



SUSIE GILMOUR

HOLDING OUT OR GIVING IN

Should Jess stay or should she go? The decision is yours



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flame

FLAME
Hodder & Stoughton

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Praise for LOVE STUCK

'Get ready for the most original book of the year with one girl, two blokes and three endings!' – *B Magazine*

'A quirky romantic comedy with a choose-your-own-ending'
– *Mirror*

'You, the reader, get the chance to choose which man she ends up with. So good you'll want to read all the endings'
– *New Woman*

'Refreshingly unpredictable' – *Company*

'A *Sliding Doors* situation . . . Jess's chaotic life provides plenty of laughs, while leaving the reader to choose her destiny is a really clever idea' – *Shine*

Also by Susie Gilmour

Love Stuck

About the author

Holding Out or Giving In is the follow-up to Susie Gilmour's highly-acclaimed first novel *Love Stuck*. She has recently returned from a teaching-trip to Africa.

For my mum, for always believing in me.

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PS A special thank you to family friends and relatives for not collapsing from shock after ignoring all warnings and reading *Love Stuck* anyway. Please have a stiff drink on standby if you plan to be equally disobedient with this one!

and not obey

To the Tune of the Coventry Carol

The nearly right
And yet not quite
In love is wholly evil
And every heart
That loves in part
Is mortgaged to the devil.

I loved or thought
I loved in sort
Was this to love akin
To take the best
And leave the rest
And let the devil in?

O lovers true
And others too
Whose best is only better
Take my advice
Shun compromise
Forget him and forget her.

Stevie Smith

PROLOGUE

Hiding in my bedroom after an unsuccessful attempt to convince Mum and Dad that any smell of cigarettes was coming from the dog. Tummy going mad due to mistaking a lump of blue candlewax for a delicious icing globule. Making myself feel popular by re-reading any birthday card not from a relative.

Dear Jess,

Happy 27th birthday – although I must say it feels very strange to be wishing someone else a happy birthday on my birthday – like a weird kind of Christmas. Since mine has been as near to happy as sitting in a dentist's waiting room is to being relaxing, I've cheered myself up by imagining yours . . .

My Birthday

Your Birthday

7.30 a.m. Mum wakes me up with birthday cards: one mysterious tantalising one alluding to an exciting sender (Miles Willoughby?), one squashy one suggesting enclosed stash of juicy twenty-pound notes, one pink one with bubbles on the envelope and one intriguing one from Glasgow. Utter disappointment: mysterious one is from the A1 Driving School, squashy one is a revolting padded kitten-sitting-in-basket-playing-with-yarn-ball number, bubble one is from the goldfish, and intriguing Glasgow one is not a birthday card at all but a leaflet about interest rate changes to my Post Office Savings Account.

Your husband wakes you up with birthday cards: one from Miles Willoughby who still regrets snogging Kerry outside the Dragon and Egg, several from all the fantastic friends you made at university, one from a couple you met when you went travelling around the world, a joint one from all the office with witty comments about how much you are loved and valued, and one your husband has hand-painted himself (because he is creative as well as rich, good-looking, funny, popular, kind, generous, sensitive, caring, intelligent, thoughtful, and absolutely nothing whatsoever like Miles Willoughby).

10.00 a.m. Double geography.

Important executive strategy meeting to discuss your successful job as presenter of The Holiday Programme.

1.30 p.m. Horrible canteen sausage lunch. Stanners finds out it's my birthday, stands on his chair and tells everybody I want Miles Willoughby's sausage. I am lunchtime laughing stock.

Delicious lunch in a sunny pavement café with your work colleagues who have all clubbed together to buy you a beautiful sophisticated objet d'art for your newly renovated home.

4.00 p.m. Maths.

~~Boquet~~ Bouquet to fill Britain arrives from your husband. Everyone is jealous. Inside one of the rosebuds is a set of keys to an idyllic French château he has just bought you.

7.30 p.m. Wander seedy Inverness back lanes stepping on dog turds and downing warm Diamond White in order to pluck up enough courage to enter the Dragon and Egg. Get chucked out of the Dragon and Egg. Look for Kerry in the hope she will know where Miles Willoughby is. Find Kerry with her tongue rammed down someone's throat. It is Miles Willoughby's throat. Hate Kerry. Hate Miles Willoughby. Hate LIFE!

Sophisticated dinner party with lovely couples you met on safari in Africa. Everyone is drinking wine and laughing, in azwe of how you can hold down a successful television career and still provide a sumptuous Delia banquet. You catch your husband looking at you lovingly as he reaches over, strokes your tiny bump and tells the guests you are expecting a baby in September. Everyone cries tears of joy.

And I'm picturing you now, curled up with your husband and possibly a little fluffy Andrex puppy, laughing over mortgages and Babygros. What is a mortgage? And did you meet your husband when you were travelling? And what's it like to be in love – to have found 'the one'? Kerry says it's as though all the love songs on the radio have been written especially for you, but Kerry thinks it's perfectly all right to go round snogging the one boy your best friend, ex-best friend has fancied all year. Did you ever forgive her for snogging Miles Willoughby? Did you ever snog Miles Willoughby?

There are so many questions I want to ask you but I know that by the time you can reply I will be totally uninterested in the answers – like doing exams and immediately wanting to know how you've done, convinced you'll never be able to stand the suspense of waiting, then getting the envelope three months later and being so far removed from the event that you don't give the slightest flying fig what it says.

Anyway, I hope this letter finds you happy. I've been trying to imagine where you might be when you read it and keep getting this alarmingly recurring image of the Dragon and Egg. Will start praying now that this is not the case. Enjoy the next ten years.

*Lots of love,
Jess, 17 today
xxx*

PS If the baby is a boy, promise me you won't, whatever you do, call him Miles.

Jess folded up the letter and did not so much feel as though she'd failed to make the grade as not even made it to the exam hall. The idea of her as a widely travelled expectant mum with devoted husband, fabulous job and boisterous Labrador smacked more of an advertising campaign for Norwich Union than anything resembling her own life. It seemed a cruel irony indeed that the only thing she'd predicted

accurately was that she would still be sitting in the Dragon and Egg.

But even this, she realised, as she stared out into what was now a trendy restaurant, had managed to mature into something a whole lot more sophisticated. If only she'd had the foresight to predict that such a notorious underage drinking hovel associated with Diamond White, teenage snogging and non-inhaling smokers could attract the richest and most élite of Inverness's population simply by converting it into an aircraft hangar and erecting some stainless steel furniture. She wondered what the natural extension of minimalism might be, and imagined herself returning in another ten years to find lots of naked people sitting in a vast open space drinking nothing out of thin air.

'Here's to the birthday girl!' Alex announced, returning to the table with a pint of beer and something that looked as though it had just been dredged up from the bottom of Loch Ness.

Jess watched as he placed the two glasses meticulously on the shiny surface and arranged himself on an oblong piece of metal claiming to be a chair. Maybe this was the husband from the letter. Maybe this was the person she was meant to be with.

'This is supposed to be a treat, is it?' she said, gesturing to the algae.

Alex nodded. 'To be downed in one. And none of those nose-pinching girly sips.'

Jess smiled. He knew her through and through. Knew every little foible, every phobia, every shortcoming. And loved her because of them.

'Long-lost friend or secret admirer?'

She looked up at him blankly.

'That,' he said, pointing to the letter. 'It's either from someone I don't know, or someone you don't want me to know.'

'Oh, you know them all right,' she said, attempting to sip the sludge. 'Very well, in fact.'

'And do I like them?'

Jess pretended to think about this. 'Last count you said you loved them.'

Alex pretended to look confused. 'So that whittles it down to Manchester United or . . . you,' he said, grinning.

'Glad to know I'm up there with the best of them,' Jess replied, smirking.

'And as far as I know Man U aren't recruiting at the moment,' he continued, still grinning, 'so that means it must be from you.' He took her hand. 'Jess, if I'd known you were that desperate for friends I would have lent you some of mine.'

She laughed despite herself. 'I'm perfectly happy with my own friends, thank you.'

'So, why the letter to yourself?' he asked, then looked concerned. 'Oh, no. It's not some weird analytical thing, is it?' Alex lived in fear of being subjected to one of Jess's psychological testing games, which she was adamant unearthed vital clues to their compatibility. The very fact she believed this said everything he needed to know about their compatibility.

'I wrote it ten years ago on my seventeenth birthday,' she announced, picking up the letter and staring fondly at a bonneted Holly Hobbie motif in the corner, 'to see if what I hoped my life would be was what it became.'

'So it is some weird analytical thing.'

Sometimes, Jess thought, she and Alex could feel so right, so bonded, so in tune with one another. This was not one of those moments. 'Weird only to those who put Manchester United before their girlfriend,' she retorted.

'So what hopes came true – apart from me?' Alex asked, grinning.

'None,' Jess said, then felt the weight of the word. 'I've let her down.'

Alex tried not to look offended. 'Let who down?'

'Me. I was supposed to have gone travelling, got married, presented *The Holiday Programme*, owned a puppy and now be smiling smugly at my bump as I wander, deliriously happy, round the Babygro department of Mothercare.'

Alex laughed. 'Well, I think Mothercare's still open if you fancied—'

'Alex, it's not funny,' she whined. 'I'm twenty-seven and a failure. I've achieved nothing.' She watched his expression crumple.

'What about a successful three-year relationship with someone who loves you?'

He was right, she mused, as they looked at each other across the minimalist olive bowl, and yet if this was something she truly valued, why did it have to take him to point it out?

'I was meaning job, life things,' she added, relieved to see a waitress scurrying towards them.

But the food ordering, rather than providing a welcome distraction, turned out to be an intensive French tutorial where the menu required the kind of translation only those carrying a sizeable Collins would attempt. For a restaurant that sold itself on simplicity and lack of fuss, Jess thought, it seemed incongruous to present its food as an A-level interpretation paper.

'So, what d'you mean "job, life things"?' Alex continued, once the ordeal was over. 'You've got a fantastic job.'

'Scouting for commitment-phobic dogs and teenage mums with suicidal tendencies is hardly presenting *The Holiday Programme*.'

'At least it's television. When I was seventeen I wanted to be an Australian bush-walker.'

Jess entertained images of Alex skipping down mountain tracks with a knapsack and Stetson singing 'Waltzing Matilda' at passing kookaburras. 'Well, a lawyer's not a million miles away,' she said. 'Anyway, you don't understand. It's less