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ROBIN WRIGHT and Kevin Spacey are the power couple Claire and Frank in “House of Cards.”

‘CARDS’ STACKS THE DECK WITH BRUTAL RESOLVE

In Season 2, Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright continue the climb to power

By **Mary McNamara**
TELEVISION CRITIC

The second season of the dark and dastardly inner-Beltway drama “House of Cards” dropped at 12:01 a.m. on Valentine’s Day. If Netflix knows as much about its subscribers as we think they do, this pretty much proves what we’ve long suspected: Binge-watching has become the new sex.

Actually it makes some narrative sense. Despite its byzantine plots of power and pol-

itics, “House of Cards” is, essentially, a love story.

One between Americans and their carefully nurtured suspicions about government. Between Kevin Spacey and his character — as with the first season, Spacey is clearly having a ball with the sneering, scheming, fourth-wall-breaking Frank Underwood, and watching him remains the simplest joy of “House of Cards.”



WATCHING KEVIN SPACEY, with Molly Parker, is the show's simplest joy.

But mostly between Frank and his wife, Claire (Robin Wright), as intriguing a definition of “power couple” as you’re going to find in fiction of any sort. They are also the only thing revolutionary about “House of Cards,” aside from the full-season download and its birth-control potential.

Heralded as the flagship of Netflix’s attempt to change the world, Beau Willimon’s “House of Cards” opened big with lavish early episodes, two of which were directed by David Fincher, before settling into a fairly standard, if extremely well-produced, series that would have not been out of place on any broadcast network.

Which isn’t surprising as it’s a remake of a British TV trilogy of the same name. Like that series, “House of Cards” tells the tale of an ambitious but behind-the-scenes politician who, after being passed over for promotion, resolves to bring down the government he helped elect. And in the second season’s first four episodes made available for review, Frank continues to drive the series’ A-plot with his ruthless determination to replace the president he feels has disrespected him.

But it’s Claire, and the Underwood marriage, that makes “House of Cards” more than just a better-than-average addition to the genre of Antihero Drama Being Used to Es-

tablish a New Fiefdom in the Television Landscape (see also “Nip/Tuck,” “Dexter,” “Mad Men,” “Vikings” and “Klondike”).

Still and chilly where Frank is ever-seething, Wright’s Claire is a character we’ve never seen before. She’s a political wife who seems neither scorned nor thwarted, though in actuality she is both of these things. But she is also plagued by doubts, and menopause; her decision to remain childless has seesawed her from one season to the next.

Claire sees Frank for precisely what he is: a man willing to commit any crime short of genocide to get what he wants. Should he falter, she will prod him back onto the twisted track to power.

On the other hand, if she feels he is taking her for granted, she will run off to New York with a super-hot photographer (way better than the standard solution of eating your weight in frozen yogurt or complaining to your BFFs, of which Claire has none). But should the young congressman her husband has been mentoring/setting up be found dead of apparent suicide (ha-ha-ha), she will come back to preserve a united front.

Indeed, the new season, which includes episodes directed by Jodie Foster and Carl Franklin, picks up right where the old one left off — with Frank and Claire out for an evening

run while the destruction they have left in their wake smokes behind them. Both return home confident that Frank, due to all his Season 1 machinations, will be named the new vice president.

Before he can take the next step — dropping “vice” from the title, Frank has to tie up a few loose ends, including reporter Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), whom Frank bedded and used as his mouthpiece until she began to question his motives, and Rachel (Rachel Brosnahan), the call girl who knows too much. Each young woman has a male protector — Zoe is now seeing her former editor at the fictional Wash-

ington Herald and Frank’s chief of staff Mike Kelly (Doug Stamper) has taken a shine to Rachel. Any of them could cause Frank’s eventual downfall, but not if he gets to them first.

Claire, meanwhile, has a few loose ends to tie up as well, including an unwelcome but quite revelatory figure from her past. The creative efficiency with which she cinches those knots is breathtaking, as is the watchful way in which her husband circles her.

Is it fear in his eyes, or admiration? And can either of these people feel love?

mary.mcnamara@latimes.com