull the broken one clean.”

Emmett whistled softly. “That’s county stock.”

“How do you know?”

“Because cheap men buy square-cut nails by the box and complain about every bent one. Alma Rusk has round wire nails in a coffee tin by her pump. I saw them when she opened the till.”

Clara looked toward the bridge road.

“The report says Keene died after the sign was placed.”

“Maybe he died because of it.”

Rain ran from the shield in small red-rusted lines. The number was not yet famous. It was just two sixes under wet paint, bright enough to lead a motorist down a road that might not hold him.

Clara opened Walter Keene’s field note again, shielding it with her body.

wrong nail

right road

Now she understood half of it.

The wrong nail was on the post.

The right road was somewhere else.

Behind her, Bragg called from the porch. “You folks about done staring at wood?”

Clara folded the note.

“No,” she said, quietly enough that only Emmett and Ruthie heard.

Then she turned toward the low-water bridge.

What Comes Next

This preview is the opening movement of a larger Mother Road Mysteries reader-magnet story. The full version continues through the bridge, the county shed, the filling-station ledger, Ruthie's photograph, and Clara's proof that the sign was moved before Walter Keene died.

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