



Back in Her Husband's Bed (Harlequin Desire)

By Andrea Laurence

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Editorial Review

Review

"Casino owner Nathan Reed needs his estranged wife's help to catch a thief amidst the glitz of Vegas. Annie Baracas is stuck between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, if she helps her husband out, he'll finally sign papers to end their marriage. On the other, she will have to play his game, which means temporarily pretending to be his loving and affectionate wife. The one thing that she won't do is share her husband's bed again...or will she? The bets have been made and the stakes are high for these two star-crossed lovers. The sexual chemistry between the hero and heroine is off-the-charts hot. With great dialogue and an intriguing storyline, Laurence's latest is a well-written hit from start to finish!" - 4.5 stars, RT Book Reviews

About the Author

Andrea Laurence is an award winning contemporary author who has been a lover of books and writing stories since she learned to read. She always dreamed of seeing her work in print and is thrilled to be able to share her books with the world. A dedicated West Coast girl transplanted into the Deep South, she's working on her own "happily ever after" with her boyfriend and five fur-babies. You can contact Andrea at her website: <http://www.andrealarence.com>.

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"Mr. Reed, our facial recognition software has detected a match for the Barracuda in pit three near the dollar slots."

Nate smiled. Like a moth to a flame, Annie had walked right into his trap. He knew she couldn't pass up the chance to play at his poker tournament, even if it meant returning to the scene of the crime. As the owner and manager of the Desert Sapphire Hotel and Casino, it was easy to have Annie red-flagged by his security team. The moment she strolled back in to his casino he knew it.

"We have visual confirmation. She's on her way to the high-roller area." Gabriel Hansen, his chief of security, lifted his hand to his earpiece and listened intently for a moment before nodding in confirmation. "She's joined the Texas Hold'em game with Mr. Nakimori and Mr. Kline."

"Of course she has." Nate set aside his paperwork and made his way to the elevator. There was no time to waste. The Japanese businessman and the oil tycoon had credit lines in the millions, and they'd need every penny if he didn't get down there. They didn't call her the Barracuda for nothing.

"Do you need assistance with this, Mr. Reed?" Gabe was also his best friend, despite the formalities they used at work. Gabe knew what Annie's arrival meant. His offer to accompany him was less about work and more about helping his friend.

Nate sighed and straightened his navy silk tie. He suspected Gabe would relish handcuffing Annie and parading her through the casino so everyone would see. To be honest, he wouldn't mind that himself, but she'd never agree to his plan if he did. "No, I've got this handled."

A quick swipe of his identification card sent the elevator plummeting down the twenty-five floors from his suite to the main casino lobby. A soft chime announced his arrival, and the doors opened to the office corridors where casino operations took place.

The walk through the casino to the high-roller area wasn't long, but each step weighed more heavily on him than the last. Annie was here. In his casino. After three long years. He should be excited to finally confront her. To have his chance to exact his revenge and make her miserable. Or if not excited, perhaps smug. His plan was working just as he'd hoped it would. And yet he was none of those things.

His mouth was dry, his pulse racing in his throat. If he didn't know better, he might think he was nervous. Imagine that: Nathan Reed, millionaire casino owner, former most eligible bachelor in Las Vegas, nervous. It was a ridiculous idea. And yet Annie had always been his weakness.

Nate rounded the corner and spied the entrance to the high-roller lounge. Even across the casino floor, he could spot her. Her back was to him as she leaned over her cards, her legs crossed beneath the table. Her long raven hair spilled over the olive skin of her bare shoulders. Beside her Mr. Nakimori leaned back into his seat, throwing his cards down in disgust.

Nate stopped just behind Annie and placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. She didn't flinch. She'd been expecting him. Game on.

"Gentlemen," he said, flashing a confident smile at the other players at the table and extending a hand to each of them. "It's good to have you both back here at the Sapphire. Is everything going well for you this afternoon?"

Jackson Kline grinned wide and leaned back into his chair. "It was until this pretty little thing showed up. She's taken more of my money than my ex-wife."

Nate smiled and nodded. "Then I'm sure you gentlemen won't mind if I deprive you of her company."

"We're in the middle of a hand."

They were the first words she'd spoken to him since she disappeared. She didn't say "hello." Not even "I'm sorry" or "You're looking well." Just a complaint that he was interrupting her poker hand.

He leaned down and pressed his lips against the soft outer shell of her ear. The smell of her jasmine shampoo filled his lungs as he hovered near. The familiar scent was alluring and reminded him of the tangled sheets she left behind, but he wasn't going to fall prey to her this time. "We need to talk. Fold." The demand was simple and quiet, but powerful.

"Well, gentlemen—" Annie sighed "-I guess I'm done." She slid the cards across the table and reached up to gently extract Nate's hand from her shoulder. He complied, stepping back far enough to allow her to rise from her seat.

"Good afternoon," the men responded in their respective Southern and Japanese accents, although they both seemed visibly relieved to see her go.

Annie grasped her red leather handbag and strolled to the exit with Nate quick on her heels. He moved alongside her, scooping her elbow up with a firm hand and guiding her toward the elevator.

"Take your hands off me," she hissed through gritted teeth. She tugged against his grasp, but it was futile.

Nate couldn't contain a chuckle. "I will not. You and I both know what happened the last time I did that. If

you'd prefer, I could have security escort you upstairs instead."

She came to a sudden stop, jerking Nate to turn back to her. Her azure-blue eyes were alight with anger. They penetrated him, a connection forming between them with a sudden snap of electricity. "You wouldn't dare," she said.

God, she was still beautiful. Nate felt the familiar pull in his gut, the heat flooding his groin. The sexual spark had always been there; it was what brought them together. It just couldn't keep them together. It pissed him off that he still reacted to her like this after everything she'd done.

"I wouldn't?" Nate retorted. Annie didn't know him at all. He leaned down, his face inches from hers. "You wanna call my bluff?" Nate didn't wait for an answer but quickly turned and tugged her behind him.

Annie silenced her protests and stopped resisting his pull. He didn't let go until they stepped off the elevator at his suite. She pulled away, turning left toward his office and dropping angrily onto the leather sofa.

"So?" she asked. "You've dragged me up here and cost me a five-thousand-dollar hand. What do you want?"

Nate avoided the couch, opting instead to lean against the large mahogany desk that had once been his grandfather's. He crossed his arms over his chest and took a deep breath. "I have a proposition for you, Barbara Ann."

Annie arched her eyebrow suspiciously at him, obviously not caring for his use of her given name. "You don't have anything I want, Nathan, or my lawyer would've asked for it already."

"That's not true. I can give you the one thing you've wanted for the last three years-a divorce."

Her blue gaze searched his face, probably looking for the catch. "You and your lawyer have been stonewalling the process for years. You've cost me a fortune in legal fees. And now you're just going to wrap it up in a bow and give it to me?"

"Not exactly." Nate smiled and turned to the bar to pour himself a scotch. He'd let her stew awhile and prolong the torture. She'd made him wait long enough. "Drink?" he offered with his glass held up, more out of politeness than a desire to be truly hospitable.

"You know I don't drink."

Nate stiffened. He'd forgotten. She hated the way alcohol made her feel out of control. It was amazing how the details could slip your mind when you were apart. What else had he forgotten? "A soda, then? Water?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

Nate dropped ice cubes into his own glass and nodded before pouring the golden liquid over it. "Very well." He took a sip, appreciating the warm sensation it lit in his stomach. It fueled his resolve and distracted him from the pangs of lust he was determined to ignore.

It was getting harder every minute he spent with her. There was something about Annie that made his blood sing. It was more than just her exotic beauty or her shrewd intelligence. He could still feel the silky slide of her ebony hair across his bare chest as she hovered over him. The musical sound of her laughter. All together

it was an intoxicating combination. Just being around her again was enough to ignite the flames of his desire.

And then he would remember that she wanted a divorce. That she had left him in the night after less than two weeks of marriage without a word until he was served the papers.

He supposed he should be grateful that Annie had bothered to file for divorce. His mother hadn't gone to the trouble. She'd just disappeared and sent his father into a spiral of depression that nearly destroyed the Desert Sapphire and his grandfather's legacy with it. Nate was stronger than that. He'd rebuilt the hotel and helped transform the industry, even as she'd left him. He wasn't about to be broken by a woman.

Even one as breathtaking as Annie.

She watched him warily from her seat as he walked toward her and leisurely sipped his drink. "I know you haven't had a sudden change of heart. So what's going on?"

He certainly hadn't. Honestly, it pained him to finally give her what she wanted, but the tournament was more important. The organization that sponsored the most prestigious poker tournament in the industry had a long-standing agreement with another casino. To lure them to the Desert Sapphire, it had taken him three years and a few promises he needed Annie to help him keep.

"I am working on a side project of sorts during the tournament and you're just the right person for the job." He paused, sipping his scotch thoughtfully. "If I sign the papers and give you the divorce you want, you agree to help me."

"I don't understand. How could I possibly—" Nate cut her protest short with a wave of his hand. "I'm sure you've heard about the cheating problem the poker circuit is having. The rumors are getting fairly loud and the tournament sponsor's reputation is suffering for it. Everyone is anticipating they'll hit the tournament."

Annie sighed. "There's always rumors of cheating, but nothing ever comes of it. The people they catch are usually small potatoes compared to the amount of money exchanged in one of these events. What's the big deal?"

"Hosting the tournament is a huge draw for my hotel. As you well know, it's been held at the Tangiers for the last twenty years. Talking the organizers into moving it here had taken more than some nice negotiating. They wanted concrete guarantees that anyone cheating during the tournament would be caught and prosecuted, to send a message to the community."

"And why are they so confident that your team can do a better job than the Tangiers?"

"Because I have one of the best security systems in the business, with some of the most qualified staff you can hire. We go well beyond the typical measures most casinos employ."

"Seems like overkill to me. I hardly think you can stop cheating."

"This hotel was on the verge of going under when I took over from my father. He wasn't well at the time and people took advantage of the situation. Our biggest issue was people gaming the house, especially our own employees. I wouldn't tolerate that on my watch and invested in cutting-edge technology to stop it. Over the last five years, our estimated losses from cheating are down by eighty percent."

"Then why do you need me?" Annie crossed her arms defensively, pressing her breasts tight against the low V-cut of her sleeveless red silk top.

Just a quick glance at the soft curves of her femininity sent a sharp spike of need down his spine and forced him to turn away. "Because," he said, "I suspect this is a more elaborate and wellorganized operation than we're used to. More people are involved...new faces with clean records. But we have to succeed. If we manage to bust this ring, I've got a guaranteed ten-year contract for the tournament. That's something my grandfather wouldn't have even hoped for."

"And what?" she prompted. "You think I know who's involved?"

"I think you probably have your suspicions. You've been active in the community for several years and have to have heard your share of stories." He lifted his gaze to meet hers. "I also think you could flush them out with the right... *motivation.*"

Annie leaped up from her seat, the nervous energy his proposal generated propelling her off the leather couch. "I'm not a snitch." There was no way she was going to ruin her reputation like that. Not for a divorce, not for the attentions of a charming, handsome man like Nate. Her honor was all she had in this business.

"If we do it right, no one will ever know that you are."

"And how's that? There are cameras everywhere. The odds are they have help on the inside, possibly even your own security guys and dealers. You don't think they'll notice us talking?"

"Nope. They won't."

He hadn't told her everything. Her game was poker, but Nate's game was chess. He was already three moves ahead of her. Annie hated being outmaneuvered. "Enlighten me."

His mouth curved up in a sly smile. "There are no cameras in here."

Annie looked around the office and down the dark corridor to his suite. She sincerely hoped not. They would've gotten an eyeful during their wedding night. "And no one will find it suspicious that I'm up in your suite? That I'm spending all my time with the casino boss?"

"Why shouldn't you spend time with *your husband?*"

Annie's blood turned to ice in her veins. If there was one thing she clung to, it was that no one knew about their mistake. Their marriage had been a secret she'd shared only with her sister, Tessa, and her mother. Yes, she and Nate would've told people eventually, but in the beginning they'd been far too wrapped up in one another to share the good news. Then it was over. "You don't think people will question that we're suddenly married? That we're together again after all this time apart?"

Nate shrugged. "We'll just tell the truth. We got married three years ago. It didn't work out. We separated. You came back for the tournament and we reconciled."

"That's not the truth."

"No, but the best lies have a good bit of truth in them. The paper trail will back up our story. And we won't

give them any reason to doubt it." He smiled a wide, confident smile that started to melt her defenses away before she could think through his statement.

No reason to doubt they were married? "You...you don't honestly expect us to...?" The air in the room suddenly seemed cooler, her skin contracting with goose bumps. Annie crossed her arms protectively over her chest and ran her hands over the bumpy flesh of her bare upper arms.

"No-" he laughed "-of course not. It will just be for show. You'll need to stay here in the suite with me. We'll eat together in public, be affectionate. You might have to suffer through a few of my kisses so any time we spend alone will be chalked up to romantic interludes. No one will suspect what we're really doing together."

Users Review

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