

TREATMENT: *Plug Nickel Blues*

by: Colleen Shannon

In San Saba, Texas, high-tech crime is using a credit card instead of a pocket knife to jimmy the lock at the Winn Dixie—until two no good scoundrels ride into town. Before long, folks quit singin’ the Plug Nickel Blues. For awhile, things get downright interestin’. San Saba begins to look more like that sin city Austin than a decent, God fearin’ town has any right to--uh, hope for.

Since we’re bein’ truthful, that is.

On that sleepy summer day, the Pecan Tree Capitol of the World seemed ripe for the pickin’ to Jess Carruthers, a black sheep lawyer from an even more wicked town than Austin. Yep. Gasp! Dallas.

Worse yet, his shady girlfriend isn’t even Texan. She might call herself Viveca Trelani Fontaine, but she was born plain old Prudence Potter, and she’s an English actress beneath them tight jeans and Western snap button shirt two sizes too small. But these two shysters got a plan, all right. They’re gonna frisk San Saba’s wealthiest, most respected citizen, Old Man Carruthers, of the fortune in gold and silver coins it took four generations to build--and will take an army of IRS agents a day to confiscate for back taxes.

Only depends on who finds it first.

However, same as Texans still believe in justice swift and sure—we do lead the nation in executions, after all—we also believe in heroes. Even when they wear gray flannel suits and

support bras instead of de rigeur cowboy attire. The thing is, San Saba might have seemed helpless on that sleepy summer day, but Viv and Jess didn't count on two foxy old San Sabans born and bred muckin' up their neat little plan. But then, they'd never met former IRS investigator Sam Taylor and lady Sheriff Rita Fitz. So they couldn't know that in rural Texas, sometimes, right still makes might. Even better, justice swift and sure can not only lead to keeping the peace—but getting a piece of the action, too.

Every plug nickel of it....

The action starts one cloudless summer day when Viv drives into town with three horses, a beat-up Ford truck, a trailer ain't worth a plug nickel, twenty dollars left in her skin tight jeans, and a hitch in her gitalong that put a itch in the pants of purty near every man who saw her. She camped down on the river, mighty friendly (it is Texas's motto, after all) as she explained she was just passing through. She was a famous quarter horse cutter, she said, had placed in more cutting contests than a Ginsu knife.

But Viv's fallen on hard times. Her best cutting mare broke her leg and had to be put down. And she had to use the last of her savings to pay for an operation for her old granny, so she didn't have any money for those sky-high cutting contest entrance fees. And the world championship is coming up. So she's lookin' for work. She can ride, rope, train horses, make a mean batch of cornbread and beans, bake a wicked devil's food cake, and spruce up a ranch house faster'n a Texas tornado.

Anybody need any hired help? She'll do just about anything, she tells the men now surrounding her campfire enjoying her food, her stories—and the view. All five feet eight inches

of it, purtiest gal to show up since that Ms. Nude America runner-up bared her ass—sets a few years back in the local watering hole and caused the only civil riot in the history of the county.

“Civil,” scoffs one fella who was there, and still has a knot on his head to prove it. “Yew mean downright rude, dontcha?”

Viv just smiles through it all. As her admirers are about to leave, she adds casually that she’s heard old man Carruthers lost his housekeeper awhile back. “Do any of you nice cowboys know him? Maybe introduce me?” she asks sweetly. She’ll take him a sample of her best Devil’s Food Cake. If she can find a kitchen to cook it in....

Small-town Texas males being the gentlemanly type, half the men in town fall all over themselves to help her. The other half would too, if their wives would look away long enough.

Before the day’s out, Viv has the offer of a good half dozen kitchens, but she accepts the help of shy, gangly Jimmy Fitz, son of San Saba’s local lady Sheriff, Rita Fitz.

Now Rita is a mighty interesting lady. She’s Texas born and bred, a throw-back to those independent pioneer women who ran the frontier, they just didn’t let their husbands know it. Rita’s always dealt the hand life gave her: devoted daughter until her parents died, devoted wife until her no-account husband ran away with the Dairy Queen float queen back when Rita was pregnant with Jimmy. No money, no house, no job, no high school diploma, young Rita did what she had to.

And tried not to think of what she’d rather do, even if the whole county knew what that was, too. All San Saba knew she and Sam, the best quarterback ever threw a football in a football crazy town, were sweet on each other. But they parted, Rita got married too fast on the rebound and was left to raise her young’un alone, leading to the biggest scandal since Jess Carruthers ran away when he was fourteen.

But this summer will lead to so much juicy gossip all the spittoons in the county will get downright jealous. Not only are San Saba's two longest, lostest citizens of the male persuasion about to come back into town on the same day, they're gonna cause quiet, level-headed Rita to blow her stack. In very different ways.

First, Sam makes do with gettin' into Rita's crew (since he can't seem to reach the real spot he's itchin' for). He strolls into town in his fancy suit in his fancy big city car, but beneath them Bruno Magli loafers he's still Rita's first love come to get on her last nerve. To all the interested folk--meaning the entire county--he explains he's retirin' from a lifetime of government work, first as a Marine, then as an IRS investigator. He wants his own little spread out northwest of town.

Whether Rita likes it or not.

And she doesn't, as the whole town witnesses when he sits right across from her in front of God and everybody at the town's version of Grand Central Station, the coffee shop on Main Street. The sign hanging out front says as much about San Saba as any two line mention in an AAA travel guide: "World's best Chicken Fried Steak--nearly five dozen sold."

To the delight of the old men who play dominoes on the front porch every day at noon, Sam tries to flirt with Rita. She looks right through him. Even if she does find him more attractive with a little snow on the rooftop than when he was a quarterback stud, she's long ago decided she's too old for such nonsense as sex and dating. She tells him to stay out of her way and storms out. Which only, of course, leads to even more gossip, especially when Sam smiles like a fox with feathers in his chops.

As it turns out, Sam and Rita go way back together (to be blunt, way back in the seat of a 1968 Dodge Charger, and oo--ee, did they charge it). But young love is seldom true love, even

in small Texas towns. When Sam graduated from San Saba High, he couldn't wait to get that red clay dust off his cowboy boots and trade 'em for army boots. Off he went to the big city to enlist. Rita, on the other hand, was already working in the Sheriff's office, and she was about to give up her own grand dreams of the big city and working for the FBI.

Rather than take in 'callers' she scrubbed floors at the jail house. While she never did finish high school, she did something even more shocking to the men at the jailhouse--she read. Anything and everything. First she got her GED. Then her associate's degree by correspondence course, encouraged all along the way by her Daddy's best friend--Old Man Carruthers. The only man in San Saba County Rita not only trusts, she respects.

Jimmy wasn't even crawling when the sheriff promoted her to desk clerk, then dispatcher. By the time Jimmy was in first grade, she made deputy. And when he went into middle school, the old sheriff died. Since the whole county knew Rita had done the sheriff's job for the last three years anyway, they made all the old Texas Rangers buried out of town in the local cemetery turn over in their graves.

They elected a woman sheriff.

That was ten years ago. Rita had long since got her masters, and while she might be isolated from all those new-fangled radars and DNA equipment and suchlike down in Austin, she still had the world at her fingertips in the www. The cattle rustlers hitting the ranches soon found their eighteen-wheeler stashed in a local pecan orchard confiscated, traced by the tire treads and paint flecks they'd left at the scene, the cattle returned to their rightful owners and themselves in the hoosegow.

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The grainery clerk who beat his wife made the mistake of swinging at Rita when she went to arrest him. She caught his scrawny neck in her hand and used just the right pressure at just the right pressure points.

“Did him good,” as she told her deputy later,”to see what it felt like to wake up stone cold on the floor.”

And while none of the local law enforcement in a fifty mile radius would admit it to each other, much less to Rita, San Saba County has never been so law abiding and peaceful since main street consisted of two shacks and two hundred jack rabbits. And she keeps the peace the hard way in Texas—without a gun. Oh, she still carries one, a Smith and Wesson 38 clean as a whistle. But she’d sooner shake hands with a rattler than use it. And so far, she hasn’t had to.

The other long lost son is Old Man Carruther’s long lost nephew Jess. He’s decided to retire from practicing law up in Dallas, the prodigal son returned, and he wants to wear a real star instead of the one he used to wear with his pop gun when he was a kid. So on top of having to deal with that cocky Sam and all those strange feelings she hasn’t felt in years, now Rita has a fight on her hands in the upcoming election. San Sabans love a native son made good.

So when Viv rides into town, Rita’s troubles are plenty and her patience thin. It gets thinner yet when Sam actually starts to flirt with her. After deserting her so he could go shoot people for the government. What’s more of an insult to a woman than that?

When Rita arrives at her little house not far from the jail that hot summer evening, the smell of chocolate baking in her kitchen smells like a rat to her. Not a single nail in Viv’s perfect manicure is broken, plus she doesn’t know a trailer tie-down from a traffic tie-up. Plus she tries a bit too hard to ingratiate herself with the local law enforcement.

Still, things have livened up considerably, so, curious, Rita offers Viv a ride the next day so Viv can take her cake to Old Man Carruther’s fancy house out in the country.

Since he's blind, the old man isn't as susceptible to Viv as the other males in town, but Jess, whom the old man hasn't seen since he was fourteen and can't see at all now, lights up like an Aggie bonfire. Sure, they can use a new housekeeper, he says, welcoming her—literally—with open arms.

Even if he is trying to take her job, Rita's been reserving judgment on Jess. Since he arrived back, he had taken good care of the ornery old coot. He does have the Carruthers features, but there was something about him that bothered Rita.

But as Rita watches Jess and Viv settle in together, she gets the nagging suspicion that these two know each other and are up to no good. What could the little hussy be after? Why would Jess have to scheme? He's the old man's rightful heir—isn't he?

Like many landed gentry families, the Carruthers are land proud but dollar poor. These days ranching is not a lucrative business, which is why Jess took to the bar—both kinds. For generations, since that unfortunate little dispute between the states made their Confederate script worthless, the Carruthers have preferred putting their hard-earned spare cash into tangible assets. Cattle, real estate.

Gold and silver....

However, there's a legend been goin' around town for over fifty years. Seems old man Carruthers' Pappy, back when that Liberal Yankee Carpetbagger (in this part of TX, the three terms being both synonymous and pejorative) FDR tried to steal all the gold, buried a fortune in St. Gauden's, every gold commemorative and silver commemorative made up to WWI, gold eagles going all the way back to Alexander Hamilton, and many coins besides, on the family ranch.

Of course, in his glee, the old boy kicked the bucket soon as he spited the damn Carpetbaggers, before he told anyone where he hid the stash. And then the War came along, as a young man Carruthers went away to fight, and when he came home his Mama was dead and the famous Carruthers coin collection, added to for decades by various family members, was gone. Or so the legend went.

Strange how, soon as it looks like Old Man Carruthers might be on his last legs, Viv, Jess and Sam all hotfoot it to town at the same time. Rita decides to investigate.

The harder Sam tries to ingratiate himself with Rita, the more suspicious she gets of him, too. What does she really know of this virile, handsome man who still reminds her so of the cocky young quarterback who used to irritate her and excite her in the same breath? Some things never change, but Rita would crucify herself before she'd admit it to him.

Funny how the more Rita tried to avoid Sam, the more she ran into him. At the Winn Dixie; at the cattle auction so he could stock his new spread; at the coffee shop; even in church, where he showed no shame and actually winked at her.

Meanwhile, the new housekeeper and Jess get mighty cozy mighty fast, and they sure do spend a lot of time out at that godforsaken ranch with nothin' but varmints, cattle and trailers. Not near as fine or fancy as the Carruthers house in town. On occasion, some of the townsfolk go out to visit, and dang if those two ain't either diggin' holes with bulldozers or ridin' around on them contraptions called four-wheelers instead of tendin' to cattle and fence and such other minor details on a working cattle ranch. And them quarterhorses are loose on the range to fend for themselves instead of bein' groomed and fed up like champions.

San Saba's favorite occupation heats to full boiling: gossip. If this gal's tryin' to get together an entrance stake, how come she never practices her cutting? In fact, two of the town's old biddies took out their famous pickles, jest to be neighborly, you understand, not to snoop, and caught that hussy playin' at ropin' and ridin' with Jess, all right.

But he was the horse, and Viv wasn't usin' a saddle.

With the election approaching, Jess is busy politickin'. He knows how to charm the womenfolk and drink beer with the menfolk, and besides, he'll look so good in that uniform. Anyway, Rita's gettin' a little too old to keep chasin' after rustlers and such. The whole county will retire her on a nice little pension (little bein' the operative word). So let's jest keep the election nice and friendly, okay?

Not okay to Rita. Maybe the people of San Saba aren't grateful for her years of service, or appreciative of her own high standards, but even if they vote her out of office, Rita can't bear the thought of leaving her county in the hands of a shyster. For she's become quite sure that Jess is no more related to the Carruthers than she is, and that their famous rodeo gal knows Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills, better than the back end of a horse. She and Viv have numerous encounters, and let's just say, if cats could fly, Viv would be a UFO.

But the whole town is so taken with Viv that Rita bides her time and adds up her evidence—with an unlikely ally. Sam Taylor. Sam the IRS Man Taylor. Who knows how to run fake I.D.s and finger prints through data bases Rita's never heard of. Turns out he's suspicious of the new arrivals, too, and he also has a soft spot for Old Man Carruthers. So while Rita lifts a beer with the guys at the pool hall—and takes Jess's stein

with her to run his prints—Sam runs Viv’s name through every cutting association he can find on the internet. Sure enough, Viv’s not a member anywhere. No record of anyone by that name even placing in any of the recent events. They send their pictures over the wire, and bide their time.

Sam, on the other hand, figures he’s bided his time long enough. He finds Rita equally attractive, even if she is a bit long in the tooth. As he teases her—right before she whacks him—“Horses are still frisky even after they get old, and boy, do they ride a lot smoother than a green filly.” After she quits blushing, Rita curses her own foolishness, and then feels herself weakening.

Heaven help her, but she begins to flirt right back.

Meanwhile, Jess goes a bit green when he sees Sam, but pretends he’s never met the fella. The election and Jess’s big shindig at the ranch dawn on the same day. He plans to celebrate his victory that night, certain he’ll win. Oh, and BTW, he found his uncle’s missing coin collection. Strangest thing—right at the base of a tree, half revealed in the last gully wash. He’s going to put it on display for all the town to see, with the old man’s permission, of course.

The morning of the election, the results Rita and Sam have waited for finally come back: Jess is really Gordon Tucker, a recently disbarred Dallas lawyer who embezzled funds from his firm. One of their oldest clients is the Carruthers. So Jess knew about the coins.

Viv is really Prudence Potter, an English actress who’s impersonated many women over the years, but wanted her best performance to be her last after she and Gordon got the coins and headed for Mexico. With Jess the sheriff--on his first and last

day in office--who's to stop them? Especially with the other-competent-lawn enforcement officers two counties away?

Rita is about to call a town meeting so everyone can hear the truth when she gets a visit from Sam. My, oh my, did her tiny little offices' windows rattle as they yelled at each other. And then, would you believe they fogged right over? And the strangest sounds of desks a skiddin' all over the place and papers a flyin'. Sort of a rhythmic sound, too....

When they come out, let's just say Rita hasn't worn such a goofy grin since she won her first election fifteen years ago and Sam looks more than ever like a fox who just feasted in a hen house. Too bad that just as Sam and Rita get their relationship back on track, Jess wins the election.

That night, he displays Viv proudly on his arm. Viv looks so Texas chic in her fringe and denim, with that white hat with the rhinestone band. And Jess--why, the whole town agrees, if anyone was ever meant to wear a law officer's uniform, it's Jess.

The shindig at the ranch that evening is one that will be long remembered by everyone, all right. Battling bulldozers, food fights, skinny dippin' in the Colorado--and finally, everyone gets to see that coin collection. Jess shows it off--just in time to hand it over to the Feds, who are summoned by Sam. IRS agent Sam. Who had audited Gordon and found out about the coin collection. Already hankering to go back home and see Rita one last time anyway, Sam followed Gordon to stop his second favorite San Saban from being fleeced. He just hadn't figured on getting the best end of the deal himself.

He offers proof of who Jess and Viv really are, and what they were really after. Even shows the Feds Viv's and Jess's packed bags. They were only waiting to

skedaddle with the dawn. Instead, the coin collection is confiscated by the government for back taxes that crotchety old man Carruthers has refused to pay for forty years.

Before they close up all that gleaming gold and silver, Sam says, “What about giving our lady sheriff here--”

”Former lady sheriff,” Rita points out.

“A little souvenir. Nothing valuable—maybe just a few of those dimes and nickels. After all, without her, I never would have caught them.”

The FBI man in charge says sure, they haven’t counted it yet anyway, and who’s gonna miss a few worthless coins? So Rita picks a few tarnished, grungy dimes and nickels and leaves to pack her bags. Except no one sees her put them right on top of Sam’s in her old car.

The whole town’s ashamed now at the way they treated her, but Rita says never mind, she was ready to retire anyway. She leaves her house to her nogood son and dusts San Saba off her boots for the last time. Never too late to make a fresh start, she says cheerfully.

In fact, for a lady who lost her job, her home, and her friends all in one day, she’s mighty happy. She stops to tell Old Man Carruthers good-bye, and he’s mighty cheerful, too, for a man who just lost a fortune in gold and silver to the dadgummit government.

Next town over, Rita stops for gas and runs smack dab into Sam. Who drives a hot little red sports car now, showing the real man behind the courtly Texan. They pretend surprise for those watching. Then they kiss, get in the same car and drive off with their bags, leaving Rita’s old heap to the Good Will store in town.

“Let me see it,” Sam says, pulling off behind some trees, so excited he can barely sit still.

Rita pulls out her worthless handful of pocket change.

They planned this, you see, the three of them. Blind Old Man Carruthers, Sam and Rita, the only ones in town who knew that the most valuable item in that coin collection didn't glint either silver or gold.

It was just plain ol' nickel.

The mistruck 1913 Liberty Head nickel, one of five confiscated by a mint employee years ago and then secretly sold. The rarest, most valuable coins in US history. One recently sold at auction for two million dollars....

And Old Man Carruthers wanted them to have it, not the Feds. He only wanted the lien off his ranch so he could retire down at the beach with his hot lady friend who's twenty years younger. The rest of the coins are more than enough to pay his back taxes, so now he can sell his properties free and clear.

With the coin collection deposited legally with the Feds, no one even knows the crafty old foxes got off with a fortune. And the young, handsome couple who thought to take the town by storm not only got to find the coins. They got to hold the bag—empty.