

This is an unedited chapter for Eliza's Copper Penny. I still have one more round of edits, so . . . Enjoy! Ciara Gold

One

Banjo, Texas, 1874

Continued Efforts to Locate Boston Heiress Brings Railroad Tycoon to Texas

Eliza Woodpen stumbled when her heel caught in the groove of the planked porch in front of the local mercantile. She caught the post to keep from falling and tugged her foot loose, all the while eyeing the bold lettering. Snatching up the discarded newspaper, she glared at the headline. The large print mocked her. Her heart pounded, and she sank onto a nearby wooden bench. Ignoring the sights and sounds of the busy town, she started to read.

With each word, Eliza became more alarmed. With a shaking hand, she pushed her glasses back into place. *Why now?* When she finished reading, she scanned the paper again in case she'd missed an important detail. Stunned, she laid the newspaper in her lap and stared at nothing, her eyes glazed and unfocused.

Charles Rittman had brought his search for Emilia to Texas. Her past was about to catch up to her.

"Miss Woodpen? You all right? You look like a goat ate your best bonnet."

She focused moist eyes on Cyrus Greet and nodded. "I'm fine, Mr. Greet. Just a little too much sun today, I'm afraid."

"You sure? I heard you had a run-in with the school board. Something to do with Sarry Jones?" His rheumy, red-rimmed eyes looked at her with sympathy.

"All a rather nasty misunderstanding, Mr. Greet." She bristled at the reminder. Even the town drunk knew about her difficulties. If only he knew her full dilemma. "Nothing to worry over."

"Still seems a shame. Miss Sarry needed help and you was right kind to offer. It weren't Miss Sarry's fault her brother done what he did. Townsfolk oughta forgive and forget if'n you was to ask me." He took a step closer, stumbling against a loose board, and gave her a toothless grin.

"You have a kind heart, Mr. Greet. And I have to agree with you. Sarah shouldn't be held accountable for her brother's sins." Even now, the thought of all Sarah Jones had endured brought a pang to Eliza's heart. Sarah's brother, John, had been hanged for murder a year ago. The town still hadn't forgiven or forgotten.

"Jest like you shouldn't be frowned upon fer helpin' Miss Sarry. If I thought they'd listen to me, I'd set 'em straight." A loud belch followed his unwelcome offer.

Eliza refrained from rolling her eyes. All she needed was Mr. Greet presenting advice to the school board. It seemed shameful how the townsfolk held Sarah in such contempt, though. Eliza grimaced. The town would treat Eliza even worse should they discover her sordid past. The newspaper crinkled under her tightening grip.

"I truly appreciate your offer, but it isn't necessary. The matter should be resolved

by tomorrow." By then, she'd be back in the schoolroom. For now, she'd been sent home until the school board could finish their investigation.

"Well, if'n you're sure."

"Quite sure." She smiled in spite of the gravity of the situation.

He nodded to her. "You have a right nice day, then."

Right nice day, indeed. The drunk man stumbled toward the Sassy Lady Saloon. The paper rustled, and she glanced down. Her hand still clutched the issue of the *Boston Herald*. Though over two weeks old, it was recent enough to cause misgivings. Smoothing the paper out again, she tore out the article and slipped it into her skirt pocket. She folded the remainder of the paper and left it on the seat for someone else to enjoy.

Standing, she straightened her bonnet. She should be enjoying her forced vacation from work on such a gorgeous day. A light breeze swept across her cheek, and a bright, blue sky lent a breathtaking backdrop to the town's bustling landscape. This town had been her haven, but hiding meant not being completely open with her friends. She didn't dare reveal her true identity to anyone. Alone in her self-made world, she embraced her lies as if they were truths.

Perhaps it was time to run again. Her stomach knotted at the thought. She felt safe here. The town had welcomed her into its midst. She didn't want to run again. Banjo, Texas, had become home, and the tiny, one-room schoolhouse where she spent the majority of her days had become her haven.

She stepped off the boardwalk to cross the street, lifting her skirts against the dust swirling about her feet.

A bright glimmer caught her eye, and she stopped in the middle of the road to investigate. Stooping, she discovered a penny hidden halfway in the dirt. Some child probably bemoaned the loss of candy money. After all, a copper penny could buy several pieces of peppermint or horehound. The penny glittered in the bright sun, its surface polished by the sand. The shadow of her bonnet swept over the coin, attenuating its details.

Frugal to a fault, Eliza dusted off the coin and held it in her hand. Finding a penny was supposed to bring good luck. Closing her eyes, she rubbed her fingers over the warm copper.

Keep me safe from Charles Rittman.

The ground rumbled. Hooves pounded the hard dirt. Startled, she turned. A huge horse barreled toward her, its momentum barely hampered by a freight wagon laden with supplies. The driver applied his brakes. Metal on metal grated. She froze, a bug caught in the blinding path of danger.

"Miss Woodpen! Miss Woodpen, get out of the road!"

The distant shouts failed to penetrate her shroud of fear. The driver fought for control. Clouds of dust billowed. The horse snorted, an angry cry against the pull of the reins.

"Miss Woodpen! Run!"

The urgent voice pulled her from her trance. With a squeal, she turned on her heel and scurried out of harm's way.

"Dang fool female!" The driver shook his fist when he rumbled past her. He didn't even bother to stop.

With her gaze still fastened on the careless freight driver, she didn't pay much

Eliza's Copper Penny by Ciara Gold

attention to where she ran until her body collided with the hard form of a man. She teetered on the brink of falling. Her mind reeled from her near brush with death.

Strong hands steadied her.

"Ma'am, that was mighty close. A second longer, and you'd be fertilizin' the road."

"Indeed." Her glasses sat askew upon her nose.

She collected her thoughts, took a deep, calming breath, and tried to pull away from the man's hold. His grip tightened instead. Did he think she meant to faint?

With her glasses perched upon the tip of her nose, she focused on the man's worn boots. Slowly, her gaze traveled the length of him, taking in the details of his lawless outfit. He wore a layer of dust that turned his black clothing gray. Black. A dark color for such a hot day. A saddlebag hung carelessly over one shoulder.

"Easy. You're still shaking like a frightened cat in the middle of a thunderstorm." His hands slid up her arms. A prickle of unease made her take a step back, but the man followed by taking a step forward. His hands remained wrapped around her arms. Warmth seeped through the thin material of her sleeves. Her breath stalled. Did he mean her harm?

She tried to gauge his true intent, but the brim of his Stetson shadowed his upper face. Unable to make eye contact, she fastened her gaze on his mouth. An auburn mustache and a week's worth of stubble framed a full bottom lip. She stared down at the hands still holding her arms. "I'll thank you to take your hands from my person now."

"Indeed," he said, throwing her own word back at her. His tone was gentle, amused. "And just how will you be thankin' me?"

Did he mock her?

She stiffened her spine. "Do you accost all the ladies you meet?"

"Only the pretty ones driven into my arms by runaway wagons."

She gave him her sternest look, the one most of her students associated with dire consequences.

He removed one hand and tipped the worn Stetson. A boldly stunning man gazed back at her. A spark of something wicked and intriguing caught her off guard. The deepest green eyes she'd ever seen bore into her own. In contrast, the man's bright, amber hair curled in waves upon his shirt collar. The freckles scattered about his face contradicted the aura of danger he exuded.

She tore her gaze from his, chagrined to find herself intrigued by a no 'count drifter. "Thank you for lending assistance."

"Only words? And here I was thinking of several more pleasurable ways you could thank me. I guess a kiss is out of the question?" He winked. The man flirted in the most outrageous manner. His hand fell back in place on her arm. He gave the slightest tug, trying to pull her closer.

A kiss? The scoundrel didn't even know her. Did he think she was a calico queen? Surely not. "Truly, I'm much better now. I won't fall if you release me."

"You sure? I'm pretty adept at catching pretty fillies."

Eliza blinked. She yanked herself free and stumbled backwards.

"You're very impertinent, sir." She rubbed her upper arms. "I'll thank you to observe proper manners."

"There you go again, planning to thank me and not telling me how." He laughed,

Eliza's Copper Penny by Ciara Gold

a rich, deep sound that touched a dormant chord within her.

She pushed her glasses back into place. The most disobedient child stood no chance with her strict ways, but this forward man tested the limits of her knowledge. Thank goodness the sheriff approached.

"Ma'am," Sheriff Otis said, tipping his hat politely. "You almost got yourself hurt. Who's your friend? I don't recall seein' him about town."

The man in question stuck out his hand. "Copper Reeves. Pleased to meet you, Sheriff."

The sheriff hesitated before clasping Copper's hand. You could tell a lot about a man by the way he approached a handshake. His forceful approach in greeting the sheriff spoke volumes. Most men weren't quite so gregarious when dealing with authority figures. Copper Reeves exuded confidence with a touch of mystery.

"And your business here would be?" Otis asked.

"Just passing through, Sheriff."

"Well, see that you don't stir up any trouble while you're here. We don't get many drifters of your ilk in town, but when we do, I like to make sure they don't stay long."

"Got me pegged for a tough hombre, have you?" The corners of his mustache twitched.

"Somethin' like that. You're either a lawman, a bounty hunter, or an outlaw. I figure if you were a lawman, you'd already be showing me your badge, so that leaves bounty hunter or outlaw. Both leave a nasty taste in my mouth. Couldn't be the way you're dressed, or the six-shooter you're totin' on your hip"

Eliza drew in a sharp breath. She hadn't paid much attention to the gun until now. Strapped to his thigh was a gunslinger's pride, the handle a fancy piece of art meant to capture attention. She stared at the gun, her mind tripping on all sorts of unsavory possibilities. Copper Reeves wore the trappings of a dangerous man, one who should be avoided at all costs.

Copper smiled. "Bounty hunter."

"And your purpose for coming here?"

"I'm looking for someone. Don't you worry none, though. I'm not one to shoot first and ask questions later. I always bring my quarry in alive if possible."

She swallowed hard and stepped away from the man. The newspaper article rustled in her pocket. Could he be working for Rittman?

Take a deep breath, Eliza, and don't panic.

He was just the sort of character Rittman would hire to locate Emilia. Eliza shuddered. No. The man's presence in town had to be just a nasty coincidence.

"I'll just leave you gentleman to converse while I continue on my way. Will I see you at the church social, Sheriff?" She hated the tremor in her voice that signaled her distress.

"Yes, ma'am." He gave her a broad smile. "Count on it."

Eliza nodded to both men before walking away. Three steps, and she couldn't resist glancing back at the stranger. The man's enigmatic gaze bore into hers, and she quickly looked away. Her heart hammered in her chest. Though brief, the encounter left her disturbed, and she couldn't fathom why.

When she reached her house, the copper penny she'd retrieved earlier slipped

Eliza's Copper Penny by Ciara Gold

from her fingers to land on the floor.

She stared at the coin. She hadn't realized she still held it.

"Find a penny, pick it up and all the day you'll have good luck." *Good luck, indeed.*

She picked up the penny and stroked it between her fingers. The 1871 date was worn, the details of the leaves faded. Flipping it over, her face brightened. Not just a penny; it turned out to be a two-cent piece. The number two surrounded by a wheat wreath made the penny somewhat of a novelty. With the war over, they weren't minting the two-cent pennies anymore.

1871. The year her life had taken such a drastic turn. A frown gathered on her brow. She'd be better served spending the penny on a stick of peppermint. So far, it had brought her nothing but bad luck. Her fist closed around the penny. Was the coin an omen?

She glanced at her plain image in the mirror. As if suddenly discovering the answer to a difficult mathematical equation, Eliza knew what had upset her so about Copper Reeves. He'd flirted with her. A man hadn't tried to flirt with her since she'd turned eighteen. Mr. Reeves had teased her, smiled at her, and touched her in the most provocative manner.

No one flirted with Eliza Woodpen. It was unheard of. She was the schoolmarm, not some silly girl to be treated in such a way.

She set the copper penny on the mantle, vowing to spend this particular coin the first chance she got. Copper was something you spent, not something you took home and kept.

Later that evening, Eliza tried to put thoughts of Copper Reeves aside. Try as she might, she couldn't shake the idea that he might be on Charles Rittman's payroll. Distracted, she toyed with her napkin.

"You seem miles away."

She looked up and smiled at Ted Nates. They'd been dining together for the past year. He provided male companionship without the complication of marriage, and she enjoyed their platonic relationship.

"I guess I'm not fit company tonight."

Ted inclined his head. "I imagine you've a lot on your mind. So what did the school board say?"

"I'd rather not discuss it." She toyed with her food, twirling the fork around her mustard greens. "Let's talk about your day instead. I heard we might be getting a new railroad soon. Is this true?"

He shrugged. "I take it the school board members weren't too happy with your involvement out at the Jones's place."

She set her fork down. "Mr. Nates, I'd appreciate it if we could find some other topic more interesting than my latest transgression." She dabbed the corner of her mouth with the tip of her napkin and studied Ted's uninspiring features.

"I wasn't too thrilled by your conduct either, Miss Woodpen." His right eye twitched in that annoying manner that always irritated her. "It's unseemly for the schoolteacher to consort with the likes of Sarah Jones."

She set the napkin down beside her plate, no longer enjoying Ted's company. "Mr. Nates, I consider you my friend, not my father. You've no right to tell me how to

Eliza's Copper Penny by Ciara Gold

behave. Sarah's son, Andy, happens to be one of my students, and that makes my involvement necessary."

"But you didn't go out to the farm for Andy's sake. You went to tend Sarah." He leaned forward, a fork in one hand and a knife in the other. "When you found her in a compromising situation, you should have hightailed it back to town. I'm surprised at you."

"Why? Because I care? Because I won't kowtow to these good city folks? That woman needed help, and it surely wasn't right to leave her stranded by herself with Mr. Nolan." Besides, she'd been in her place once: a broken woman on the verge of losing everything. Someone had seen fit to offer assistance, and Eliza could do no less in helping Sarah.

"I can see we'll never see eye-to-eye on this one. You seem to forget Sarah's brother was hanged for murder. On top of that, she had a child out of wedlock. Need I say more?" He set about attacking his steak.

"Bad choices don't make a person bad. People change. Sarah's a good mother, a good, decent person. I hate how some of the folks in this town won't forgive and forget."

"I had hoped we could discuss this rationally." He dabbed at the corner of his mouth with the napkin. "After all, what you do in this community reflects on me as well."

"I don't see how."

Ted narrowed his twitchy eyes. "I think it should be quite obvious."

"Maybe you'd better spell it out."

Ted's silverware clattered on his plate and he threw down his napkin. "Us. You and me. Let's face it, Miss Woodpen. I think we've been seeing enough of each other to call it courting. I'm right fond of you, and it's assumed you and I will eventually tie the knot."

Her mouth fell open. What on earth was he thinking? She leaned back in her chair and stared at him. He glanced at his plate, the other guests, the ceiling. His eyes trailed everywhere but her.

"Mr. Nates, did you just propose to me?"

His eye twitched again, and he fiddled with his napkin. "Not exactly. Well, sort of, I suppose. I... that is, I think we would suit each other. We've been enjoying each other's company over supper for a while now. I think marriage would be the natural course for our relationship to follow."

"I'm deeply touched by your concern for my moral character. I'm even more touched by your sincere wish to take our relationship a step further. You've been a dear friend to me." She paused, gathering her thoughts. "However, I'm not sure I'm ready for anything more than friendship. I've been my own keeper for so long, I don't think I'd make a good wife." She ended with a soft laugh, trying to make light of her feelings.

He met her gaze and reached for her hand. She allowed the gesture, sensing his need to save face and not wanting to hurt his feelings more.

"I can understand your reluctance. Women need time to think. Let's continue as we have, but I'd like for you to give the idea some thought. I don't want an answer now. I can wait. Just don't give up on the idea right away."

"I'd like to remain friends, but..." she said, slipping her hand from his grasp, "I'm not at liberty to even consider marriage."

"Not at liberty?"

Eliza's Copper Penny by Ciara Gold

“Those words are much too strong.” She shook her head, trying to find the words to make him understand. “I like teaching, and at the moment, it consumes the better part of my day. I’m not yet ready to settle down. I like the freedom of being my own boss and as you know, if I marry, I’ll no longer be able to teach. The school board won’t allow it.”

“I see.” But he didn’t. His hurt expression betrayed him.

Inwardly, she groaned. A sane woman would accept his honest proposal. A woman her age would likely not receive another.

He rose when she did, and she assumed he meant to walk her home.

“Perhaps, under the circumstances, it would be best if I didn’t join you for dinner anymore.”

“Nonsense.” He grabbed his hat and ushered her toward the door. “You would miss my company too much.”

“I...” She stumbled over just the right wording. “Your--your proposal changes things.”

“You can’t mean that. Is it because I berated you earlier?”

“Mr. Nates...”

“While I don’t condone your behavior, I still consider you more than a friend.”

“You’ve caught me off guard tonight, but you must realize that my contract expressly forbids me to participate in courting activities.” The door closed behind them with a resounding bang.

“I see.” The full moon caught his solemn expression and she could tell that he didn’t understand at all. But he continued as if he expected things to remain the same between them. “It was never my intention to push you, but whatever you decide, I would truly miss our dinners together. I believe we can continue without the gossips making more of our friendship than there is, if that’s your wish.”

Eliza nodded, frustrated by this change of events. Ted’s proposal complicated things. She needed to go home and think about her future. She’d become far too comfortable in her role as schoolteacher.

She stepped off the boardwalk and took a deep breath of clean, crisp air. She looked back at Ted. He wore a wounded expression, one that would have torn at her heart if she’d had deeper feelings for the man. The short walk home gave her time to mull over the day’s events. Perhaps marriage wasn’t such a bad idea. Marriage to Ted might protect her from Charles Rittman.

A slight breeze rippled across her skin. If her mind hadn’t been so preoccupied, she would have thoroughly enjoyed the evening walk. Could she really be considering marriage to Ted Nates? Upon reaching her front porch, Copper Reeves’s face flashed in her mind, mocking her for being a coward. Only a coward married a man she didn’t love to protect an identity she had no right to.

~ * ~

Copper shifted on the cold ground. Pulling a pebble from under him, he adjusted his position and leaned against a tree. He hated this part of the job, the endless waiting with nothing to occupy his time but thoughts. Thinking had a way of getting a man in trouble.

He peered through the limbs at the house on the knoll. He’d approached Tabor Nolan earlier and interrogated the man with no results. The only thing to do now was to sit and keep watch over the house. Copper expected Tabor’s brother, Jake, to make an

appearance soon. The escaped felon had no other family. Convicted of murder and sentenced to hard time at Huntsville, Jake had broken free en route. Copper had been hired to bring him back. He just hoped he found Jake before some reckless bounty hunter found him first.

The noonday sun beat down upon Copper's shoulders, making his choice in color unwise. The black shirt absorbed the burning rays, while honest sweat clung to his brow. But black gave Copper an edge. Without the dark garb, his auburn hair and heavy coating of freckles gave the wrong message. His crooked nose, a prize earned during an Indian raid, was the only physical feature that hinted at his ability to deal harshly with those who crossed him.

Copper pulled the worn Stetson from his head. With the back of his hand, he swiped at the moisture that threatened to drip into his eyes, then surveyed his surroundings with a practiced eye. He'd made camp in a spot well concealed from the average eye.

He chuckled as he thought about the reception he'd received in town. The sheriff had wasted little time in asserting his elected authority. Copper took such warnings in stride. A bounty hunter wasn't looked upon favorably by most, and Copper was no exception. To anyone brave enough to ask, that's what he'd told them--he was a bounty hunter hot on the trail of an escaped prisoner. His lie wasn't far from the truth.

His thoughts turned toward the woman he'd met in town. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why he'd teased her so relentlessly. It wasn't like him to be so rude, yet he'd enjoyed the spark that lit her eyes. She was a feisty bit of fluff, all prim and proper on the outside and full of fire on the inside. With her brown hair pulled tight in a bun and those wire rim glasses perched in front of large, dark brown eyes, she reminded him of his mother's sister. He bet she'd look real pretty with her long tresses draped across her shoulders and the glasses removed from her delicate features. Her plain dress probably hid a wealth of curves and soft, lush planes. With nothing to do but wait, he settled into the fantasy, smiling as he envisioned peeling layers of primness from her body.

She'd walked away before he realized he didn't even know her name. No matter. He'd find out soon enough. Gathering information was part of his job. He would just have to add one more item on his list of things to investigate.

A twig snapped. Copper sat up straighter and peered into the dense wooded area. He readied his gun.

A moment later, a deer darted across the clearing. He sagged against the tree and took up his vigil again. His third day keeping watch had yielded nothing, but he felt confident Jake Nolan would make an appearance soon.

The house was situated on a grassy knoll overlooking the creek. Not far away, the creek merged with the Bosque River. An area had been cleared for crops, and off to the east was a densely wooded region full of wild game and plenty of places to hide. If Jake tried to visit Tabor, Copper would be there to intercept him. He took a swig from his canteen and made himself comfortable.

Time passed slowly, which allowed Copper a chance to examine his life. He hadn't given a lot of thought to his existence, but the incident with the mysterious woman set the wagon wheels in his brain to rolling. His particular job didn't allow time for relationships. He held nothing against marriage and raising a family. On the contrary, on

Eliza's Copper Penny by Ciara Gold

a small piece of property that had been willed to him, he hoped to build a horse ranch.

His thoughts strayed once more to the woman in town. The urge to kiss the starch right out of her prissy attitude had been strong. Holding her as he had without a proper introduction pushed the rules of polite society. He smiled, remembering the many admonishments his mother often bestowed upon him for his unruly behavior. His immediate goal included finding Jake Nolan, but a few side trips along the way wouldn't hurt. For him, lemonade tasted better with less sugar than most people enjoyed. Yep, he sure wouldn't mind a sampling of sour, prissy lips to quench his parched soul.

Another twig snapped. He checked his gun and strained his eyes. A giggle drifted to his ears. Standing, he surveyed the area. He needed to find better protection from prying eyes.

He took one step and nearby gunfire erupted, shattering the quiet of the forest. He cried out, caught short by a blinding pain. The unexpected shot snapped his breath. He fell to his knees and clenched his jaw. Another pop exploded. His hand clutched the seat of his britches, and he stifled another cry.

He dragged himself to the tree and leaned on his side. Whoever was shooting had found their mark. He'd been shot in the ass. Movement caught his eye. He lifted his gun, sighted high and returned fire.