



MARRIAGE, MANHATTAN STYLE (Harlequin comics)

By Barbara Dunlop

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Elizabeth's Cinderella story is on the verge of collapse. Reed, the son of a tycoon, and Elizabeth got married, despite resistance from the people closest to them. But now she barely speaks with Reed, who is always busy with his work. Instead Elizabeth spends every day alone in a luxurious apartment and waits for her husband to come home. She's not willing to give up on the passion they had, but can Elizabeth's seduction reel in the husband she's lost?

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Editorial Review

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Elizabeth Wellington flicked the liberty head, ten-dollar gold coin high into the air above her king-size bed.

"Heads," she whispered to herself in the empty bedroom, her gaze following the coin's twirling trajectory toward the pale, bamboo ceiling mural, "I do it."

If it was tails, she'd wait until next week. At the proper time. When she was ovulating, and her chances of conceiving were at their best.

"Come on, heads," she muttered, picturing her husband, Reed, next door in his home office, studying e-mails or reading a financial report, looking fit and sexy and aloof, his mind firmly locked on the business of the day.

The coin nicked the far edge of the down comforter before bouncing onto the tightly woven carpet.

"Damn." She rounded the four-poster, blinking in vain at the dark burgundy pattern, trying to make out the shiny disk.

After a minute, she kicked off her shoes, dropped to her knees and hiked up her straight, charcoal skirt. Leaning on the heels of her hands, she peered under the bed. Was it heads or tails? And where the heck was the twenty-five thousand dollar collector coin?

"Elizabeth?" came Reed's voice from the hallway.

Guiltily, she jumped up, dusting off and straightening her hair.

"Yes?" she called back, catching a glimpse of the open, satin-lined, rosewood coin collection box. She scooted to the chest of drawers and shut the lid.

The bedroom door opened, and she struck what she hoped was a casual pose.

"Have you seen my PDA?" he asked.

"Uh, no." She moved away from the dresser and spotted the coin. It was tipped up against the nightstand, winking under the glow from the Tiffany lamp.

Reed glanced around the room. "I could have sworn I put it in my pocket before I left the office."

"Did you call it?" she asked, easing toward the coin, planning to camouflage it with her bare foot before his roving gaze landed on it.

She sure didn't want to have to explain this one.

"Can you dial it for me?" he asked.

"Sure." She lifted the bedside phone and punched in his cell number, putting herself between Reed and the

coin, careful not to disturb its resting place and ruin the toss.

A tone trilled from somewhere in the penthouse.

"Thanks," he told her, turning for the door.

A few seconds later, he called "Got it" from the living room.

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief.

She eased her foot away and checked out the coin's position. It was supported by the wood molding, just a hair off vertical. She upped the light on the three-way bulb and leaned her head down. If the nightstand hadn't got in the way, and the momentum had kept it going, it would have been... Yes! Heads.

She snatched up the coin. The decision was made. She was taking her best friend's advice over that of a trained medical professional.

On the surface, her decision flew in the face of common sense. But her friend Hanna knew more about her life than Dr. Wendell.

Oh, the good doctor knew all about Elizabeth's physical health. He knew her hormone levels and her menstrual cycle. He'd even seen an ultrasound of her ovaries. But he didn't know about her marriage. He didn't know that she'd been fighting since her first anniversary to get back to the honesty and intimacy she and Reed had shared in the beginning.

In the five years since she'd married Reed Wellington III, Elizabeth had learned that the corporation came first, the New York business community second, the extended Wellington family third, with their own marriage somewhere further down the list.

She knew a baby would smooth things out. They'd both wanted one for years. A baby would give them a focal point, something to share, a way for her to fit more neatly into his world, and a reason for him to spend more time in hers. She'd been counting on a baby for a long time. But it was getting harder to convince herself that a baby alone was the answer.

A baby needed a warm and loving home. Children needed to experience intimacy, emotion and authenticity. The further she and Reed drifted apart, the closer Elizabeth came to admitting that even their dream of starting a family wouldn't set things right.

She carefully placed the coin back in the rosewood box, closing the lid and smoothing her fingertips over the whorls and scrolls that decorated the top. Reed had given her the liberty head coin and the rosewood box their first Christmas together. Then he'd added new coins every year. But, as the value of the collection grew, the strength of their marriage declined.

Ironic, really. Back when she had only one coin, they'd joked together, shared secrets, made mistakes and laughed together. More often than not ending up on the bed or the couch or the carpet if no soft furniture was immediately handy.

The first time they'd made love, it was on the padded bench of a gazebo in the massive backyard of his family's Connecticut estate. The dark, clear sky was dotted with stars. They were alone together, and Reed's kisses had turned passionate, his hands roaming the edges of the deep back of her cocktail dress. She'd felt her skin tingle, her nipples tighten and throbbing desire pool in the pit of her stomach.

The time for waiting had passed. They both knew it, and he'd pulled her down on the bench. After long minutes, maybe hours of kisses and caresses, he'd dispatched her panties. Then he buried himself deep inside her. Two weeks later, he'd proposed, and she had enthusiastically talked herself into happily ever after.

Her friends and family in New Hampshire had warned her against marrying a billionaire. His old family money put him in a completely different social class. And they'd told her that her and Reed's expectations of marriage might be completely different. But Elizabeth had been certain their deep love would conquer all obstacles.

Now, five years later, and a whole lot less certain, she moved to the glass balcony doors of her opulent bedroom. Below her penthouse on the twelfth floor of 721 Park Avenue, traffic hummed, and the lights of the city-scape rolled off toward the horizon on this mild, October night. She tugged the heavy curtains closed.

Although she'd recognized the wisdom in Hanna's advice, Elizabeth had felt better putting the decision in the hands of fate. The toss was heads, so the choice was made. She was fighting for her marriage in a different way, starting this minute.

She marched back to the cherrywood chest. The pewter handle was cool under her fingertips as she slid the top drawer open. She thumbed her way through dainty nightgowns and peignoirs, making her way to the bottom of the stack.

And there it was.

Her stomach fluttered as she slid out the red silk negligee she'd worn on her wedding night.

She unzipped the back of her skirt, shimmying out, tossing her jacket, blouse and underwear on a chair, suddenly anxious to get to Reed. She slipped into the negligee, feeling decadently beautiful for the first time in months. Then she crossed to the en suite, fluffing her auburn hair.

Her eyelashes were dark and thick against her green eyes, her pupils slightly dilated. She freshened her lipstick, stroked some blush over her cheeks, then stepped back to check out the effect in the full-length mirror. Her feet were bare, toenails polished a gleaming copper, and the red silk fell mere inches down her thighs, ending in a band of sheer lace. The neckline dipped low, with more lace that barely camouflaged her breasts.

As a final touch, she dabbed some perfume on her neck and dropped one of the spaghetti straps off her shoulder. Then she stretched to her full five foot five and placed a hand over her fluttering abdomen. Her three-carat diamond winked back at her in the mirror.

Reed was her husband, she reminded herself. She had every right to seduce him. Besides, Hanna would be proud.

She headed across the bedroom, switching off the lamp and padding down the hallway.

"Reed?" she cooed softly, emerging into the doorway of his office, snaking her arm up the cool doorjamb and striking a pose.

Two men looked up from where they were reading a letter.

At the sight of his wife's sexy outfit, Reed's jaw fell open, the words *insider trading* vanishing from his mind. The Securities and Exchange Commission's letter slipped from his fingers to the desktop while, beside him,

his vice president, Collin Killian, sucked in a shocked breath.

It took Collin a full three seconds to think to turn away. Reed supposed he couldn't blame the man. It took Elizabeth five seconds to squeak out a gasp and flee down the hall.

"Uh..." Collin began, peering cautiously over his shoulder at the now empty doorway.

Reed swore as he rose to his feet and heard the bedroom door slam shut.

Collin reached for his briefcase. "Catch you later."

"You stay put," Reed commanded, striding across the room.

"But—"

"I just found out I'm being investigated by the SEC. You and I need to talk."

"But your wife—"

"I'll talk to her first." What was Elizabeth thinking? He rounded the corner into the hall.

Collin called behind him, "I don't think talking is what she has in mind."

Reed didn't bother answering.

Elizabeth had no business doing anything *but* talking. He wasn't the one monitoring her basal body temperature, but he was pretty sure they were days ahead of schedule. He missed spontaneous lovemaking as much as she must, but he also wanted to be a father. And he knew damn well she wanted to be a mother. Programmed lovemaking was frustrating. But it was a sacrifice worth making.

He put his hand on the doorknob, forcing himself to pause, steeling his hormones for the sight he knew waited inside. His wife was a knockout, a sexy, sensual, stunning knockout, but he had to be strong for both of them.

He turned the knob and carefully opened the door.

"Elizabeth?"

"Go away." Her voice was muffled as she wrapped a terry robe protectively around herself. A stream of light from the en suite backlit her as he shut the door and moved into the room.

"What's going on?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. "Nothing."

He longed to draw her into his arms, maybe slip his hands into the soft terry cloth and pull her tight against his bod...

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