



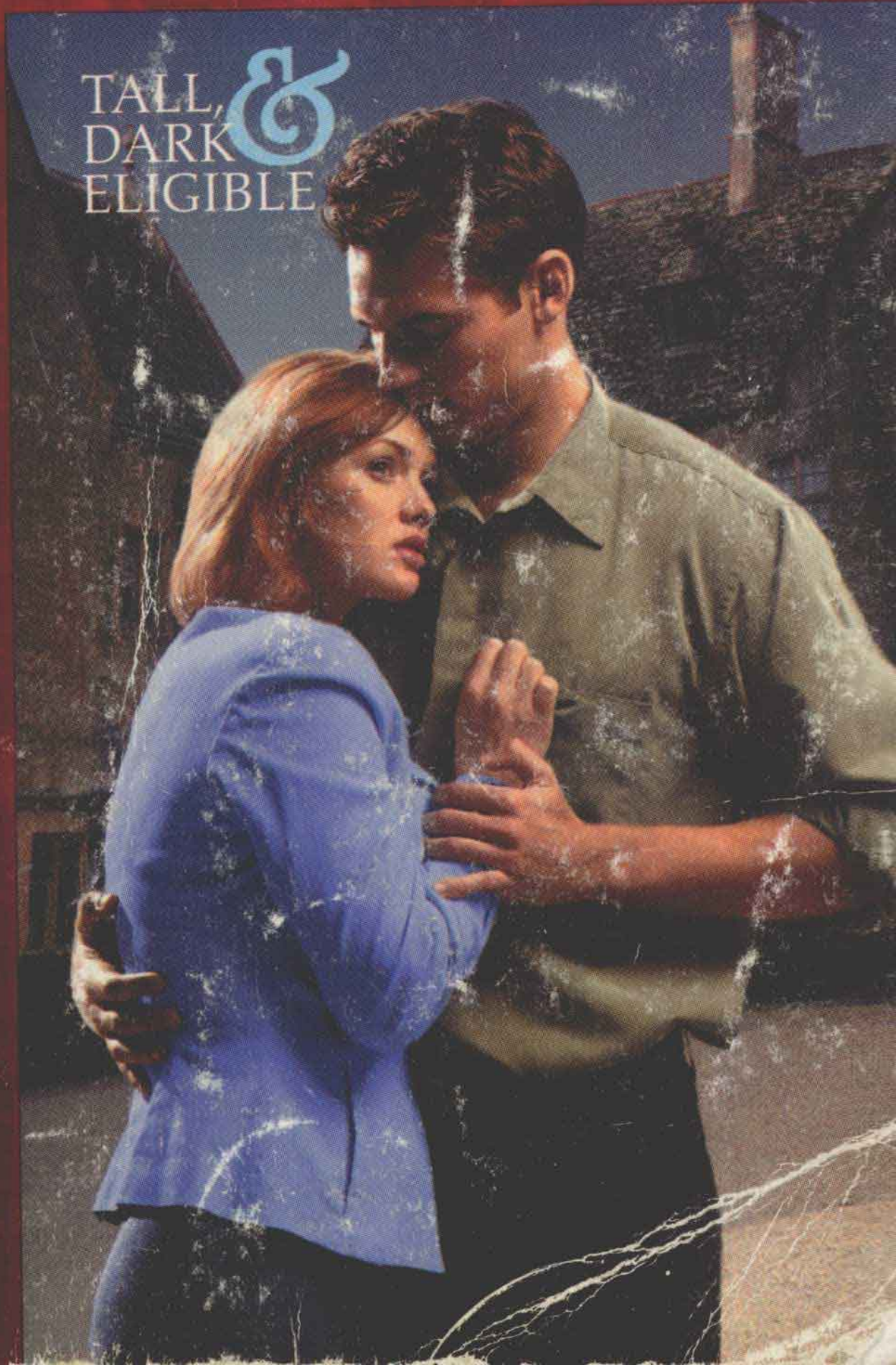
Silhouette®

1397
October

Jacob's Proposal

EILEEN WILKS

TALL, &
DARK
ELIGIBLE



Desire



Jacob Was Marrying Her For Money, Not Love.

Money, and the undeniable passion that flared between them. He wasn't thinking of forever. Only three nights ago, Claire had actually been relieved to learn that he didn't love her. How could so much change so quickly?

She held out her hand and hardly noticed as the jeweler slipped a ring on.

Last night, saying yes had been so easy. She loved him. He needed her. Given time, he might well come to love her, and last night, in the private darkness they'd shared, answers had formed and flowed easily.

"Do you want a larger stone?" Jacob asked.

"If the diamond was any bigger, I'd have to start working out just to lift it. It's a beautiful ring. I just..." She turned to look at him. His eyes were frowning, intent. He wasn't taking this business of getting a ring—of getting married—as lightly as it seemed....

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Silhouette Desire, where every month you'll find six passionate, powerful and provocative romances.

October's MAN OF THE MONTH is *The Taming of Jackson Cade*, part of bestselling author BJ James' MEN OF BELLE TERRE miniseries, in which a tough horse breeder is gentled by a lovely veterinarian. *The Texan's Tiny Secret* by Peggy Moreland tells the moving story of a woman in love with the governor of Texas and afraid her scandalous past will hurt him.

The exciting series 20 AMBER COURT continues with Katherine Garbera's *Some Kind of Incredible*, in which a secretary teaches her lone-wolf-boss to take a chance on love. In *Her Boss's Baby*, Cathleen Galitz's contribution to FORTUNES OF TEXAS: THE LOST HEIRS, a businessman falsely accused of a crime finds help from his faithful assistant and solace in her virginal embrace.

Jacob's Proposal, the first book in Eileen Wilks' dynamic new series, TALL, DARK & ELIGIBLE, features a marriage of convenience between a beauty and a devastatingly handsome financier known as the Iceman. And Maureen Child's popular BACHELOR BATTALION marches on with *Last Virgin in California*, an opposites-attract romance between a tough, by-the-book marine drill instructor and a free-spirited heroine.

So celebrate the arrival of autumn by indulging yourself with all six of these not-to-be-missed love stories.

Enjoy!



Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

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Jacob's Proposal

EILEEN WILKS



Published by Silhouette Books
America's Publisher of Contemporary Romance

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SILHOUETTE BOOKS



ISBN 0-373-76397-2

JACOB'S PROPOSAL

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Printed in U.S.A.

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**Tall, Dark & Eligible*

EILEEN WILKS

is a fifth-generation Texan. Her great-great-grandmother came to Texas in a covered wagon shortly after the end of the Civil War—excuse us, the War Between the States. But she's not a full-blooded Texan. Right after another war, her Texan father fell for a Yankee woman. This obviously mismatched pair proceeded to travel to nine cities in three countries in the first twenty years of their marriage. For the next twenty years they stayed put, back home in Texas again—and still together.

Eileen figures her professional career matches her nomadic upbringing, since she's tried everything from drafting to a brief stint as a ranch hand—raising two children and any number of cats and dogs along the way. Not until she started writing did she “stay put,” because that's when she knew she'd come home. Readers can write to her at P.O. Box 4612, Midland, TX 79704-4612.

停在原地不动。

Prologue

“We have to get married.”

Outside, wind thrashed the shrubbery and snatched leaves from the oaks. Inside, three brothers stood in silence—two of them stunned, one grim. All three were tall, strong men, but that was the only obvious resemblance. ⁶They weren't full brothers, after all. A close observer might notice a certain shared grace, the identical long-fingered hands, a likeness about the jaws and strong throats. Those few people who knew the West brothers well knew of other traits their father had passed on to his sons. Less visible traits than physical strength and grace.

Less desirable ones.

Luke, the middle brother, gave a quick bark of laughter. “What, the three of us? This is Texas. I'm pretty sure there are laws against that sort of thing.”

“Don't be any more of an ass than you have to.” That came from Michael, the youngest, who sat in one of the

wing chairs facing the empty fireplace. His eyes were as dark as his hair; he had the build of a dockworker and the face of a scholar. "The treatments are that expensive, Jacob?"

The oldest and tallest of the brothers stood in front of the mantel. Jacob West was a lean, broad-shouldered man with harsh features and a remote expression. His hair was dark enough to look black in the artificial light; his eyes were oddly pale, as nearly colorless as human irises can be. "Each treatment takes eight days and costs just under a hundred thousand dollars. None of it, of course, is covered by insurance, since it's experimental."

Michael whistled soundlessly.

"Even you don't have that kind of money." Luke pushed away from the wall he'd been leaning against. "God. The last time I saw Ada, she looked fine. It's hard to take in...how long have you known?"

"Four months."

"Four months?" Luke stopped, his head swiveling toward his brother. He was a restless man, lighter than the others in build and coloring, with the face of a fallen angel and more charm than was good for him. "Four months, and you didn't tell us?" He took a step toward Jacob. It looked as if he might take a swing at him, too.

Michael stood and put a hand on Luke's arm. "Easy."

"Ada insisted that I promise not to tell anyone. I wouldn't have known about her condition myself if I hadn't found her collapsed one day..." Jacob's thin lips closed tightly on that memory. "I'm breaking my promise now because there's something we can do."

Michael spoke. "Where's Ada now, Jacob? In the hospital?"

"No, she's in Switzerland, at the Varens Institute. They specialize in rare blood diseases. I've made copies for both

of you of the information I've gathered so far about Timur's Syndrome, and about the institute." He passed them each a folder.

Silence fell once more while the two younger brothers looked over the multipage report. After skimming several pages, Luke grinned. "You had her doctor investigated."

"Of course. It's always useful to know who you are dealing with."

Michael set the report down. "This treatment she's undergoing is experimental. Is it safe? Is it helping?"

"At this point Ada is responding well. Well above expectations. This isn't a cure, but it looks like her symptoms can be almost completely alleviated with continued treatments. That's why I sent for you."

"I've never used more than the interest on my coming-of-age money," Michael said. "I can live well enough without it."

"A generous offer, but it wouldn't be enough. Ada will need between two and four treatments a year for the rest of her life. The cost will come down if the treatment becomes approved in this country, but that's at least five years in the future, possibly more."

"You're talking about between two and three million dollars over the next five years. More after that."

"Yes."

Silence fell once more, broken only by the limb of one young tree tapping repeatedly against the window, sounding like fretful fingers.

There was only one way they could help Ada. Marriage.

"Well." Luke raised his eyebrows. "Anyone want to place a bet on which of us can do the deed first?"

Michael ignored that. "How long will it take to wind up the trust once we've fulfilled the conditions?"

"At least a month," Jacob said. "Ada will need another

treatment in three to six months. I can cover the cost myself, but I've got a deal trying to go south. If it does, it will be...expensive."

"So we marry sooner, rather than later. No problem." The glitter in Luke's eyes contrasted with the lightness of his voice. "I can think of several ladies who would be delighted to help me out, considering how much will be left even after we take care of Ada. Jacob, of course, will ask Maggie."

Jacob's lips tightened. "Arranging my affairs for me?"

There was challenge in the look Luke gave his brother. "Don't tell me you've been leading the poor girl on."

"Are you talking about Maggie Stewart?" Michael's eyebrows lifted when Jacob nodded. "Are you serious about her, then?"

Jacob's shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "I've been considering marriage. It seemed time."

"What about you, Mick?" Luke's use of Michael's nickname was an olive branch of sorts. "You wouldn't meet many women in your line of work. Sneaking into hostile countries, blowing up things—it can't leave you much time for socializing."

"Luke has a point," Jacob said. "Will your duties interfere with finding a bride? You said you'd be leaving the country again soon."

"Yes. On the third."

Luke whistled. "Eight days? I'm a fast worker, but that's not much time, even for me. With all those millions that will land in your lap soon, though, it can be done. Want me to send a few candidates your way?"

Michael scowled. "I think I can find a wife on my own."

"One more thing," Jacob said. "The treatment seems to have worked, but there's no guarantee subsequent treatments will have the same effect." He paused. "We might

marry, dissolve the trust, set up another one to pay for Ada's care—and a month or a year later, she could be dead anyway."

Luke and Michael exchanged glances. For once, the two understood each other perfectly. Michael spoke for them both when he said, "A month, a year, twenty years—it doesn't matter. Any time we can buy her will be worth the price. This is for *Ada*."

It was settled. The three of them would find women willing to marry quickly, and so dissolve the bizarre trust their father had set up. They would do this in spite of the fact that each of them had at some point vowed never to marry.

Because this was for Ada. The one woman they all loved. Their housekeeper.

One

Rain washed the window where Jacob stood staring out at a wet, dreary world. He didn't know why some people claimed to like rainy days. Rain sucked the color out of everything and sniffled in self-pity while it did, sounding like one great, endless sob. And a December rain was the worst, cold and endlessly gray.

Storms, now—storms were all right. When the air cracked open and flashed threats across the sky in million-volt arcs of light, it woke a man up. But three endless rainy days made Jacob want to put his fist through something.

Not that he would do such a thing, of course. He took a sip from the mug in his hand, then frowned. Cold coffee was as bad as rainy days.

Of course, if he wanted to be honest, he'd admit that his mood this morning had a great deal to do with what had happened last weekend. It wasn't every day a man asked a woman to marry him. And got turned down.

He'd rushed things. He knew that, but what choice had he had? He had to marry soon, and Maggie had been his choice. She was perfect for him, a warm, outgoing woman with dozens of friends both male and female, and a ruthlessly competitive streak when she was on the back of a horse. But sexually she was shy, inexperienced. He'd rather liked that about her. Jacob hadn't objected to taking his time, letting her get used to him.

Hadn't he spent two months proving she could trust him, that he wouldn't pounce on her? It hadn't been easy, either. And the reason she'd given for refusing him had come as a shock. Like hell he didn't want her! Maybe he didn't feel some blind, all-consuming passion, but she was a cute little thing and he'd been looking forward to taking her to bed. Passion was like fool's gold, anyway—lots of sparkle, no substance. He'd expected her to agree with him about that.

Of course, Maggie had been shocked, too. But she liked him, dammit. They could have been good for each other, comfortable together. If he'd just had a little more time...

When the door behind him opened, he spoke without turning. "The office line rang a minute ago."

"Then you should have answered it," a tart voice said. "Since you've apparently got nothing better to do."

He turned around. "I'm taking a break. You're always telling me I work too hard."

A tiny, wrinkled woman in baggy slacks came into the room bearing an insulated carafe of coffee—no doubt her excuse for barging in on him. "There's a difference between taking a break and brooding."

"I don't brood."

It had been three weeks since Ada had returned from Switzerland and learned that he'd told his brothers about her condition. She had yet to forgive Jacob for spilling her secret. She was looking better, though. That was what mat-

tered. Oh, she was still too skinny, but she had always been a bony little thing. Her movements were reassuringly brisk.

"I like the hair."

One child-size hand came up to pat the orange frizz that made such an interesting contrast with her tanned-to-leather skin. "Do you? I was afraid Marilyn used too much Tropical Sunrise this time."

"Very cheerful."

She snorted and set the carafe down on his desk. "As if you cared about cheerful. You want me to call a temp agency? Cosmo's down with a stomach bug, and I've got better things to do than answer your office line."

Damn. "My new assistant should be capable of answering the phone. *If* she ever gets here."

"She called. She's on her way."

He glanced out the window. This damned rain! "I suppose the roads are difficult." Although Jacob's house was built on high land, several of the roads nearby flooded when they had a heavy rain. That was one reason he preferred to have his staff live in.

"They've got travelers' advisories out. Here." She held out a fresh cup of coffee. "Maybe a little caffeine will stop your snarling."

Jacob took the mug. He wasn't looking forward to breaking in a new assistant. He'd always hated having strangers around him. Sonia, his regular assistant, thought highly of Ms. McGuire, but Jacob remained skeptical. "I know her name from somewhere."

Ada gave him a pitying look. "They do say the brain is the first to go. She compiled a report for Sonia a month ago. You read the report. No doubt her name was on it."

"That's not what I meant." He sipped the coffee and sat down behind his desk. "It sounds like I've got time to put a call through to Marcos in Rome. When my new assistant

finally shows up, bring her to me right away. You can fill her in on my faults later.”

“Aren’t enough hours in the day to do *that*,” she said, going to the door, where she paused, looking uncharacteristically uncertain. “Jacob...”

“Yes?”

“Did Maggie turn you down?”

He knew very well his expression hadn’t given him away, but apparently something had. He nodded.

“She wasn’t right for you, anyway,” she said gruffly. “You might as well get some work done. Better than brooding.” She pulled the door shut behind her,

In spite of everything, he smiled. Ada was definitely feeling better.

And that, he reminded himself, was what mattered, not who he married. Marriage was an unholy risk, no matter who he asked. Maybe, he thought, sipping his coffee, he would ask his new assistant to marry him as soon as she stepped in the door. *Good morning, Ms. McGuire. I’m pleased to see you didn’t drown on the way here. You’ll need to answer the phone today, since my secretary is sick. Also, I would like to get married as soon as possible. Is Friday good for you?*

Jacob chuckled and put down his mug. He was still smiling as he powered up his computer, accessed the latest market quotes—and promptly forgot his coffee, the rain and the woman who had rejected him.

It was still raining when Claire pulled up in front of the West mansion. *Or castle*, she thought, eyeing the massive house where she would be living for the next month or more.

Someone had already decorated for Christmas, though Thanksgiving was only a few days behind them. Lights

were strung in a zigzag along the pediments topping the first floor windows, making a bright, incongruous splash of scarlet against the gray stone. Off to the left, she glimpsed a turret through the blur of rain. And could the roof really be crenelated?

Good grief. Tucking her laptop beneath her raincoat and shielding herself as much as possible with her umbrella, she climbed out of her cousin's Bronco and dashed up the steps.

The doorbell was tucked inside a gargoyle's snarling mouth. She grinned and pressed it, wondering who would open the door. A house like this deserved an ancient family retainer. A terrifyingly dignified butler, maybe? Or a hunchback with a scar that knit half his face into a hideous scowl? Igor, in fact.

The door didn't creak when it opened, unfortunately. And that was definitely not Igor.

"Good God," exclaimed the wrinkled elf in the doorway. "This is worse than I'd expected. Or maybe better."

The woman was no bigger than a twelve-year-old child. A scrawny twelve-year-old. Frizzy hair the color of marigolds and the texture of a dandelion puff framed a face that had been browned by the sun of at least fifty Texas summers. She wore a sweatshirt, baggy olive-green slacks, an apron and a pair of diamond earrings with stones so big they should have come out of a Cracker Jack box.

But Claire was pretty sure they hadn't. "Ah—I'm Claire McGuire."

"Of course you are. Who else would show up in this weather, looking the way you do?" She shook her head. "You may as well come in. Sonia did warn me. She also assured me you wouldn't try to seduce the boy, but you wouldn't have to try very hard, would you?"

Claire stiffened. "I beg your pardon?"