

From Route 66 Spring  
By Michael Lund  
fifth book in the Route 66 novel series

Prologue: Message in a Bottle

I have no doubt about when things began for me. They began with the bottle rising from the depths of Route 66 Spring. The glass artifact actually made an audible "plink" as it broke the surface, a soft announcement of its arrival within the steady bubbling of water pushing upward and the light splashes of the resulting stream flowing over rocks down into the valley.

Of course, this wasn't even called "Route 66 Spring" then. Its identity as an attraction along the Mother Road was a decade in the future at that point. This was just the spring in some woods off a gravel road southwest of my home town, Fairfield, Missouri. A lot of kids used to hike out there on weekends or holidays, both because the spring was out of parents' reach and because it was such a beautiful, hidden spot. I had come this particular time to get away from Brad Whitaker.

The spring was quietly secluded from humans and their doings. A path wound from a decaying farmhouse several hundred yards through cedar and pine down from the ridge to which the road ran. The spring was up under a rock overhang at the bottom of the ridge, fifty feet of limestone cliff rising straight up above it. Dense hardwood made a semi-circle against the cliff's base, and this setting blocked out distant sounds.

Route 66 Spring wasn't famous as a site of miracle then either. The apparition of Sacagawea from the water's winter mists--just in time to save an Osage woman from probable death--was, if it had occurred at all, years in the past, but unknown to most who lived in these parts. No, this natural wonder was hidden from fame and interest at this, my own time of crisis.

Ours state's soft rock makes it a land of geological wonders. Missouri is honeycombed with caves, for instance, its limestone and dolomite penetrated and hollowed out by water over the millennia. The region also features spectacular sink holes, circular depressions ten or twenty yards wide that pockmark fields and bottom land. And we have shut-ins, narrow valleys in which small rivers are constricted and sometimes seem to dive beneath a surface of jumbled rock.

But there are especially springs, small ones and large ones from which clear, clean water issues in all seasons of the year--Meramec Spring, Bennet Spring, Round Spring, Alley Spring, and dozens more in the southern third of the state. Underground rivers, fed by rain water making its way through layers of soil and rock, feed rising currents that emerge as springs in the long valleys banked by high Ozark ridges.

There are many stories of strange things coming to the surface of the Show Me State's countless springs, having travelled who knows how many miles and years underground: dead fish from a species long thought to have been extinct; a towel left at a picnic at the other end of the state and washed into the local drainage system; a boy's homemade toy boat that got away from him on the neighborhood creek half a dozen years earlier.

But my bottle with the message might turn out to be the most famous of all magical appearances in a Missouri spring. The handwritten letter kept dry inside for fifty years changed my life and may well be responsible for improving the world for unborn children well into the future. Until now, though, only I have known the full import of the message in the bottle. The time has come to tell its story.

When the bottle appeared, all I thought I had, as I fished it out with a forked stick pulled from the brush, was a summer day's discovery, a finder's-keeper I would show my college friends. Encrusted with mineral deposit and a goodly layer of slime, it had only vaguely a recognizable bottle shape. But I thought I saw what could be a cork at the narrow end, a stopper that suggested to me something might still be inside.

Anything to take my mind off Brad that day! He was pressuring me to marry him. We'd grown up together, dated in high school, and assumed ourselves naturally suited to a conventional life together. He had the support of both families and, until recently, my lukewarm acceptance of his uninspired proposal.

But coming home for the summer from college after my sophomore year, I'd looked at his solid build, his earnest face, his steady progress toward managing the family's prosperous insurance company and began to wonder what in the world I'd seen in him! He was kind but dull. He needed a wife to match.

"Honey," he had said to me the night before. "Honey, you don't need to go back to school in the fall. Let's get married this summer." We were parked in little pull-off along Lover's Lane. The bushes were thick, and no one else was in sight.

"I need to finish college," I pointed out, "if I'm going to get a job."

I was majoring in history, with the vague notion of teaching high school. The frontier was my favorite subject. I got excited about the challenges and opportunities people faced as America spread itself across the continent, those men and women in covered wagons crossing the prairies. Our own fates are shaped by such distant events in the past.

"I don't want to drive up to Columbia every weekend to see you," he complained. "Let's try to talk this out."

Frankly, I wasn't all that interested in talking at this point. We'd been necking for half an hour and I was starting to ache. Couldn't he do something more?

"I'm part of the firm now," he continued. We'd been at his graduation the weekend before, and he'd gone to work in Fairfield the next Monday. "I'll get a good salary. You won't ever need to work. We'll be raising a family."

We won't be raising a family if he doesn't figure out how to make love! Listening to the other girls at Stevens this year, I'd come to the conclusion it was past time for me to lose my virginity. From the stories they told me, all a boy needed was for a girl not to say no. I was being careful not to say no. What was holding Brad back?

"Put your hand here," I whispered and shifted him around.

"Honey, you know I shouldn't do that."

We should do that and more, I thought. Get excited!

But getting excited was something Brad did rarely, my steady-as-a-rock boyfriend/would-be husband. He didn't get excited about school, or his job, or the sweet young package he had in his arms. He just wanted to tie things down, get his immediate surroundings securely in place for a predictable, sure future.

I wanted him to take me to the back seat of the car and satisfy the rising fire of my desire. I ground my hips after his retreating hand, arched my neck to return to his lips, gasped for air like a drowning person. If he'd just push up against me I'd be at least as happy as when I rolled around on my dormitory bed with Miss Blue (a backrest with arms you put at the head of the bed). But Brad got away from me.

The day after this debacle I held in my hands a crusty old bottle, cold in the spring's water, a talisman from another age. Standing up at the edge of the bubbling pool, I shook it dry. And felt something knocking dully against the inside.

Patting the pockets of my jeans, I searched for a tool to open the bottle with, a handkerchief to wrap around the stopper and twist, or a jackknife to pry it open. It was sealed tight.

Some decades later, I sometimes wonder if I didn't draw this talisman out of the earth's deep rather than

stand there innocently as it broke into the air. So keen were my desires and so limited my hopes at that time that I might have willed it to the surface, calling it forth to save me from another day in a life of tedium.

I do believe, in fact, in long hidden forces emerging into the present, secrets of the past saving themselves for the future, days of fulfillment. My own destiny had been brewing under ground that day perhaps for years, unseen by anyone, least of all by me. But the bottle and the message changed everything. What I was to do with my life was inspired by what I read on the seventy-five-old papers and by the miracle of their finding.

"My Letter to an Unknown Friend" the manuscript was entitled. It was signed, "a woman who lost an entire world." This was the call to my true destiny. I knew it when I saw it. Goodbye, Brad. Hello, another life.

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