

Excerpt of
All Roads Lead Me Back to You
By, Kennedy Foster

At 8:30 Alice Andison logged out of her spreadsheet program with a nervous shudder, went into the kitchen, and filled a baggie with oat-and-molasses horse-cookies. January's numbers looked good, which worried her more than if they had looked bad. Bad numbers at least gave you an idea where you stood with the gods, whereas good ones left you wondering when the lightning would strike. For strike it must. Was I born a pessimist? she thought. No, and I'm not a pessimist now. Just a clear realist. The old joke about the rancher who won the lottery ("What will you do with the money?" "Keep on ranching till it's gone.") barely scratched a smile out of her; it was just too near the bone. She pulled on her thermal coveralls.

The collie Bel lay against the kitchen door, whining. She wanted to stay inside, and Alice wanted to keep her in because she was old and stiff and felt the cold, but Bel couldn't stand it. Collies lived outside, she knew. The other two were out there, in the kennel in the carport. Suddenly she struggled up, and Alice heard the other dogs barrel out past the pickup, claws scratching the cement. A volley of barks, and something went creaking past the front of the house, paused, and then the whole circus moved on down the slope toward the shed-yard. Bel cried and scraped at the door.

"What in hell?" muttered Alice, a moon-boot half-on. She hopped across the house, knelt on the window-seat, and made a tunnel of her hands on the frost-knit window. Nothing. Immaculate snow, ice-chip stars, frowsy locust twigs hanging still. She could hear the dogs, but they weren't shrieking like they did for a bobcat or a porcupine. She pocketed her horse-treats, stood for a moment with her thumb on her lip, and went and got a big flashlight from the utility closet. Its batteries wouldn't last in this cold, but it was long and heavy, weapon-like.

She went out; Bel shot away downhill toward the barns. No question about where the party was. The high-drifted snow of the front yard had been tossed by the skirmishing dogs and by—what? Powder snow, too cold and fine to keep a sharp imprint. She tramped slowly down the slope toward the diminishing noises, shining her flashlight from side to side, its beam turning yellow, then orange. No sound now but the squeak of her boots in the powder.

On her left were long horse-pens going down to the creek, the shadowy shapes of horses drifting uphill, sensing some entertainment. On her right the three hay sheds, with the flatbed wagon standing loaded and ready for the morning. Nothing and nobody inside, and anyway the collies weren't there. Ah, there—Sweep ran out the door of the foaling barn, caught sight of her, and ducked back in.

The foaling shed had lights, the switch by the door. Gripping her flashlight righthanded, Alice switched on the overheads. The big fluorescents flickered on, revealing the three dogs grinning in a circle around a horse that had just cleaned up a flake of grass-hay left loose in the wheelbarrow. As she watched, the animal abandoned the barrow and limped urgently onward toward the stacked bales. Automatically, Alice registered breed, sex, and color: quarterhorse mare, spang-in-your-eye-red chestnut. Carrying a roping saddle in good condition. And hopping lame, though not bleeding anywhere that Alice could see.

The bosal bridle on her head had no bit to get in the way of her eating. Not that anything less than a muzzle would have, it looked like. The collies looked from Alice to the mare and

back, delighted with their prize. A bay colt, three years old, kept inside while a wire-cut on his pastern healed, pointed an ear at Alice but kept his starting eyes on the foreign horse; even the cat Ike, high up in the bale-stack with his paws tucked in, ogled her. But the mare spared nobody an ounce of attention, just went on jerking one starveling mouthful after another out of the handiest bale of mixed-grass.

Alice stood uncertain. Whose horse, where had she come from? No saddlebags, no slicker or bedroll tied behind the cantle, so probably not a runaway from a pack-string or hunting outfit—anyway, what lunatic would go hunting or camping in such weather? Forest Service horse? Same objection; furthermore, the rim-fire roping rig with its two cinches, lariat neatly coiled and tied? That heavy Mexican bosal?

Her hands ached distractingly.

The rider: if not here, where? “Anybody up there with you, Ike?”

“Ip,” he replied, and licked his nose.

She walked out, thoughtful, and made her evening round of the pens, counted and observed the horses, checked that they had hay, dispensed cookies. Looked, for good measure and by the browning ray of her flashlight, into the machine shed and the covered arena. Nobody there, but anyway she was coming around to the belief that the chestnut mare’s lameness and solitary state meant that she had had a fall somewhere up in the hills and parted from her rider there. Probably some time ago. Those ribs were pretty well covered, but her belly was ganted up from lack of water. (Though sprung in a suggestive way behind the saddle.) Could she have been lost for as much as three days, since before the blizzard and the deep freeze? Alice found herself calculating the rider’s chance of survival, her own obligations.

She would have to try. Wouldn’t she? Though it might mean miles, hours. And the rider might be, probably was, dead already. Or she might reasonably wait for morning and call the state police. Or call her sister in Waitsburg for advice. No, she couldn’t; Janet would try to drive up, get stuck on the way, and freeze in a ditch. Pa, she thought longingly, as she deep-bedded the red mare in the second foaling-box, untacked and blanketed her, supplied her with water and three flake—on second thought, four flake of grass hay. Pa, what should I do? But Allan was dead. And anyway, she knew what was right.

Come on, Alice. Cowboy up.