



## Proposal at the Winter Ball (Harlequin Romance)

By Jessica Gilmore



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Alex cherishes Flora above everything. He is estranged from his family, so she's been the bright spark in a dark life. But after their kiss, Alex must make a decision—step back and protect their friendship, or risk everything, down on one knee, for the happiness he's always dreamed of!

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### Editorial Review

#### About the Author

A charity-working, dog-walking, child-wrangling, dust-ignoring bookworm, Jessica lives in the beautiful and historic city of York with one patient husband, one daughter, one very fluffy dog, two dog-loathing cats and a goldfish called Bob.

As day dreaming is her very favourite hobby and she loves a good happy-ever-after Jessica can't believe she's lucky enough to write romance for a living. Say hi on Twitter at @yrosered or visit [sprigmuslin.blogspot.com](http://sprigmuslin.blogspot.com)

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'A glass of white wine and make it a large one.' Flora sank onto the low leather seat and slumped forward, banging her forehead against the distressed oak table a couple of times. She sat back up and slouched back in her chair. 'Please,' she added, catching a quizzical gleam in Alex's eyes.

'Bad day?' He held up a hand and just like that the waiter glided effortlessly through the crowds of office-Christmas-party escapees and Friday-night drinkers towards their table, tucked away in the corner as far from the excited pre-Christmas hubbub as they could manage. Flora could have waved in the waiter's general direction for an hour and he would have ignored her the whole time but Alex had the knack of procuring service with just a lift of a brow; taxis, waiters, upgrades on flights. It was most unfair.

What was it about Alex that made people—especially women—look twice? His messy curls were more russet than brown, his eyes undecided between green and grey and freckles liberally splattered his slightly crooked nose. And yet the parts added up to a whole that went a long way beyond plain attractive.

But then Alex *was* charmed—while Flora's fairy godmother must have been down with the flu on the day her gifts were handed out. Flora waited not too patiently, ready to finish her tale of woe, while Alex ordered their drinks. A humiliation shared was a humiliation halved, right?

Finally the waiter turned away and she could launch back in. 'Bad day I could cope with but it's been a bad *week*. I think I'm actually cursed. Monday was the office manager's birthday and she brought in doughnuts. I bit into mine and splat. Raspberry jam right down the front of my blouse. Of course it was my nicest white silk,' she added bitterly.

'Poor Flora.' His mouth tilted with amusement and she glared at him. He was still in his work suit and yet looked completely fresh. Yep, unfairly charmed in ways that were completely wasted on a male. Flora's seasonally green wool dress was stain free today but she still had that slightly sticky, crumpled, straight-from-work feel and was pretty sure it showed...

'And then yesterday I left work with my skirt tucked into my knickers. No, don't laugh.' She reached across the table and prodded him, his chest firm under her fingers. 'I didn't realise for at least five minutes and...' this was the worst part; her voice sank in shame '...I wasn't even wearing nice knickers. Thank goodness for fifteen-denier tights.'

Alex visibly struggled to keep a straight face. 'Maybe nobody noticed. It's winter, surely you had a coat on?'

'I was wearing a jacket. A *short* jacket. And judging by the sniggering the whole of Holborn noticed. But even that was better...' Flora stopped short and buried her face in her hands, shame washing over her as she mentally relived the horror of just an hour ago.

'Better than?' Alex leaned back as the waiter returned carrying a silver circular tray, smiling his thanks as the man put a pint in front of him and a large glass of wine in front of Flora. She picked up the glass, gratefully taking a much-needed gulp, the cold tartness a welcome relief.

'Better than tonight. I didn't mean to...'

The old phrase tripped off her tongue. Flora's mother always said that they would be her last words, carved onto her grave.

*Here lies Flora Prosperine Buckingham. She didn't mean to.*

'I was just so relieved to see a seat I all out ran for it only I threw myself in a little too vigorously, misjudged and I ended up. I ended up sitting on a strange man's knee.'

She glared at Alex as he choked on his pint. 'It's not funny! The whole carriage just stared at me and the man said.' She stumbled over the words, her cheeks heating at the memory. 'He said, "Make yourself comfortable, pet. I like a girl with plenty to grab hold of."'

She took another gulp, ignoring the guffaws of laughter opposite. The words had stung more than she cared to admit. So she was tall with hips and a bosom that her mother called generous and her kinder friends described as curvy? In the nineteen fifties she would have been bang on trend but right now in the twenty-first century she just felt that bit too tall, that bit too wide, that bit too conspicuous.

Of course, sitting on a strange man's lap in a crowded Tube carriage hadn't helped her blend in. There had probably been people from her office in that very carriage on that very train, witnesses to her humiliation. Thank goodness her contract ended next week, although the thought of even one week of whispers and sniggers was bad enough; if only she could get a convenient dose of flu and call in sick. A week of rest, recuperation and isolation was exactly what she needed.

Though sick days meant no pay. Flora sighed. It was no fun temping.

Alex finally stopped laughing. 'That was very friendly of you. So you've made a new friend?'

'No!' She shuddered, still feeling an itch in the exact spots where the large hands had clasped her. 'The worst thing was I just had to sit there and pretend nothing had happened. No, not on his lap, idiot! On the seat next to him. I'm surprised I didn't spontaneously combust with mortification.'

How she would ever get back onto that Tube, onto that line, even onto the entire underground network again she had no idea. Maybe she could walk to work? It would only take a couple of hours—each way.

'Will you go back there after Christmas?'

It was as if he had read her mind. Alex was far too good at that.

Flora shook her head. 'No, I was covering unexpected sick leave and she should be back after the holidays.'

Luckily January is always a good time for temps. All those people who decide to *carpe diem* on New Year's Eve or do something outrageous at the Christmas party.'

'Come on, Flora, is that your grand plan? Another year temping? Isn't it time you *carpe diem* yourself? Look, it's been two years since you were made redundant. I know it stung but shouldn't you be back in the saddle by now?'

Flora put her glass firmly on the table, blinking back the sudden and very unwanted tears. 'It's not that easy to find design work and at least this way I'm paying the bills. And no...' she put up her hand as he opened his mouth. 'I am not moving in with you and I am not moving back home. I don't need charity. I can do this on my own.'

Besides, it wasn't as if she wasn't trying. Since she had been made redundant from her job at a large but struggling pub chain she had sent out her portfolio to dozens of designers, retail head offices and agencies. She had also looked for freelance work, all too aware how hard it was to land an in-house position.

Most hadn't even bothered to reply.

Alex regarded her levelly. 'I'm not planning on offering you charity. I'm actually planning to offer you a job.'

Again. Flora swallowed, a lump roughly the size of the *Titanic* lodging itself in her throat. Just great. It wasn't that she envied Alex his incredible success; she didn't spend *too* much time comparing the in-demand, hotshot team of architects he headed up with her own continuing search for work. She tried not to dwell on the contrast between his gorgeous Primrose Hill Georgian terrace, bought and renovated to his exact design, and her rented room a little further out in the far ends of North London.

But she wished he wouldn't try and help her. She didn't need his pity. She needed him to believe in her.

'Look,' she said, trying to stop her voice from wobbling. 'I do appreciate you offering me work, just like I appreciate Mum needing a runner or Dad an assistant every time I'm between contracts. But if I learned anything from the three years I was with Village Inns it's that mingling the personal and the professional only leads to disaster.'

It *could* have been a coincidence that she was made redundant shortly after breaking up with the owner's son and heir apparent but she doubted it.

And yes, right now life was a struggle. And it was more than tempting to give in and accept the helping hands her family and best friend kept holding out to her. But if she did then she would just confirm their belief that she couldn't manage on her own.

At least a series of humiliating, weird or dull temp jobs kept her focused on getting out and getting on.

'I'm not offering you a role out of pity. I actually really need you. I need your help.' His mouth quirked into a half-smile.

Flora gaped at him. Had she heard right? The cheesy blend of Christmas tunes was already pretty loud and amplified even more by the group at the bar who were singing along a little too enthusiastically. 'You *need* me?'

That potentially changed everything.

'You know the hotel I designed in Austria?'

Did she know about the high-profile, high-concept boutique hotel Alex had designed for the fiber-successful, fiber-exclusive Lusso Group? 'You might have mentioned it once or twice.'

'I've been offered an exclusive contract to design their next three. They pick stunning natural locations, like everything to be as eco-friendly and locally sourced as possible and each resort has an entirely unique look and vibe. It's a fantastic project to work on. Only the designer I used for Austria has just accepted a job with a rival hotel brand and can't continue working with me.'

This was a lot bigger than the small jobs he had been pushing her way for the last two years. It was too big to be a pity offering; his own reputation was at stake as well. Hope mingled with pride and for the first time in a long, long time Flora felt a smidgen of optimism for her future.

Only to be instantly deflated by Alex's next words. 'I'm flying out tomorrow for the launch of the Austrian hotel and while I'm there I plan to present my initial concepts for the Bali hotel complete with the interiors and overall look. I thought Lola had at least made a start on it but when I called her today to ask her to fax her scheme over she told me cool as anything that, not only hadn't she started, but thanks to her new job she wasn't intending to.' He blew out a long breath, frustration clear on his face. 'This job better work out for her because there's no way I'll be recommending her again, no matter how insanely gifted she is.'

Ouch, ouch and ouch again. Flora's fingers tightened on her glass stem. So it wasn't her talent he was after, it was her availability?

But maybe it was time to swallow her pride. A job like this would propel her into the next league. She leaned forward, fixing an interested smile onto her face. 'So what do you want me to do? Study your plans and email my ideas over?' Her tiny box room of a bedroom, already crammed with material, her sewing machine and easel, wasn't the most inspiring surroundings but she could manage. Or she could travel back to her parents a week early and work from there—at least she would be warm and fed if not guaranteed any peace and quiet or, indeed, any privacy.

'Email? Oh, no, I need you to come to Austria with me. That way you'll get a real feel for their taste.' He fixed her with a firm gaze. 'You need to follow the brief, Flora. There's no room for your whimsy.'

Her whimsy? Just because her private designs were a little fantastical didn't mean she carried her taste into her professional work. She knew the difference between indulging her creativity in her personal work and meeting a client's brand expectations, no matter how dull they might seem. She narrowed her eyes at him. 'Of course, I *am* a professional.'

Alex held her gaze for a long second before nodding. 'Good. I'll talk you through my plans on the flight to Innsbruck'

The reality of his words hit her. A trip abroad. She hadn't been on a plane since her redundancy. 'Tomorrow? But I have another week of my temp job to go.'

'Can't you get out of it?'

'Well, yes. Although my agency won't be best pleased.'

'It's a temping agency. I'm sure they will be able to replace you.'

'Yes. Of course.' A fizz of excitement began to bubble through her. No more Tube trains and oppressive offices. No, she would be spending the next week in a gorgeous hotel. No more spreadsheets or audio typing or trying to put salespeople off, she would be flexing her creative muscles instead.

'It's a shame it isn't Bali. I could do with some winter sun.' Flora shivered despite the almost oppressive heat in the overcrowded wine bar. Her last holiday had been a tent in the Cornish countryside. It had all sounded idyllic on the website, which had deliriously described the golden beaches and beautiful scenery. The reality had been freak storms and torrential rain. She didn't think she'd been truly warm since.

Alex set down his pint. 'This isn't a holiday, Flora.'

'I know.' She leaned forward and grabbed his hand. 'I was teasing you. I'd go to the Antarctic for a chance like this. What do I need to do?'

His fingers curled around hers, warm and strong, and Flora's heart gave the all too familiar and all too painful thump at his touch. 'Be ready tomorrow morning, early. Pack for snow and some glamorous events, you know the kind of thing.'

No, she didn't. Not recently but there was no way she was going to tell him that. 'Warm yet dressy. Got it.' A thought struck her as the group by the bar began to roar the chorus of yet another overplayed Christmas classic. 'When are we due back? Mum and Dad are expecting both of us home on Christmas Eve. They'd be gutted if you don't turn up. Horatio is on duty at the hospital so it'll just be Minerva, her perfect spouse and her perfect twins.'

She could hear the bitter note in her voice, feel it coat her tongue and took another sip to wash it down. What she meant was she couldn't cope with Minerva and her Stepford family without Alex.

'No Horry?' Alex raised his eyebrow. 'That's a shame. I do like watching your mum trying to fix him up with the local eligibles. He's so beautifully oblivious.'

'I think it's a defence mechanism.' Flora eyed Alex speculatively. 'Anyway, you should be glad he never takes the bait. If Mum wasn't worrying about her permanent bachelor son she might turn her matchmaking skills onto you.'

'You're her youngest child,' he countered sweetly. 'I wouldn't worry about me, Flora. It'll be you she'll be launching forth next.'

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