
It started with a baseball...

Which shattered Lauren Russell's perfectly ordered life. Lauren's new neighbors were about to see the Southern lifestyle columnist's temper! Then she met Cole Donovan, the sexy single dad. He was not the man from her husband list; he was too tall, too sexy—and definitely had too many kids! But somehow, looking into his blue, blue eyes, she forgot all that....

Lauren was too elegant, too prim and The Husband Recipe didn't understand that his three rambunctious kids were The Husband Recipe the focus of his life. But his tempting neighbor smelled delicious, looked luscious and cooked like a dream. Cole wasn't looking for a wife, but he couldn't stay away from Lauren. Was it a recipe for disaster—or marriage?

"I'm going to ask you out on a date," Cole said.

"I'm a little afraid, though," he continued. My last few dates were..."

"Interesting?"

"Disasters."

Lauren laughed and turned her head. Their lips brushed, met, settled together for a kiss

that rocked him to the core.

She took her lips from his and whispered, “Let’s not overthink this. If we do, we might end up talking ourselves out of something good.”

“You don’t strike me as a ‘go with the flow’ kinda girl.”

“I’m usually not. For you, I’ll make an exception.” She tilted her head, touched her lips to his.

Before the kiss had a chance to grow into more, a sharp crash from next door—too close—interrupted.

“I have to go,” he said, reluctantly stepping away.

Lauren nodded. “If you ask me on a date,” she said, “I think I’ll say yes and take my chances.”

The Husband Recipe

Dear Reader,

You never know where inspiration will come from, when or where characters will come to life—and then refuse to let go. I’ve recently started following baseball rather fanatically, thanks to a nephew’s success in that sport. When you watch every game of the season, when you get to know the players, you see well beyond the games. You begin to get a small glimpse of their lives. These very talented ballplayers travel all the time, during the long season. Their families make a big sacrifice. And there was my “what if?” What if a father was suddenly left to raise three kids on his own? It would be a sacrifice to walk away from a lucrative career in order to be a single parent, but that’s what Cole Donovan did, and that shaped his character for me.

Having three kids of my own, I know what a rowdy household can be like.

Lauren Russell comes from a world I know well. The The Husband Recipe South. Her grandmother was a big influence on her, and is still around to help shape her life. Cooking is at the center of Lauren's world. She's also organized to a fault and she has plans for her life, personal and professional. Plans thrown into chaos by a handsome man and three adorable (if occasionally unmanageable) children who move into the house next door and turn her neat life upside down.

Sometimes chaos The Husband Recipe is a good thing. Sometimes it's the *unplanned* that shapes us.

I hope you enjoy their story!

Linda

Linda Winstead Jones

The Husband Recipe

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Harlequin Special The Husband Recipe Edition

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Fever

LINDA WINSTEAD JONES

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With special thanks to The Cooking Women, Doris and Joyce. Fried chicken, pinto beans and cornbread, The Husband Recipe sweet potatoes, coleslaw, fried squash, seven-layer cake, peach cobbler...and that's just a part of one meal. Y'all have inspired me to go back to my grandmother's cookbooks and give some of those recipes a whirl. And of course a thanks to Benny, as well. Because when I'm not around, *someone* has to take care of the eating.

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Chapter One

Blam!

Something hit the side of her house, right outside her office. Lauren Russell jumped half out of her skin, jarring against the desk and sending hot tea sloshing over the edge of the cup and running under the stack of articles she'd printed out, as well as coming dangerously close to her optical mouse.

"Damn it!"

She leaped up and grabbed her napkin—high quality linen, of course—and swabbed at the spill. When she'd rescued the mouse, she left the rest for a moment and hot-footed it over to the window to The Husband Recipe see what the heck had happened. She was just in time to spot a little The Husband Recipe boy pick up a baseball and hurl it to his sister in the yard next door, then race back into his own territory.

She should have known. The Husband Recipe The monsters were loose again.

Lauren immediately felt guilty, because in general she liked children. Maybe the pertinent phrase was *in general*, because these particular children were driving her nuts.

Going back to her desk, she finished *The Husband Recipe* mopping up, drying off the papers as best she could, then taking them into the bathroom and using her blow dryer to finish the job. They were crisp and wrinkly, but readable. She didn't like the fact that they were now less than perfect, but it would take too much time to go to each and every website and reprint everything. Later, maybe.

She sat at her desk again and did her best to tune out the happy screams and shrieks of what sounded like fifty children romping around a sprinkler on a hot summer day, as well as the occasional thump of a ball hitting the side of her house. Every time it hit, *The Husband Recipe* she jumped. How could three kids make so much noise? Weren't children supposed to spend hours indoors playing video games these days? How was she supposed to work with this going on?

She had a deadline, an article to finish and send off by noon. The first thump had alarmed her, but now that she knew what was going on she should be able to dismiss the noise and concentrate on her work. Though it was tempting, she didn't march outside to tell the kids to take it easy. Yesterday she'd had to tell them not to tramp in her flower bed, and last week she'd had a talk with them about Frisbees in her tomato garden. She didn't want to be *that* neighbor, the grumpy woman all the neighborhood children were afraid of, the witch who did her best to *The Husband Recipe* squelch the kids' fun. Might as well get herself a pointy hat and construct her house out of candy. No, thanks.

Still, a very tall privacy fence was looking more and more like a necessary investment. That would ruin the ambience of her carefully landscaped backyard, but if this continued she might have no choice. Her office was on the newly noisy side of the house, as was the spare bedroom. Unless she wanted to try to move her bedroom furniture into these rooms and convert the master suite *The Husband Recipe* into a large office, she was out of luck. Yeah, like she wanted to try to sleep on this side of the house.

The Garrisons had been such good, quiet neighbors! Why had they moved? Lauren was happy that the older couple now lived closer to their eldest daughter and their two grandchildren, but why couldn't the daughter have moved here? Why did being close to family mean going to Arizona, of all places? Maybe Alabama was hot in the summertime, even if Huntsville was about as far north as you could get and still be in the state, but it couldn't be any hotter than Arizona. Worse, the Garrisons had sold their house to a family with three *The Husband Recipe* children. At least, she'd seen three so

far—two The Husband Recipe boys and a girl. Good Lord, she hoped there weren't more.

Lauren stared at the computer screen, concentrating diligently in an effort to mentally block the noises from next door. Naturally, trying so hard only made her more aware of every sound. A piercing squeal. A shouted taunt. Laughter. She The Husband Recipe just had a couple of hours to finish this piece for the local paper, and then she needed to tackle the edits on her book. They were due back in three days, and she was hoping to make quick work of them this afternoon and evening, and then tomorrow morning overnight the changes so they'd be there a day early. It was her first book, a collection of recipes and household tips—many of which had come from her weekly newspaper articles—and she was certainly hoping there would be other books to follow. Being late wouldn't endear her to her editor. Besides, Lauren hated The Husband Recipe to be late, almost as much as she hated it when others were late. It was a...well, a *thing* she had. Everyone was The Husband Recipe allowed a *thing* or two, in her opinion.

As she was attempting to place herself in a magic bubble of silence, a loud crash jerked her back to reality. A loud crash accompanied by shards of glass that flew into her office, landing on the area rug and her grandmother's occasional table and into the vase of fresh flowers there. Lauren's heart almost jumped out of her chest. She screamed—just a little—and then, a split second later, she realized that all screams and laughter from next door had gone silent.

The Husband Recipe

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