

Drought.

by Yasmin Elaine Waring

423 days.

The old man still possessed the childlike habit of biting his lower lip when he wrote. The thick skin dry as pork rind. He recorded the days without rain in a spare, makeshift almanac. The pages waxened from the soiled press of his hand tracing and retracing the swelling numbers. It had been over a year since he last saw her, but he remembered. The weight of her when she fell hard and pummeled him with bruising drops. He'd refused to take shelter despite her torrential rage. The heels of his flaking snakeskin boots clawed for traction in the shifting muck.

He'd held his ground.

Standing there. Arms spread wide, back arched, mouth agape, swallowing hard. She tasted of the sun and the stars, and she teased him with this. Her celestial seduction. She swiped the puckered rustler's hat from his head. Disproved that his battered slicker was waterproof. She didn't stop until she had brought him to his knees. And once he'd fallen, slumped and spent, against the thick trunk of a stripped oak, she left. Running his finger along the bloody crease of his mouth, he smiled. At least she kissed him before saying goodbye.

He knew she left because of her.

The woman who'd found him there that day. Still limp from the tempestuous encounter. She came riding up surveying the storm's damage to her property on horseback. They were not strangers. In fact, she had been his employer on one occasion. He was a ranch hand. Transient. Averse to long-term hire. At his age, she was reluctant to hire him for any lengthy duration. However, he was strong and possessed an agility with the horses and ease with the

cattle that softened her doubts. He was silent, not sullen, and this was acceptable behavior. The less chatty the better when it came to working with livestock, and with her. When he left them after three months, without incident or notice, it was neither surprise nor insult, and he was soon forgotten.

But she was surprised to see him now, hurt. And she did remember him. She extended her arm signaling him to climb atop her stout quarter horse, Jackson. He stood, with some difficulty, and looked up at her. As she leaned forward and measured his face, she realized that he wasn't as old as she had originally thought, despite skin leathered from a life open to the elements. His eyes were sharp with a still-youthful clarity in the color of the irises. He looked up at her wide-eyed. If she had been standing, she may have felt a little weak-kneed, but she maintained her composure and shifted her weight in the saddle. Jackson responded in tandem and shuffled slightly to accommodate her.

There were no words.

He shook his head. He didn't want her help. But before she nudged Jackson with her heel to move on, the young old man grabbed her stirrured boot and held it close to his chest. For a moment. Then he slapped Jackson on the haunch without facing her. He did not watch her ride away. But he knew *she* had been watching. She saw his moment of weakness and would not be forgiving.

It was over a year later, while riding Jackson by a dry riverbed creviced by drought, that she discovered his body. When she knelt beside him, she felt the first pale drops of rain, after 426 days.

Opening her mouth wide, she wept.

