

The Softer Side of Texas

By

Sai Marie Johnson

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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Johnson, Sai Marie
The Softer Side of Texas

Cover Design by ABCD Graphics
EBook ISBN: 978-1-61258-221-4

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Chapter One

Early Mornings

They say in Texas the sky is as free and open as the prairie lands surrounding it. In the country, where city boys and girls just don't understand what it is like to really get in touch with your inner self but sometimes the world looks at the people there as if they are uneducated, or worse, pompous fools who know nothing except their guns, horses, and a stiff drink. In many ways, that was very true but for Ivanka Jessup, Texas was home. A crude and sometimes hard place to live, but nonetheless, it was still home. The blonde beauty had hair like the golden rays of sun as it filtered across the open desert and her skin was just as brilliant. In fact, Ivy Jessup's nickname from her father ended up being Honey Sunshine because of how sweet and pretty the young lady had always been. Judging a book by its cover would be foolish in the case of Ivy, however, because beneath all that decadence was a tomboy with a bite like a diamond rattler's. That morning was no different from any other morning and Ivy rolled over in her bed to moan aloud when the sunlight hit her eyes.

"It's too damn early!" she groaned, pulling the sheet back over her face. Working the night shift at Bud's usually had this effect, and Ivy felt as if she was dying when the cock began crowing in the distance. Still living at home with her parents, the young woman had chores to run on her daddy's farm, but working late nights was beginning to take its toll on her. More than that, Ivy was starting to feel like she hated being the object of the customers' attention. Especially one in particular named Antonio Rodriguez. He was a Mexican-American farmhand who seemed to think he had the right to try to touch her, and like clockwork at about six o'clock every night, he would stride into her bar and demand a Tecate. It would be the start of at least a dozen others, and by eight o'clock that night, he would be well past the limit. For some reason, Bud didn't ever throw him out, though, and his actions towards Ivy never seemed to bother him, either. Ivy finally pulled herself out of bed and drew her hands up to tiredly wipe her eyes.

"Damn, this is killing me. I really need to find a new job." Yawning, she stood up and waltzed across her room to grab a pair of faded blue jeans which she shimmied on in a matter of seconds. Next, came a faded plaid button down which she tied off at her waist, and slipping her feet into a pair of tan boots, she opened the door to head to the kitchen. In the hallway, everything seemed to echo and Ivy could hear her parents discussing the bills already.

"Now, Jesse, you know we can't afford that. It is enough just keeping the horses fed. Ivy gives me all her money from working down at the bar, but I don't like the way Antonio looks at her. I worry about what could happen." Ivy's mother Margie's voice brushed past her ears, and Ivanka decided to wait in the hall a minute to listen in on what they were saying.

"Margaret, we can't have her quitting her job when you just said we can barely afford to keep feeding the animals. I know you don't want me to start looking for farmhands because of how much it will cost but I need the help. You and Ivy can't help me with all of this. I need some manpower around here. If Ivanka quits her job, we'll definitely be up the creek. What else do you want me to do?" Jesse's voice was stern and pleading at the same time.

"Well, Jesse, I think we should consider getting our daughter into a new job and stop

sending her down to work that biker bar. She's too sweet and pretty to be working there, and if one of those grimy men does something to her, you're going to regret it. Go hire a farmhand or two, I guess. I don't know what else we can do from here."

Ivy could hear her mother give a long sigh of disappointment and it was then she decided to ease out of the hallway and walk into the kitchen. "Good morning. What's for breakfast?"

Jesse and Margaret immediately shut their mouths. It was obvious to Ivy, they were attempting to keep this conversation between themselves, and because of the respect she had for her parents, she opted not to push the subject.

Margaret smiled pleasantly at her daughter as she looked back at her from the stove. "Pancakes, sausage links, and eggs, darling. Do you have to work tonight?" she asked gently. Most of the time she hated asking her daughter about work and it was because of what she was doing for a living. Not that Ivanka didn't work her tail off at the bar, but Margaret was a religious woman, and she knew places like that weren't places for good girls to be working. Ivy had always been a looker, but she was also a great student and had never brought her mama any amount of undue pain. Jesse and Margaret only had two children because Margie had difficulties with pregnancy. Unfortunately, Ivy's old brother, Brenton, passed away about two years before, in Afghanistan. It had been a devastating experience for their entire family but Ivy took it the hardest. Ever since then, Ivanka seemed to think it was her responsibility to take care of her parents and help them out with the ranch.

With a sigh, she smiled at her mother and nodded. "Yes, and tomorrow night, too. The usual schedule, Mama."

Jesse peered up from over his newspaper and watched Margie place a plate in front of his daughter. "You making decent tips still?"

Ivy nodded her head but the truth was ever since she had started having trouble with Antonio, her tips had gone down quite a bit. It didn't help that he had started bringing in a few buddies to heckle at her almost nightly, and it was starting to get the point that she really hated going in to work. Tonight would be worse, and she knew it, but telling her parents that would only make them worry more so she chose to let them believe things were working out just fine.

"Things are just fine; don't worry, I can handle my own, I promise." Ivy began to toy with her eggs in contemplation of how she was going to handle the night, but for now, she wanted to enjoy her breakfast before going out to help her dad with the farm chores.

Jesse adjusted the paper and looked back down on it with a nod of approval. "That's my tough girl. See, Margie, she can handle her own just fine. You worry too much," he retorted.

Margaret turned back to the stove and fidgeted in place. Jesse may have thought she was just fine, but Margie knew better. A mother always did know when something wasn't quite right with their child and Ivy's quick response left her wondering why she wasn't honest with them. She turned around to settle down beside her husband and nodded in agreement. "Yes, I know she's a tough cookie, just like her pa." Margaret chuckled to herself. It was never something that went over easily when she called him pa, and Jesse immediately brought the paper down to peer over the edge with furrowed eyebrows.

"Now listen here, woman. I ain't nobody's pa, pawpaw, or anything else. I see how ya are, wanting to make me old and cankered 'fore I'm ready to be. Just you remember, Margaret Anne Jessup, you ain't too far from being put out to pasture, yourself." He roared with laughter as his wife frowned and shook her head. These were the moments Ivanka really felt joy and peace. How could she ever tell her parents men were harassing her at work when it was her paychecks that helped put food on their table? She smiled and shook her head as her own laughter emitted

her lips.

"You two are something else, teasing like high school kids," Ivy said. She finished eating the last bite of her meal and took a quick drink of orange juice before pushing her plate forward.

Margaret sat down and began forking her eggs into her mouth. She always had a habit of almost shoveling her food down in a hurry. One time, Ivanka had asked her why she ate so fast, and Margaret replied with an answer that seemed to fit with her reasoning. "There are way too many things to do around here and eating leisurely is what the cows do. I have work waiting on me." Her soft voice held a tinge of exhaustion to it, but it was that sense of duty that led Ivy to work so diligently in an occupation she herself despised. Her mind refocused on her parents, and she pushed her chair back to stand.

"I suppose I have a lot to do today, and I reckon that I'll be coming in late tonight. Dad, don't you worry about feeding the horses today. I'll go down to grain and water them now, before I head down to town to pay my cell phone bill. Do you need me to pay anything on any bills while I'm down there?" she asked.

Her father lowered the paper and glanced at her mom for a minute.

"You know, Ivy, you just pay the family share plan this month, and we'll handle the utilities. I think that would be the best. You really ought to have some fun or enjoy one of these fall festivals," Margaret replied. She always hated asking Ivanka to pay too much for the house bills and really wanted to see her daughter find a decent man. The loss of Ivy's brother had been a terrible occurrence for the entire family, but what pained Margaret the most now was seeing Ivanka work so hard in a place where men harassed her for what seemed to be nothing at all. A lot could be said about the bar and none of it was good, but Ivanka had the personality, body, and brains to be a great tender. She raked in tons of tips because of her bubbly sense of humor, but seeing her daughter as she was now just didn't sit right with Margaret, at all.

"Are you sure about that, Mom? I don't need to go to any of these shindigs out here. I get plenty of party action down there at the bar. To tell you the truth, I would rather go horseback riding or target practicing. That's beside the point, though. Really, Mama, I have plenty of money to help out this month. You never know if it will stay that way next month, though. I want to help. Please don't limit me from adding to the pot just because you think I need to have more fun than I'm already having," Ivy said.

Margaret shifted in her seat and gave a sigh. She knew Ivanka's heart was definitely in the right place but, being a mother, she couldn't help wondering if maybe her daughter deserved more of a life than the one she had been handed.

"Ivy, can you go down to the co-op and post a flyer for me?" her father asked.

Ivanka peered back at him and gave a nod. "What kind of flyer are you posting, Dad?" she asked.

"Well, I'm looking to hire at least one ranch hand. I don't think you can help me with all the work down here all the time. Your mom is right; you need to have a little bit of a social life. Maybe even go on a shopping visit to Houston or something. You spend entirely too much time down there serving those riffraff and no time doing anything productive for yourself. You can also pay the water bill while you are down in town, if you are stuck on helping with something else besides the phone bills," he said.

Ivanka gave a sigh. Arguing with her parents now never seemed to work in her favor for long. She couldn't let on that she had overheard their conversation earlier, but she also felt really helpless in the situation. It seemed doing the right thing only ever amounted to feeling stuck either way but her father's request for help on the water bill gave her something to work with.

"I'll think about the shopping trip, Dad, and I will pay the phone bills, along with the water bill. See y'all in a bit," she said, waltzing out the door without giving them another chance to argue. She crossed the yard quickly and, pausing in the middle of the grass, breathed in gently. The air was sweet and smelled of an early autumn. It was Ivy's favorite time of the year. When she was a little girl, watching the leaves turn golden, the orange, red, and bronze hues of every plant had been her favorite pastime. It was a warm day, even for being an early November morning, but the weather had been awkward those past few weeks. Ivy preferred the warmth to winter any day, though, and it brought her spirits up as she walked into the stables. The family had eight horses stalled up. Four that belonged to them and four that were being paid to be cared for by the family. Ivanka went to the grain sack and lifted it to dump into a wheelbarrow. She tossed a scoop on top of it and began pushing it down the line.

"Hey ya, Mack," she said, scooping some grain up and dumping into the first horse's feeding tray. The animal snorted and leant down to begin munching. Ivy smiled and proceeded to the next horse stall. The nametag read Duchess, and Ivy grinned at the tawny colored animal. The name was fitting, and she had been a blue-ribbon winner repeatedly. She pranced over to the feeding tray and lowered her head to be petted. Ivy stuck her hand through the window and gently stroked the creature. She had always wanted to own Duchess but never had enough money to pay for her. Lately, her owners had neglected to come see her but Ivanka felt a sense of camaraderie with her and she never complained about their negligence. Rather, she hoped they would never come to collect or would cease paying their stall rental so she could claim ownership by default of payment. So far, they had yet to miss a payment and, truth be told, her owners were some of the few who kept their farm going. They owned two of the four animals. Duchess and Duke were their names. Duke was ornery and callous, most days, but Duchess always had a sweet demeanor, regardless of who fed her.

"You're always such a lady, Duchess," Ivanka said. She moved down the line and fed the rest of the animals. Next, came the watering; then, she got them each two flakes of hay. After the feeding frenzy was over, Ivanka exited the barn and headed back towards the house. It was about eleven in the morning and she was hoping to get some sleep before the evening Happy Hour rolled around. Chores and responsibilities seemed to be the entirety of her life, but sleep was the one thing she never seemed to get much of. She walked back into the house and went straight for her keys.