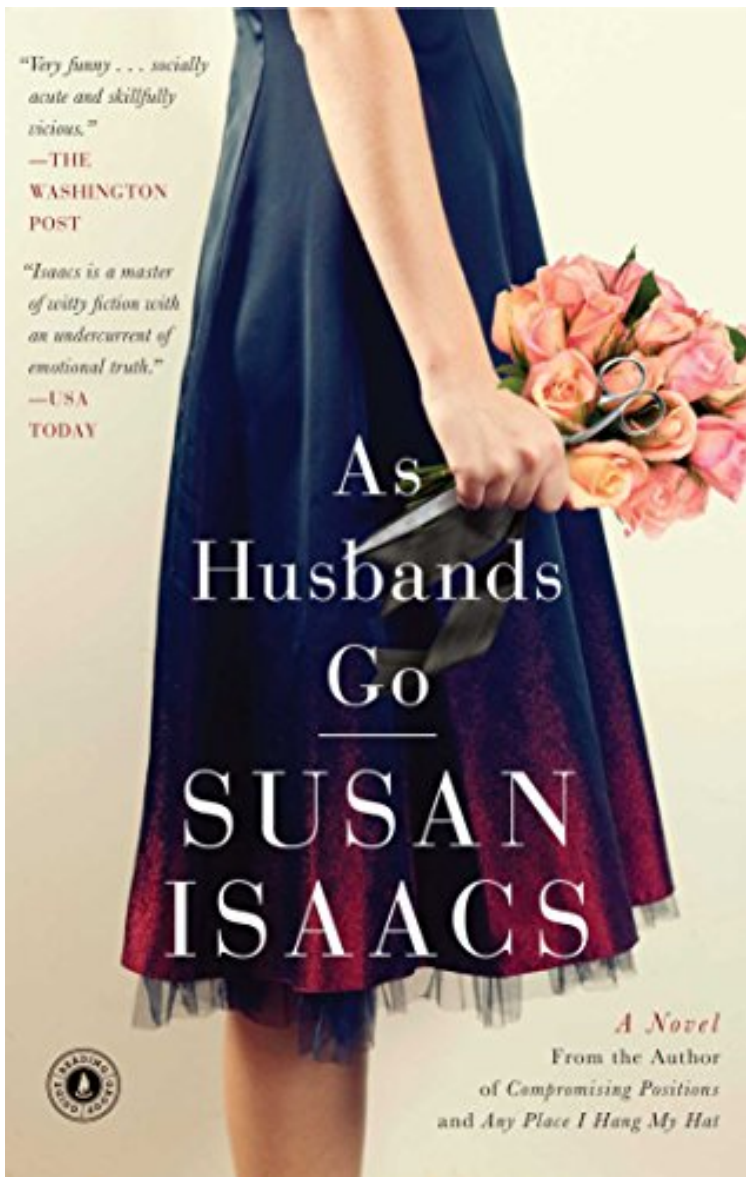


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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA rare mix of wit, social satire, and suspense, along with characters who leap from the page to speak directly to the reader -- a moving story about a love that just won't give up, *As Husbands Go* is the latest from critically acclaimed, bestselling author, Susan Isaacs. Call her superficial, but Susie B. Anthony Rabinowitz Gersten assumed her marriage was great -- and why not? Jonah Gersten, M.D., a Park Avenue plastic surgeon, clearly adored her. He was handsome, successful, and a doting dad to their four-year-old triplets Dashiell, Evan, and Mason. But when Jonah is found in the Upper East Side apartment of second-rate "escort" Dorinda Dillon, Susie is overwhelmed with questions left unanswered. It's bad enough to know your husband's been murdered, but even worse when you're universally pitied (and quietly mocked)

because of the sleaze factor. None of it makes sense to Susie -- not a sexual liaison with someone like Dorinda, not the "better not to discuss it" response from Jonah's partners. With help from her thoughttalking, high-style Grandma Ethel who flies in from Miami, she takes on her snooty in-laws, her husband's partners, the NYPD, and the DA (is the person arrested for the homicide the actual perp, or just an easy mark for a prosecutor who hates the word "unsolved"?), as she tries to prove that her wonderful life with Jonah was no lie. Susan Isaacs brilliantly turns the conventions of the mystery on end as Susie Gersten, suburban mom, floral designer, and fashion plate, searches not so much for answers to her husband's death as for answers to her own life.

Chapter One Who knew? It seemed a perfectly nice night. True, outside the house, the wind was whoo-whooping like sound effects from a low-budget horror movie. The cold was so vicious that a little past seven, a branch of the great white spruce on the front lawn that had been creaking all afternoon suddenly screamed in pain. Then a brutal CRAACK, and it crashed to the frozen ground. But inside our red brick Georgian in the picturesque Long Island town of Shorehaven, all was warmth. I went from one bedroom to another to kiss the boys good night. Despite the sickly yellow gleam of the SpongeBob Squarepants night-light in his bedroom, Mason, the third-born of our triplets, glowed pure gold. I stroked his forehead. Happy dreams, my sweetie. He was already half asleep, thumb in mouth, but his four other fingers flapped me a good night. A flush of mother love reddened my cheeks. Its heat spread. For a moment, it even eased the permanent muscle spasm that had seized the left side of my neck seconds after Jonah and I gazed up at the sonogram and saw three little paisley curls in utero. My utero. Still, a perpetual neck spasm was a small price to pay for such a wonderful life, one I had hardly dared dream about as a little girl in Brooklyn. Okay, that wonderful life and hardly dared dream business does cross the line into the shameless mush of Mommyland, where fulfillment is all about children, not sex, and where mothers are jealous of each new baby-shoe charm on their friends bracelets. Feh. Sure, sure: Sentiment proves you're human. Feelings are good, blah, blah, blah. But sentimentality, anything that could go on a minivan bumper sticker, makes me cringe. Take this as a given: Susan B Anthony Rabinowitz Gersten (i.e., me) was never a Long Island madonna, one of those moms who carries on about baby Jonathan as if he were Baby Jesus. What kind of mother was I on that particular night? A happy one. Still, it wouldn't have taken a psychologist to read my emotional pie chart and determine that the sum of my parts equaled one shallow (though contented) human being. One third of that happiness was attributable to the afterglow of the birthday present my husband had given me two weeks earlier, a Cartier Santos watch. Another third was courtesy of Lexapro (twenty milligrams). A little over a sixth came from the pure sensual gratification of being wrapped in a tea-green Loro Piana cashmere bathrobe. The remaining sliver was bona fide maternal bliss. Maybe I'm still shallow, just deluding myself that after all that's occurred, I've become a better person. On the other hand, even at my superficial worst, I wasn't terrible. Truly, I did have a heart. Especially when it came to my immediate family. I loved them. So I gloried in that moment of mommy bliss. I remember thinking, Jonah and I have some lucky star shining down on us. Along with our three boys, my husband, Jonah Paul Gersten, MD, FACS (picture a slightly older and significantly shorter Orlando Bloom, with a teeny touch of male pattern baldness), was the light of my life. Naturally, I had no clue about what was happening with Jonah twenty-six miles west, in Manhattan. How could I possibly know that right at that very instant, he was stepping into the Upper East Side apartment of a call girl who had decided a month earlier that the name Cristal Rousseau wasn't projecting the class-up-the-ass image she had been aiming for. Lately, there hadn't been much of a market for the refined-type fuck, so she'd changed her image and her name to something still classy yet more girl-next-door. Dorinda Dillon. Why would a man of Jonah's caliber bother with someone like Dorinda? Before you go heh-heh, think about it. It's a reasonable question. First of all, Jonah never gave me any reason to believe he wasn't devoted to me. Just a couple of months earlier, at the annual holiday party of his Park Avenue surgical practice, I had overheard the scheduling coordinator confide to one of the medical assistants, Dr. Gersten always has that look of love, even when Mrs. Gersten is standing right beside him in those four-inch heels that I hate to say it make her shockingly taller. Also, being a plastic surgeon with a craniofacial subspecialty, Jonah was a man with a sophisticated sense of beauty. He had the ultimate discerning eye. No way would Dorinda Dillon's looks have pleased him. Objectively speaking, I swear to God, she looked like a ewe in a blond wig. You'd expect her to go baa. Genuinely sheepy-looking, whatever the word for that is. All my life I've read much more than people ever gave me credit for, and I have a surprisingly decent vocabulary though obviously not decent enough. Anyway, Dorinda had a long, wide sheep nose that sloped down straight from her forehead. It took up so much room in the middle of her face that it kept her eyes farther apart than human eyes ought to be. Despite her loyalty to some hideous blackish-

red lipstick, her mouth came across more as dark two-dimensional lines than actual lips. Not that I was gorgeous. Far from it. All right, not that far. Still, most people saw me as . . . well, fabulous-looking. I guess I should apologize because that sounds arrogant. Okay, obnoxious. A woman who comes right out and says, Hey, Im stunning! (even when she is) is violating what is probably the real First Commandment, the one that somehow got replaced by the I am the Lord thy God business, which never really made a lot of sense to me because how is that a commandment? Anyway, the true numero uno of human conduct is Thou shalt not speak well of thyself. Because of that, every great-looking woman has to apologize not only by acting nicer than she really is but by showing shes paid her dues, la I had major zits when I was fourteen and was totally flat-chested and, like, so self-conscious nobody even knew I was alive. Im still, like, really, really shy deep down. So let me get with the program. For most of my life, whenever I looked in the mirror, I honestly did feel insecure. In fact, throughout my childhood in Brooklyn, I kept waiting for someone to shout Hey, Bucktooth! which would inevitably become my nickname until I graduated high school. Weird: No one ever did. Years passed without any cruel mockery. My confidence grew a little. And after Jonah came into my life, it flourished. Someone like him genuinely wanted someone like me! Yet I always knew my overbite stood between me and actual beauty. Braces would have fixed me up, but I didnt get them. With perfect clarity, I still see myself at age ten, gazing up at Erwin Monkarsch, DDS, a blobby man who looked like hed been put together by a balloon-twisting clown at a birthday party. Even though he didnt seem like a guy who could answer a maidens prayer, my young heart fluttered with hope. I put all my energy into willing him not to do . . . precisely what he now was doing: shaking his head. No, her bites actually okay, he was telling my mother. In that instant I understood I was doomed. No orthodontia. However, Im not saying she couldnt use braces for cosmetic reasons, he added. She definitely could. At that time my mother was in her Sherry the Fearless Feminist and Scourge of the Frivolous stage, and she responded with a single humorless chuckle. Cosmetic reasons! Then she snorted at the notion that she would spend money on a treatment that would aid in transforming her daughter into a sex object. For the next ten years of my life, I spent thousands of girl-hours on self-criticism gazing into mirrors, squinting at photos, having heart-to-hearts with my girlfriends and department store makeup artists. What I finally concluded was that my overbite was clearly not a plus. The good news was that it made me look a little dumb but not unappealing. Sometimes after I changed my hairstyle or got a new coat, Id catch myself in a mirror. In that fraction of a second before I realized it was me, Id think, Great look, but double-digit IQ. Still, as I explained to Andrea Brinckerhoff, my business partner as well as my official best friend (youre not a true woman unless you have one), men liked what they saw when they looked at me. I still got frequent second and, once in a while, third looks. Naturally, no guy ever went I demonstrated by pressing both hands over my heart and gasping Omigod! the way a guy might if he bumped into an indisputable, acknowledged beauty, a Halle Berry or Scarlett Johansson. On the other hand, Halle and Scarlett werent rolling carts down the household-detergents aisle of a Long Island Stop Shop. Why do you even waste two seconds worrying about your appearance? Andrea demanded. Look who youre married to. A plastic surgeon. Not just any plastic surgeon. A plastic surgeon who made New York magazines top doctors. You know and I know, way before Jonah even went into medicine, he had a gut understanding about what stunning meant. He couldnt marry a d-o-g any more than he could drive an ugly car. With all he has going for him, he could have had almost anyone. He has a good family background. Well, not Social Register, since theyre . . . you know. But still, he is Ivy League. Then he stayed at Yale for medical school. And hes hot in that Jewish-short-guy way. He could have picked a classic beauty. But he chose you. Andrea may have been irritating and snobbish, but she was right: I was close enough to beauty. Take my eyes. People called them intriguing, compelling, gorgeous. Whatever. They were very pale green. At Madison High School in Brooklyn, Matthew Bortz, a boy so pasty and scrawny that the only type he could be was Sensitive Artiste, wrote me a love poem. It went on about how my eyes were the color of liquid jade mixd with cream. Accurate. Sweet, too, though he got really pissed when I said, Matty, you couldve lost the apostrophe in mixd. It wasnt only great eyes, the kind that make people say a real woof is beautiful just because she has blue eyes and three coats of mascara. I also had world-class cheekbones. They were prominent and slanted up. Where did I get them? My mothers face was round, my fathers was closer to an oval, but both their faces were basically formless, colorless, and without a single feature that was either awful or redeeming. My parents could have pulled off a bank heist without wearing masks and never have been identified. I was around thirteen and reading some book about the Silk Road when I began to imagine that my facial structure came from an exotic ancestor. I settled on a fantasy about a wealthy handsome merchant from Mongolia passing through Vitebsk. He wound up having a two-night stand with one of my

great-great-grandmothers. She'd have been the kind of girl the neighbors whispered about: Oy, Breindel Kirpichnik! Calling that green-eyed minx a slut is too good for her. They say she's got Gypsy blood! It's a long story I won't go into here, but I was twenty when I sought out and actually found where my looks came from: my no-good grandmother who'd taken a hike, abandoning not only her boring husband but her eight-year-old daughter-my mother. Grandma Ethel was tall, willowy, with liquid-jade-mixed-with-cream eyes.

She was me minus the overbite. She told me I could thank her for my hair, too, light brown with gold highlights. She was pretty sure hers had been my color, but she'd become a blonde in 1949 so couldn't swear to it. But back to me. My mouth was better than Grandma Ethel's, but better is mostly luck, since I'd been born into Generation X, a global slice of humanity that tolerates fat only in lips. Other women were forever asking me, Did your husband inject collagen or some new filler into your lips? My body was good, which made me one of maybe five females within a fifty-mile radius of Manhattan who did not have a negative body image. I was blessed with an actual waist, which came back (though not 100 percent) after the triplets. Long legs and arms. Enough in the boob department to please men without having them so cantaloupish as to make buying French designer clothes an act of willful idiocy. My mind? No one would ever call me brilliant, unless those MacArthur people gave grants for genius in accessorizing. Still, I was smart enough not only to make a beautiful life for myself but to be grateful for my incredible blessings. Plus, to get people to ignore any of her dumb thoughts courtesy of my overbite (also so they wouldn't think I was all style, no substance), I listened to The NewsHour on PBS five nights a week. Jonah helped, because having gone to Yale, he went for subtitled movies about doomed people, so I saw more of them than any regular person should have to. I read a lot, too, though it was mostly magazines because I never got more than fifteen minutes of leisure at a shot after Dashiell and Evan and Mason were born. Still, there was enough stuff about books in Vogue that when all the women at a luncheon talked about, say, Interpreter of Maladies, I'd read enough about it to say exquisitely written and not hilarious. I did like historical fiction, but more the kind that got into eighteenth-century oral sex, or the marchioness's brown wool riding jacket with silver braid, and didn't linger on pus-filled sores on the peasants' bare feet. So, okay, not a great mind. But I definitely had enough brains not to let my deficiencies ruin my happiness. Unlike many wives of successful, smart, good-looking doctors, I didn't make myself crazy with the usual anxieties: Ooh, is Jonah cheating on me? Planning on cheating on me? Wishing he could cheat on me but not having the guts or time? To be totally truthful? Of course I had an anxiety or two. Like knowing how fourteen years of marriage can take the edge off passion.

We still enjoyed gasping, sweaty intimacy now and then. Like one starry Long Island evening that past August. We did it in a chaise by the pool after three quarters of a bottle of sauvignon blanc. Also in a bathtub in the Caesar Park Ipanema Hotel during an International Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery convention. But with three four-year-olds plus two nineteen-year-old live-in Norwegian au pairs (twins) and a five-day-a-week, eight-hours-a-day housekeeper, our chances for hot sex were close to zero even when Bernadine wasn't there and Ida and Ingvild had a weekend off. After Sleep tight, sweetie times three, Jonah and I were rarely finished being parents. We still had to deal with Evans' nightmares about boy-swallowing snakes, Dashiell's nighttime forays downstairs to play with remote controls, and Mason's frequent awakenings. So even ho-hum marital hookups weren't as common as they had been. On those exceptional nights when I still had enough energy to feel a tingle of desire, Jonah was usually too wiped from his ten-hour day of rhinoplasties, rhytidectomies, mentoplasties, genioplasties, office hours, and worrying about what the economy was doing to elective surgery to want to leap into bed for anything more than sleep. Even though I was clueless about what my husband was doing when he was actually doing it (though now I can picture Jonah stepping onto the leopard-print carpet of Dorinda's front hall, his milk-chocolate-brown eyes widening at the awesome display of lightly freckled breasts which of course he would know weren't implants that rose from the scoop neck of her clingy red tank dress), I do remember sighing once or twice over how Jonah's and my private time lacked . . . something. Fire. That's what was lacking. I knew I had to figure out some way to cut down the noise in our lives so we could once again feel desire. Otherwise? There could be trouble down the road. Not that I didn't trust him. Jonah was a one-woman man. A lot of it was that he had an actual moral code. Not just the predictable DONT SHOPLIFT AT BERGDORFS MENS STORE. Seriously, how many super-busy, successful guys in their thirties were there who (like Jonah) absolutely refused to weasel out of jury duty because they believed it was a citizen's obligation to serve? Also, Jonah was monogamous by nature, even though I hate the word monogamous. It always brings to mind a nature movie from eighth grade about a mongoose that had dried-out red fur and brown eyes. Just as I was thinking, Oh my God, it looks like the Disney version of my mother! the mongoose gave a gut-grinding shriek and whomp! It jumped on a

snake and ripped it apart in the most brutal, revolting way. Okay, forget mongoose and monogamous. Jonah always had one girlfriend at a time. We met standing on line in a drugstore when he was a senior at Yale. I was a freshman in the landscape architecture program at the University of Connecticut at Storrs but was in New Haven for a party and had forgotten lip gloss. The weekend before, he'd broken up with a music major named Leigh who played the harp. That we actually met, going to schools sixty-five miles apart, was a miracle. Right from the get-go, I became the sole woman in his life. I knew that not only in my head but in my heart. And in the years that followed? At medical school, lots of the women students were drawn to him. At five feet eight, Jonah couldn't qualify as a big hunk, but he was a fabulous package. He looked strong with that squared jaw you see on cowboy-booted politicians from the West who make shitty remarks about immigrants, which of course he never would. Plus, he was physically strong, with a muscled triangle of a body. And the amazing thing was, even though Jonah was truly hot in his non-tall way and had that grown-up-rich-in-Manhattan air of self-possession, he gave off waves of decency. So his female classmates, the nurses, they were into him. But he had me. He never even noticed them. Okay, he knew he was way up there on lots of women's Ten Most Wanted, which couldn't have hurt his ego. But my husband was true by nature. However, a girl can't be too careful. Since I wanted Jonah more than I wanted to be a landscape architect (which was a good thing, because with the department's math and science requirements, my first semester wasn't a winner), I quit UConn five minutes after he proposed. There I was, eighteen, but I knew it was the real thing. So I moved in with him in New Haven. At the time I was so in love and so overjoyed at never again having to deal with Intro to Botany or Problem Solving that dropping landscape architecture seemed all pros and no cons. I transferred to Southern Connecticut State in New Haven as an art major and wound up with a concentration in jewelry design, an academic area that evoked double blinks from Jonah's friends at Yale (as in Could I have heard her right?) followed by overenthusiastic comments of the That sounds sooo interesting! variety. Much later, it hit me how sad it was, my tossing off my life's dream with so little thought. From the time of my third-grade class trip to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, when I gaped at the thousands of roses covering arches and climbing lattices, the bushes laid out in a plan that had to one-up the Garden of Eden, and inhaled the mingling of roses and sweet June air, I understood flowers were somehow my ticket to a world of beauty. Those scents transformed me from a shy kid into an eight-year-old live wire: Hey, lady! I hollered to the guide. What do you call someone who thinks all this up? A landscape architect. Strange, but until I talked to my guidance counselor in my senior year at Madison, I never told anybody this was what I wanted. No big secret; I just never mentioned it. The librarians knew, because two or three days a week, I walked straight from school to sit at a long table and look at giant landscape books. When I got a little older, I took the subway to the garden itself or to the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. The librarian in the Arts and Music section there, a guy with a face like a Cabbage Patch doll, would always ask, What do you want to look at today, garden girl? Though I did turn out to be a quitter, landscape architecture-wise, I wasn't a loser. First of all, I snagged Jonah. I got my BA in art from Southern. Also, from the get-go in New Haven, I proved I wasn't going to become one of those burdensome, useless doctors' wives. I moved my things into Jonah's apartment on a Saturday while he fielded hysterical calls from his parents. By late Monday afternoon I had landed a late-afternoon/weekend design job at the crme de la crme of central Connecticut florists by whipping up a showstopping arrangement of white flowers in milk, cream, and yogurt containers. Why am I babbling on like this? Obviously, I don't want to deal with the story I need to tell. But also because I never bought that business about the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. What's so great about short? Too often it's the easy way out. Plus, a straight line is minimalist, and my work is all about embellishment. Any jerk can stick a bunch of thistle into an old mayonnaise jar, but what will people's reaction be? Why couldn't that thistle-pulling bitch leave the environment alone? But I take the identical thistle and jar, grab a few leaves or blades of grass, and voil! create an arrangement that makes those same people sigh and say, Exquisite. Makes you really appreciate nature. And so simple. It really wasn't simple, but if your design shouts, Hey, look how brilliant I am, it's not much of a design. Anyway, after Jonah graduated from college and then finished Yale med school, we moved on from New Haven. With time ticking away like that, a lot of men who marry young start thinking, Do-over! Not Jonah. Even after ten years of marriage (along with two failed attempts at in vitro), when some other deeply attractive senior resident in plastic surgery at Mount Sinai might have dropped a starter wife for a more fertile number two (maybe one from a Manhattan family even richer and more connected than the Gerstens, one who could push his practice), Jonah stayed in love with me. Never once, in word or deed, did he communicate, It's not my fault you can't conceive. Once we were settled back in New York, I began realizing my chosen career

shouldnt have been chosen by me. I did not love jewelry design: Finding brilliant new ways to display pyrope and tsavorite garnets in Christmas earrings wasnt a thrill. Living in Manhattan made me want to work with something real, and I yearned for the smell and feel of flowers. So I wound up with a design job at Bouquet, which billed itself as Manhattans finest fleuriste. While I was still finding myself, Jonah was already a success, and not just in the OR. He was surrounded by enamored patients. Housewives and advertising executives, beauties and battle-axes. So many had crushes on him. They would have given anything for a taste of his toned pecs, his status, his obvious decency. Except those women only got what they paid for a first-rate surgeon and a caring doctor. Not that I was complacent. Throughout our marriage, I saw what happened to other doctors wives as well as to some of our neighbors when we moved to the North Shore of Long Island. I understood: Marriage is always a work in progress. On that particular night, I was too wiped to be inventive about how to turn up the romantic heat. In fact, I was too wiped to do anything. So instead of calling Andrea to discuss what seasonal berries would be right for Polly Kimmel, who wanted ikebana arrangements for her daughters bat mitzvah, or exfoliating my heels, or reading *The Idiot* for my book club because Marcia Riklis had said, Enough with the chick lit, I flopped onto our Louis XV style marriage bed without my usual satisfied glance at its noble mahogany headboard and footboard with their carvings of baskets of flowers and garlands of leaves. Almost instantly, I fell into an all-too-rare deep, healing sleep. Sure, some internal ear listened for any sound from the boys rooms, but one thing Im certain of: I would have been deaf to the soft tread of Jonahs footsteps as he climbed the stairs. If he had.

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