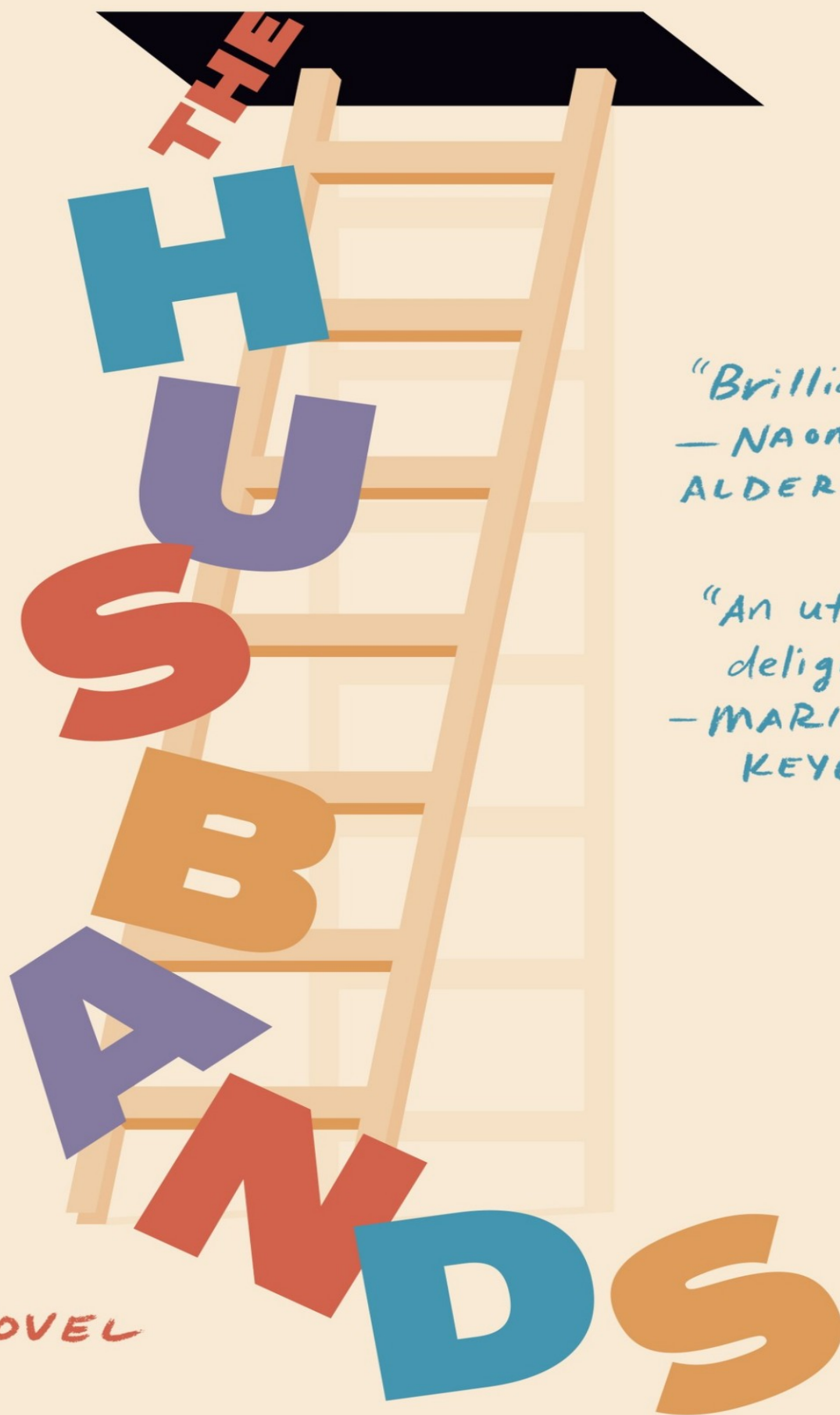


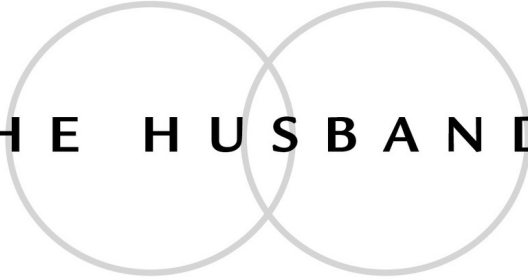
HOLLY GRAMAZIO



"Brilliant."
— NAOMI
ALDERMAN

*"An utter
delight."*
— MARIAN
KEYES

A NOVEL



T H E H U S B A N D S

A Novel

Holly Gramazio

Doubleday *New York*



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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doubleday.com

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Cover art based on an illustration by Laralova/Shutterstock
Cover design by Emily Mahon

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Gramazio, Holly, author.

Title: The husbands : a novel / Holly Gramazio.

Description: First edition. | New York : Doubleday, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023030831 | ISBN 9780385550611 (hardcover) | ISBN
9780385550628 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PR9619.4.G736 H86 2024 | DDC 823.92—dc23/eng/20231017

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023030831>

Ebook ISBN 9780385550628

ep_prh_6.3_146644694_c0_r0

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For Terry, my favourite husband

CHAPTER 1

The man is tall and has dark tousled hair, and when she gets back quite late from Elena's hen do, she finds him waiting on the landing at the top of the stairs.

She yelps and steps backwards. "What—" she starts, then tries again. "Who are you?"

He sighs. "Fun night?"

Carpeted steps lead up to the man and the dim landing. This is definitely the right flat, isn't it? It must be: her key worked. She's drunk, but she's not drunk enough to commit breaking and entering by accident. She steps back again, and feels for the light switch, keeping her eyes on the stranger.

She finds it. In the sudden glare, everything is as it should be: the angle of the steps, the cream of the walls, even the switch under her fingers, a moment's resistance then *click*. Everything except him.

"Lauren," he says. "Come on. Come up and I'll make you some tea."

He knows her name. Is he—no, it's been months since she had that guy round, and he was blond, he had a beard, this isn't him. A burglar? How would a burglar know her name?

"If you leave," she says, "I won't report this." She will absolutely report this. She reaches behind to the door handle, and tries to turn it, which takes a lot of fiddling but she isn't going to look away, especially not now that—oh god—he's coming down the stairs. She backs out of her flat and into the hall, takes careful steps until she's grappling with the front door until that pushes open too, warm summer air thick behind her. Out through the spatter of irregular raindrops—but not so far that she can't still see him.

He's crossing the hall, then he's outlined in the doorway, bright light behind him.

"Lauren," the man says, "what are you doing?"

"I'm calling the police," she says, digging in her bag for her phone, hoping it has battery left. The pocket where it should be is occupied instead by a tiny cactus in a painted pot, from today's workshop. The phone itself is further down. It lights up and she rummages, grabs it, pulls it out.

But as she does, she sees the lock screen.

And: it's a picture of herself, standing on a beach with her arm around the man in the doorway.

Two per cent battery, flicking to one. And his face. Unmistakable. And hers.

She grabs with her other hand for the little cactus, holding it ready to throw. "Stay where you are."

"Okay," he says. "Okay. I'm staying here." He's taken a few steps outdoors, feet bare. She looks again: his face glowing from the phone, his face in the night in front of her. He's wearing a grey T-shirt and soft tartan trousers. Not trousers, she realises. Pajamas.

"Right," she says, "come out further," and he does, sighing, another half-dozen barefoot steps on to the pavement, and now she has enough space to edge around him towards the front door, past the closed blinds of the downstairs flat. "Stay there," she says, facing him as she circles. He turns, watching. She steps up through the door, on to the tiles of the hall, and risks a glance to confirm: yes, the closed door to Toby and Maryam's to one side, the open door to her own flat directly behind her, familiar stairs, the right house.

"Lauren," she hears the man say. She spins and shrieks and he stops, but she told him to stay where he was, and he's moved! She slams the front door in his face, then steps quickly into her flat and slams and locks her own door. "Lauren," he's still saying from outside. She thumbs her phone again to ring the police after all, but it lights up—his face—and then darkens. Out of battery.

Shit.

“Lauren,” and sounds of the outer door rattling. “Come on.”

She runs up the stairs and across the landing and grapples in the kitchen for her charger. She’ll phone someone, she’ll call Toby downstairs even. But then she hears footsteps, and the man’s coming up, and somehow he’s in the flat. He’s *in the flat*.

She spins and strides to the kitchen door. “Get the fuck out,” she says into the landing, holding the cactus firmly. She’s ready. If he comes any closer, she’ll throw.

“Calm down,” the man says, reaching the top of the stairs. “I’ll get you some water.” He takes a step towards her, and she does it, she throws, but the cactus goes wide, past him, and it hits the wall and bounces off and rolls towards the stairs, *thud, thud, thud-thud-thud*, accelerating down the steps in an otherwise silent night, coming to a stop with a final thud against the door at the bottom.

“What’s wrong with you?” the man says, keys clutched in his hand. That’s how he got in: he stole her spare keys. Of course. Maybe he logged into her computer and changed her phone remotely, and that’s why his picture’s on her lock screen. Is that possible? “Fuck’s sake,” he says. “Go and sit down. Please.”

He turns off the light on the stairs, and switches on the landing light instead, the big square landing with all the rooms leading off it, the big grey landing she passes through a dozen times a day.

Which is, somehow, blue.

And it has a rug. It never had a rug before. Why is there a rug?

She can’t stop to look: the man’s walking towards her. She backs across the rug, which feels thick and soft even through her shoes, towards the door to the living room. It’s right above Toby and Maryam’s bedroom. If she screams, she thinks, they’ll hear. But even in the dark, the room doesn’t seem right.

She feels for the switch.

Click.

Light falls on more strange objects. The sofa is dark brown, and surely when she left this morning it was green. The clock on the wall has Roman

numerals instead of normal numbers, and it turns out Roman numerals are difficult to read, VII, XIII, VVI. She has to squint to stop them from blurring. Her old vase on the shelf has tulips in it, her wonky lino print of an owl is gone. The books are wrong or in the wrong place, the curtains have been replaced with shutters. Most of the pictures are wrong and one of them—one of them is *very* wrong. One of them is of a wedding featuring—and she steps up to it, nose almost to the glass—*her*. And the man.

The man who has entered the living room behind her .

The husband.

She turns around and he holds out a pint glass filled with water. After a moment she takes it and notices, for the first time, a ring on her finger.

She transfers the glass to her right hand and spreads her left in front of her, turns it over palm up, ring still there as she folds her fingers in and touches it with the tip of her thumb. Huh.

“Come on,” the husband says. “Sit down. Drink up.”

She sits. The sofa is the same shape it used to be, despite the colour. And it has the same uneven give.

The husband sits too, over in the armchair, and at first she can't see whether he's wearing a wedding ring as well, but he leans forward and there it is: bright on his finger. He's watching her. She watches him in return.

She is, she thinks, very drunk, so it might be that she's missing something obvious. But she's been given a drink by a man she's never met before and, if anything, the fact that she may be unexpectedly married to him should make her more rather than less wary.

“I'll...drink this in a moment,” she says, carefully, clearly, enunciating each syllable (although there do seem to be more of them than usual).

“Okay.”

If he's meant to be here, why isn't he in bed? “Why aren't you in bed?”

He sighs. “I was,” he says. “You didn't exactly make a stealth entrance.”

“I didn't know you were here!”

“What?” he says. “Look, drink the water and take your dress off and we'll get you ready for bed. Do you need help with the zip?”

“No!” she says, and grabs a throw pillow, pulls it in front of her. Shit. She’s never seen him before. She’s not taking her dress off in front of him.

“Okay, okay, don’t—shh, it’s fine, drink your water.” His tired face. Round cheeks with a flush of red. “Okay?” he says.

“Okay,” she says, and then, after a moment: “I’ll sleep here. So as—so as not to disturb you. You can go.”

“Do you want the spare room? I’ll clear the bed—”

“No,” she says. “No. This is good.”

“Okay,” he says again. “I’ll get your pajamas. And the quilt.”

She stays upright, still careful, as he leaves and comes back in. The pajamas are her own old set that she bought from the big Sainsbury’s, the ones with Moomins on them, but the quilt is another new thing: dark-blue and light-blue squares, alternating, arranged like patchwork but it’s just a print. She doesn’t like it.

“I know, but look at it this way,” he says, “if you chuck up on it you’ll finally have an excuse to throw it out.”

This doesn’t make sense, “finally,” but everything is intense and confusing and she doesn’t want to argue. The room is buzzing gently.

“Okay,” she says. They seem to be taking it in turns to say “okay” and sighing or waiting, which perhaps is what marriage is like; this is the first time she’s tried it.

The husband turns on a lamp and then turns off the overhead light. “You good?” he says. “Do you want some toast?”

“I had chips.” She still has the taste in her mouth. “And chicken.” She is a vegetarian but not when she’s drunk.

“Okay,” he says once more. “Drink your water,” he adds again, just before he closes the door. She hears him in the kitchen, then the bedroom, and then nothing.

Well.

She goes to the door and listens for a moment. Silence on the landing, and through the flat. She puts on her pajamas, step by step like she’s in a school changing room: first the shorts over her underpants, then the dress over her head, then the pajama top on over her bra, then the bra off,

unhooked and her arms wriggled out one by one until she can pull it triumphantly from an armhole, at which point she overbalances and tumbles back on to the sofa with a thump and a clatter as her dead phone falls off the cushions and on to the ground.

She freezes, waiting to see if the husband comes back. Nothing.

A creak, maybe. A truck or a bus outside, up on the main road.

At least now she's sitting down.

Another rumble of a car outside. Maybe a train, further back, although it's late for that. Perhaps she's imagined it, and the husband.

If she hasn't imagined him, there's a strange man in her house. She pushes herself back up to stand unsteadily one more time. Quiet steps to the table in the corner, and she takes a chair and carries it—slowly, slowly—over to the door. She hasn't ever done this before but she's seen it in so many movies: you wedge the chair and it keeps the door shut, right? She sets it down and balances it, the back hooked up under the handle. It takes her a couple of tries, but finally it's there, jammed in place, and she looks at it and goes to sit on the sofa and figure out what to do next, and then she's asleep.