

# SUMMER WINDS

*by*  
Andrews & Austin



2009

## CHAPTER ONE

*C*hange is like wind through a screen door tempting you to open up and feel the full force. I let go of that thought and grabbed the metal screen-door handle, stepped onto the front porch, and braced against the wind as it whistled across the prairie and bent the grass to the ground. Late May, and only a few weeks before wet, swollen pastures would dry beneath my feet, ponds would come alive with the hum of cicadas, and chilly evenings would surrender to long, hot nights. Change in the wind made me restless.

“You okay, Maggie Tanner? You look mighty thoughtful.” Perry approached from around the corner of the house looking like someone who’d just crawled out of a mine shaft after twenty years missing. His white beard, sweat-stained shirt, suspenders, and baggy jeans belied the romance of unexpected meetings.

I ignored his question because these days I didn’t know the answer. Instead I zeroed in on work: what should have been done or needed to be done or had to be re-done. “Did you get that gate repaired so the boom can get through there and Jeremiah can start spraying the south pasture?” I held my hand up to assess the wind’s velocity and determine if we’d be wasting weed killer.

“Gate’s fixed. Jeremiah’s broken. Don’t think he’s sprayin’ or stayin’.”

Skipping further discussion, I headed to the bunkhouse two hundred yards to the south where Perry and Jeremiah shared living quarters while Perry gave me a lot of reasons why I shouldn’t start “buildin’ up a head of steam.” Ignoring him, I banged on the door,

then pushed it open and blinked into the semi-darkness. Jeremiah, a tall boy in filthy blue jeans and a dirty white T-shirt, lay face down on the bed, his arms spread wide and flopping like a spastic snow angel. The room reeked of drunk-sweat.

“Jeremiah, damn your ass, pack up and get out!” I tried to hoist him by the back of his belt but he was deadweight.

Perry limped in behind me and wedged between us. “Now, Maggie, we’re short a hand as it is.” Perry half hoisted him to his feet, and Jeremiah staggered once before lurching forward onto the bed again.

“I won’t miss him, because I don’t know what he looks like, because his drunken face is constantly stuck in the mattress.” The blood rushed through my veins and my blood pressure rose.

Perry looked up at the ceiling and gave that little whistling sound he always made when I lost my temper. He used to call me a feisty widow woman, until I threatened to kill him if he ever said it again. Now after nearly two decades of ranching together, no telling what he said about me out of earshot, but he stayed, and that said something.

He caught up with me by the water well where I seesawed the tall pump handle, letting the ice-cold groundwater splatter onto my legs, arms, and face. I could have walked to the house and used the kitchen sink, but I liked the shock of the icy spring-fed water slapping me back to my senses.

“That’s three you’ve fired and the season hasn’t even got started.” Perry scratched the top of his head as if my decision had irritated his brain.

“Drunks, druggies, womanizers, and lazy asses!”

“Need to hire ourselves some monks,” he said evenly, and mopped his brow with the bandana from his rear pocket before he walked away shaking his head.

I wiped my damp hands on my pants, pulled my truck keys out of my pocket, and decided to go into town and blow off some steam. Perry could have the last word, but I didn’t have to stand around and listen to it.

My light blue Chevy pickup bounced over the rutted dirt

road for a quarter of a mile before getting traction on the two-lane highway that led into Little Liberty. I sped past miles of flat farmland with white wood-frame houses in the distance and open fields dotted with John Deere equipment. *Can't stand up long enough to work ten acres, much less my twelve hundred. Passed out drunk twice a week, and Perry blames me for firing him. Old coot!*

Thirty minutes later I slowed to twenty-five as I entered the city limits and turned onto Main Street, where I pulled into a graveled spot in front of the Kansas Kafe, or the 2-K, as the locals called it. Advertised as “the best coffee, homemade sweet rolls, and fried hash-brown eatery for miles around,” the 2-K had no competition an hour’s drive in any direction. I pushed open the glass door bearing the chipped, white-stenciled 2-K, made to look like a cattle brand, and scanned the room for anyone I knew.

Hiram Kendall, my neighbor on the north, his blubbery body lodged into a scarred oak booth in the back, was talking to his employee, Stretch Adams, a tall mid-fifties fellow with thinning hair and muscles as tough and sinewy as beef jerky.

Hiram gave a nonchalant wave as I approached. “Howya doin’?”

I hooked a thumb over the front pocket of my Levi’s. “Fair to middlin’.” I fell into the colloquial vernacular for “okay, but not great.” “Know anybody looking for work?” I asked casually, as if the answer didn’t matter. I’d long ago discovered when things mattered too much, people took advantage.

“Everybody I know’s tryin’ *not* to work.” He chuckled and tore into a chicken leg as if the pause for conversation had nearly allowed it to escape.

“I’d be willing to come over there, Maggie, and *do a little work.*” Stretch raised an eyebrow, undoubtedly convinced only Hiram would get his meaning, and Hiram chuckled.

“Think the payment might be a bit high, Maggie. I’d look elsewhere.” Hiram jiggled from internal mirth and wiped the chicken grease off his chin with the back of his big bear paw.

“How old do men have to get before they stop thinking about sex?” I asked.

“Dead, that’s how old.” Hiram grunted.

“How old do women have to get before they *start* thinking about it?” Stretch leered.

“If she’s in your bed, Stretch, I’d say wake her up and ask her.”

“That’s a good one.” Hiram pounded the table and, in appreciation for my adding humor to his morning, agreed to ask around on my behalf. Unspoken was the fact that men out here would do things for each other when they wouldn’t do them for a woman.

Donnetta, a big, dark-haired part-Cherokee wearing a white apron over her tight pink blouse and black stretch pants, hustled between tables and cash register. Catching my eye, she crossed the room to greet me and sang out jovially, “You annoying my diners?”

“Your diners are plenty annoying without my help,” I joked.

The breakfast crowd was clearing out, the far-too-fat farm boys hoisting up their overalls and heading out to their trucks. An elderly, bent-over part-timer bussed tables and cleaned up around us as Donnetta indicated a booth that was clean.

“Sit,” she ordered in her commanding voice and gestured with one powerful arm that could have been deemed fat, but due to her tight tan skin just seemed strong. “I need a break.” Her pie-shaped face beamed as her butt slid across the brown leather seats and her tummy grazed the table edge.

“How’s Big Valley, Ms. Stanwyck?” Donnetta had decided years ago that my starched shirts and hard-pressed independence qualified me as the star’s double. Ranching had made me tough, but beyond that, I didn’t see the resemblance.

“Big Valley needs haying, know anyone?” I asked.

“Sounds like a personal problem to me. My Big Valley needs some attention too.” She guffawed, and I wondered if the entire restaurant had a Viagra with their V-8.

“I need ranch hands,” I said.

“Well, that works too!” She doubled over with laughter and I

waited for her to get serious. “This is where being married again would help you. It would be *his* problem to find ranch hands.”

Stretch Adams walked over and bent down to tell me good-bye. “You are looking mighty fine, Maggie.” He slipped a stained business card on the table bearing his cell phone number and winked, then slid a toothpick between his lower front teeth and sucked loudly on the wooden shaft before heading out the door.

*As if I don't know where to find him in a town of nine hundred people, or that I'd want to.* Stretch must have seen a movie where a suave leading man slid his phone number in front of a woman and she jumped his bones, because he glanced back over his shoulder at me as if he thought he was so hot he'd burn a hole in the pavement.

“Imagine ‘doing’ that one,” Donnetta said as he attempted a seductive saunter out the door.

“You imagine it, I gotta go.” I downed the rest of my coffee, jumped to my feet, and slapped a dollar bill on the table. As the glass door swung shut behind me, I could still hear her protest my paying for the java.

I turned down Main Street and drove past Benegan's hardware store, which sat diagonal to Olan's gas station, an old movie theater, and a tiny bakery. Down the first side street was the Kendall lumberyard, the corner bar, and directly across from it an old white clapboard house that served as the funeral home where Bea Benegan's husband “Seller” got his nickname after he exited the pub drunk, entered the mortuary, and tried to sell a hand gun to Mrs. McRary, who'd been dead for three days. After that, whenever he walked down the street, people shouted, “Seller, Benegan?”

I approached Main and Fourth, an intersection of churches: Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, and a new one labeled Sinners Church, apparently for those who couldn't settle on a denomination and simply needed a category.

Freedom, religious or otherwise, was hard to come by in this small town, at least the kind of freedom I'd always envisioned finding after graduation. I'd planned to be a reporter or journalist or interpreter for the United Nations but instead ended up married

and living on a ranch. After all these years, I still didn't feel like I blended with the locals. But my college education made me the country equivalent of bilingual. I could be comfortable seeing you anon or nigh onto Sunday.

My mental wanderings were simply an excuse to avoid thinking about having fired Jeremiah and leaving myself short a ranch hand. And I was just plain nervous for reasons I couldn't pinpoint other than the wind blowing and stirring everything up off the sidewalks and swirling it around my head. The wind set expectations, but what could you expect in Little Liberty, a town of jobs instead of careers, tasks rather than goals, and duties that displaced dreams.

I drove thirty minutes to the ranch past a landscape sprouting small barns and houses set back off the road. Just enough people to give you comfort that someone might be there when you needed them but not so many that you felt crowded. People were like weeds; a few couldn't hurt, but too many and they choked out anything good that might "come of the ground."

Since we were only weeks from the beginning of summer and blistering heat, I needed someone younger and stronger than Perry, who was probably seventy but guarded his age like a starlet. These days the local kids went away to school and didn't return. Ranch work was hard, and the limping men in the community attested to the dangers of tractors rolling over on you or livestock kicking you. Old-timers knew farming didn't support a family in dollars but paid off in breathtaking sunsets and black starry nights and newborn calves.

I pulled into the long gravel drive and put the truck in park and walked into the house just as the phone rang. The voice on the line took a familiar tone.

"How's the prettiest brunette this side of the Rockies?"

"Tell me who this is or I'll hang up," I demanded, refusing to let strangers trivialize me.

"The eight-second wonder of Texas Tech." Buck Tate tee-heed, then continued to shout as if the telephone wire were nothing more than a Dixie cup tied to a string and volume would ensure transmission. "You miss me, sugar?"

“I’m the *blonde*, Taterhead. Do you even know what woman you’re talking to?”

“It’s been so long you *are* kind of fadin’ from my memory.” He laughed at himself.

Just thinking about Buck’s Garth Brooks build and little-boy giggle renewed a warm spot in my heart for Tater. “You haven’t called me in five years, you crazy fool, and your phone number was disconnected.”

“I’m still in Denver but don’t advertise it. Second wife’s tryin’ to kill me. Can you imagine that? Me, of all people. I wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Buck was susceptible to volatile women, and during our college days I’d helped him through a dozen broken hearts at the hands of blond cheerleaders and nearly as many broken bones on the backs of rank bulls. He’d gotten a girl pregnant when he was only fifteen, married her quickly, and was in the middle of divorcing her while in college. Despite the disgrace and whispers of that era surrounding unwed pregnancy, his dilemma wasn’t as bad as mine as I dealt with the aftermath of losing my parents in a senseless accident.

We sat once and talked about life’s irony: I had people leaving the world and didn’t want them to go, and he had a baby entering the world and didn’t want it to come. “Everybody just got on the wrong train,” Buck had said in his simple way. “Now we gotta go on from here.”

After that he made it his mission to make me laugh, leading a bull up to my dorm where it relieved itself on the floor. Once when I got called to the dean’s office, he wired the dean’s door shut and connected it to the fire alarm. Buck Tate was my friend and a shoulder to cry on, the guy who insisted I would take all my troubles, turn them into stories, and become a famous writer for the *New York Times*. Grateful, I encouraged his aspirations to be the world’s most famous bull rider. My end of it hadn’t exactly panned out, and somehow I didn’t think Buck’s had either. I asked about his job and his family. On the last topic he drew a deep breath.

“Got a favor to ask. Mary and I don’t fight over much but we do fight over the kids, that’s for sure. I won’t bore you with

the domestic details, but basically my teenage boys are spoiled rotten. They've got more computers and software and game toys and bullshit, not to mention a bunch of big-titted, mindless girls chasing after them."

I couldn't contain a chuckle over his distressed tone, as if he'd personally spent his teenage years in an ashram.

"You think it's funny, Mags, but I don't want to wake up one morning and find out that I've raised a bunch of wussy techno-geeks who got up from the computer to go to the john, fell forward, and knocked up big-boob Betty Sue. You oughta see my oldest. He put a stud ring in his nose big as the ones in the bulls I used to ride. I grabbed hold of it and led him around the house and him shoutin' for his mama. Brave enough to staple hardware into his head but yellin' for his mama!"

"Now that's real tragic, Buck."

"Well, this'll wipe the smile off your face. I want you to take one of 'em for the summer. Hell, I'd give you all of them but I don't want to be sued. I could send Hank or Jennings...or hell, even Cash." Buck had named all of his kids after country-western singers and fortunately had stopped reproducing before he got to Slim Pickens.

"I was just in town asking around about a hand for the summer. But the work is hard, you know that, and the heat's fierce out here."

"I guarantee any one of my kids can hold his own."

"You just said they're useless as tits on a boar."

"I was exaggerating to get you to feel sorry for me. Let me go back and pick the right one out of the chute. I promise you'll have the best hand you ever had show up within a week."

By the time I hung up I was elated to have solved my problem, and I nearly skipped out of the house to tell Perry how things had worked out. He was sitting on the bunkhouse cinderblock steps scraping riverbed mud out of his boot treads with a hunting knife. As I finished my announcement he glanced up with one eye.

"He ever work a ranch?"

"Don't know, might have. Buck was a bull rider in college."

“How big’s the kid, the one he’s sending?” Perry’s brow furrowed unhappily.

“Big enough, I guess, or Buck wouldn’t send him.”

“How long’s he stayin’?”

“Don’t know that either, but you’d best get the booze-air out of your sleeping quarters.”

Perry rose and muttered into his boots, “Nice. Sharing a room with somebody neither me nor you knows nothing about. Could be a killer.”

“Or a rocker.” I clamped my thumb and middle finger around my nostril as if bolting something to it. “Has a stud stapled through his nose.”

Perry snorted. “Guess I’ll use a metal detector to find him after dark.”



After noon, almost a week later, I stood on the front porch examining my small garden. A few squash, tomatoes, and pepper plants were taking hold now, their dark green shoots becoming stronger by the day. I examined the rich dirt around them to see if it was damp enough, then rose and brushed my hands off on my blue jeans, careful not to get any dirt on my khaki shirt. People often remarked about my crisp shirts, but they just made me feel better so it was a luxury I afforded myself, taking them into town to have them starched and pressed. On cool days I wore a green pullover that had a quilted shooter’s patch on the right shoulder with elbow patches to match, old gear from the early days when my husband tried to turn me into a hunter. The soft, worn sweaters always made me feel safe, proof that something could last forever.

A car rolled down the gravel road and I turned my gaze in that direction, shading my eyes with my hand as I rested against the sturdy porch post for support. I didn’t recognize the vehicle but thought perhaps Hiram had sent someone from town to inquire about work.

An older black Jeep with the spare tire on the back slowed, then crept onto the dirt-and-rock indentation twenty yards from the house. I cocked my head, trying to see the face behind the wheel, then stepped off the porch for a better look and waited.

The motor shut down and the door swung open. The sun's glint obscured the details of the figure climbing out of the vehicle except that he was tall, with dark shiny hair, strong shoulders, and narrow hips. As he turned to face me, I realized even from a distance that he wasn't a teenager, but more like late twenties. The boy wiped his palms on the back of his dark jeans and then sauntered over, squinting up at the sun, seeming to measure its intensity before he extended his hand and looked down into my eyes.

"Cash Tate, Ms. Tanner. Buck said you'd be expecting me." The twinkling eyes were captivatingly pale against the rich, dark hair. "I know you're looking for an experienced hand and I can't say I am one. But I learn real quick." The big, self-assured grin and sturdy handshake unnerved me, but not nearly as much as the fact that this tall, handsome young man was, on close inspection, a woman. And her hand wrapped completely around mine sent a chill through my entire body that felt like the wind blowing back the grass. It caught me by surprise and rendered me momentarily speechless.

She must have realized I was shocked because she grinned wider and said she'd be heading back to the Jeep to get her duffel.

I ran to the phone to call Buck Tate. *What is he doing sending me a girl!*