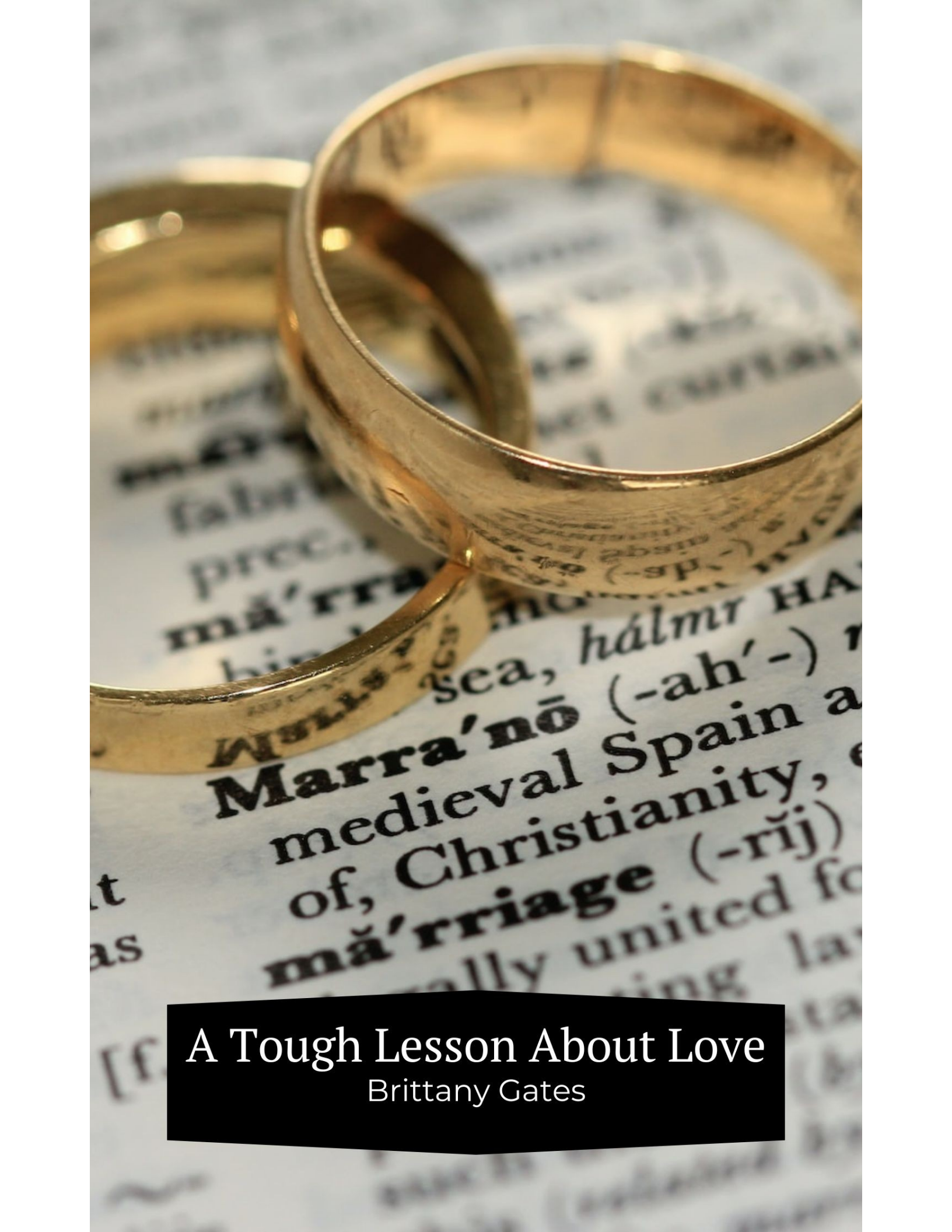


A close-up photograph of two gold wedding bands resting on an open dictionary. The bands are positioned diagonally across the frame, with one band slightly overlapping the other. The background is a dictionary page with various words and definitions visible, including 'Marra'nō', 'medieval Spain', 'of, Christianity', and 'mă'rriage'. The lighting is soft, highlighting the metallic sheen of the rings.

A Tough Lesson About Love

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I wake up suddenly from the short, sharp calling of “mom.” My eyes lock onto the screamer: My four year-old son Douglas. He stands just inches from my face, staring at me with his brown eyes.

“What do you want, honey?”

“I’m hungry.”

“Tell daddy that.”

I close my eyes to go back to sleep. My son continues to talk, unaware I stayed up until three AM last night working so I could take today off.

“Douglas, please! Go tell daddy and he’ll make you some food.”

“He’s playing.”

I open my eyes and stare at my son with anger. It’s hard not to just scream at him for disturbing me.

“What do you mean?”

“Daddy is playing with colors.”

I sigh and roll my eyes. Douglas calls when my husband paints “playing with colors.” We told him a few times it’s called painting but he’s four so it’s not sticking yet.

“I’m hungry, mommy.”

“All right!”

I rip my covers off and get out of bed. My son is far away now because my screaming scared him. I shouldn’t have done that. And I shouldn’t have to deal with this right now. Harry handles this. It’s his job. We made an agreement about this.

“Come on, Douglas. Let’s find daddy.”

We walk out of the bedroom and head to the front of the house where the room my husband uses for his art is located. The door to the room is ajar and I push it open, entering without knocking. My husband looks up suddenly from the easel, holding a paintbrush in his right hand, and the palette in his left.

“Meredith, I hate when you barge in.”

“I hate being woken up by a hungry child, Harry.”

He looks and sees our son standing off to my right side. My husband lowers his painting tools and grows meek.

“I thought Douglas would sleep longer so I snuck in a painting session. I should’ve fixed breakfast instead.”

I can’t stay mad at him when he acknowledges his mistake.

“It’s all right, Harry. I’m, I’m just angry from lack of sleep.”

“I’ll take care of Douglas. You can go back to bed. You gotta get some sleep so you’ll be ready for your interview this afternoon.”

“You’re right. I gotta sell my book to keep making money to support us all.”

I leave Harry and Douglas and go back to the bedroom to go back to bed. Falling back to sleep can be hard for me at times when I wake up early. I settle under the covers and close my eyes.”

The next noise to wake me up is the alarm on my phone. I grab it off of the nightstand next to the bed and stop the alarm. It's noon and my interview is at three PM. That gives me enough time to take a shower, do my hair and makeup, choose a nice outfit, and eat something. Harry should have lunch ready by the time I'm done, if it's not already done.

I go into the en suite bathroom and take a shower. Then I dry and style my hair. I fluff it out while looking in the mirror, happy with its appearance. Then I sit down at the end of the vanity to apply my makeup. I apply a neutral look bordering on natural to look professional. It's my go-to look for interviews.

After applying my makeup I walk into the closet connected to the other side of the bathroom to pick out my outfit. Just like my makeup I need to choose an outfit to look professional. Yet, I want one that also flatters my shape. I choose to wear a cream V-cut blouse and black straight-leg pants. Underneath those clothes I wear a matching white bra and panty set. Dressed for success, I walk out of the closet into the bathroom and back into the bedroom. Now it's time to eat.

I enter the kitchen and find my husband and the boys sitting around the kitchen table eating. Harry looks up at me with a smile. Douglas continues to eat and Wallace sits in his high chair stuffing food into his mouth with his stubby hands. I stand next to Harry, draping my arm across his shoulders.

“It looks good, honey.”

“Thanks. I saved you some in the pan on the stove. I'll fix you a plate. What do you want to drink?”

“A sparkling water.”

He gets up to fix my lunch and grab my drink. I sit down next to his seat and talk to the boys. Douglas offers me a smile while Wallace giggles as he grabs the next handful of food.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

“You look beautiful in that outfit. I kinda wish you always have an interview so you dress like that all the time.”

I look at my husband with a coy smile.

“Oh, that's not to say you don't look good when you wear your other clothes. You do. It's just, you know.”

“I get it, Harry. You like this look best.”

We eat in silence for a bit. The food is really good. Harry has become a great cook over the years. And to think he was a horrible cook when we got married.

“Who's the interview with today?”

“Janet McCullen, a relationship influencer with over a million followers on TikTok alone. She’s also quite popular on YouTube just like I am. She focuses on helping older single women – between the ages of thirty to forty-five – find a husband using the techniques she developed to help her find a husband when she was thirty-five.”

“Is that why you’re doing this interview because you got married in your thirties?”

“I believe so. My book is aimed at women in the age range in Janet’s audience.”

“Are you two similar in other ways beside that?”

“No. I delayed marriage due to my schooling and my career. As for Janet, she had too much fun traveling and dating different guys. Those are her words, not mine.”

“Is she and her husband like us?”

I shake my head and continue to eat.

“Is she going to understand your beliefs about love and marriage?”

I shake my head again.

“I told you this before, Meredith, but I don’t like how these interviewers treat you. It wears you down and you have to deal with enough stress already. I wish I could help you more and make your life easier.”

I stop eating and look at my husband. He has that soft look in his eyes that causes me to melt inside.

“You do make my life easier, Harry. And when you give me that look my stress goes away. It’s one of the reason why I married you.”

He blushes and averts his face. I run my hand through his brown hair.

“I’m done.”

I look over at Douglas and see his clean plate.

“You are. And it looks like Wallace is done too.”

Our youngest plays with the last bit of his lunch, smushing it with the palms of his hands. I look at my husband.

“I’ll clean him up.”

“Thanks. I don’t want to mess up my outfit.”

“Come one, boys. Time to clean up. After that it’s nap time.”

“I want to watch cartoons.”

“We’ll watch cartoons after we clean up.”

I finish my lunch as Harry takes the boys to a nearby bathroom. Then I grab the dishes from the table and put them into the sink. He’ll wash them later. Now it’s time for me to respond to work emails.

By the time I handle a good majority of my emails there’s just an hour to the interview. I spend that time outside to get some fresh air. Then I talk to Harry as he perform some chores around the house as the boys nap. Finally, it’s time for the interview.

I head back into my office and sit down at the desk containing my laptop. I open the email from Janet's assistant to access the link to the Zoom meeting. A new window appears and I see Janet is already in the meeting. Good. I hate it when meetings start late.

"Meredith, you're here! Great!"

"Hello, Janet. Can you see and hear me all right?"

"Oh yes. What about my connection?"

"I can see and hear you perfectly."

"Good, good. How are you doing today? I know you're busy due to your new book and your practice."

"I had a late start today due to working late last night. I had to since I took today off to do this interview. It's just better for me to clear my schedule when I need to do an interview. I still ended up doing work at home, however. But I got to spend some time with my family which was nice."

"Good to hear. Before we get started I just want to remind you that I'm recording the interview for my YouTube channel. And I think clips will be used for TikTok too. Are you still fine with that?"

"Yes I am."

"All right. I'll do my intro to the video now."

I watch Janet change as a grand smile appears on her face. It negatively accentuates her heavily-applied makeup.

"Hey, everyone! It's your favorite gal pal who's trying to make an honest woman out of ya. I have a special guest with me today. You probably seen her on YouTube discussing love and marriage on her popular channel. My guest is a controversial figure in the relationship community due to her views. However, those views lead to a book deal and it's coming out in one week. Please give a virtual warm welcome to Meredith Meyers."

"Thank you, Janet. I'm glad to be here. Thanks for the invitation."

"You're welcome! Now, please, introduce yourself to the audience."

"Sure. As Janet said my name is Meredith Meyers, and I'm a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. I've been in practice for the past eleven years. My focus is pre and post-marital counseling. I am a controversial figure because of my unconventional beliefs regarding love in marriage, specifically unconditional love. That's why I titled my book 'Conditional Love.' I tell my clients the root cause of their marital problems is their unreasonable expectations stemming from their belief in unconditional love."

"I've watched your content, Meredith, and I really want to ask you this: Do you really believe there's no unconditional love in a marriage?"

"Yes, that's my belief."

"So you believe a husband or a wife won't stick around if there's nothing in the marriage to benefit him or her?"

"Yes, that's a great way to put it."

"Do you your clients accept that premise? I know I wouldn't want to hear that message if I'm coming to you for help with my marriage."

I smile. "My views does turn off some of my clients. And some do leave for therapists who practice a more 'conventional' technique. I'm fine with that because I cannot help every couple that comes to me. Nor should I."

"Meredith, can you explain to me and the audience how your techniques help your clients?"

"Yes I can. The first step is to assist my clients dismantle their unreasonable marriage expectations by reading guides and doing role-play exercises. The second step is the most important step in my opinion. I help my clients realize why they got married. Once they understand the 'why' they can start work to improve their relationship. Usually this involves each individual to agree to perform certain roles or duties to help their spouse. That's what resolves the trouble and brings the couple together to work well with each other. The final step is for the couple to have periodic check-ins to make sure each individual is doing their part. It's quite easy to become complacent."

At the end of my speech I see Janet is stunned. I didn't say anything drastic or unrealistic or even extraordinary.

"Sorry for the pause there. I'm debating whether I should ask my next question or not."

"I think you should ask any question you want. We tend to censor ourselves too much in today's world."

"It's a personal question."

"That matters not to me. I discuss parts of my personal life with my clients. It's only right since they have to reveal their intimate details."

"All right then. My question is this: Do you love your husband conditionally, Meredith?"

"Yes, I do."

"Wow! You didn't have to think about it. Does he love you in the same way?"

"Yes, he does."

"And he was fine with that knowledge? Or did he have the same beliefs as you regarding marriage?"

"Oh, my husband believed in marrying for love. He is a creative person. They tend to be romantics."

"Then why did you two get married? I would think your relationship wouldn't work."

"We got married because I wanted a family but I didn't want to be a single mother. My husband also wanted a family but he wanted to continue painting. That requires a steady income but his painting didn't provide that. However, my career does. Thus, I support the family financially and my husband is a stay-at-home father. That gives him time to work on his art. We both got what we wanted because we were honest with each other. Thus, we saw how we could benefit one another."

Janet goes speechless again. I have to keep myself from bursting out in laughter because the look on her face tickles me so.

“What happens if you couldn’t provide for the family financially?”

“My husband would leave me and take the kids.”

“Now what would you do if your husband couldn’t take care of the family anymore?”

“Well, if he got sick I would hire some help, like a nurse and a nanny. If he didn’t want to be a stay-at-home dad anymore so he could travel and paint like he used to, then I would divorce him because he broke our agreement.”

“Good Lord, how can either of you live this way?”

Ah, here comes the exasperation before the anger.

“We live well because we know the truth about our relationship and each other. I can’t understand how couples can exist in a marriage full of unknowns.”

“I know my husband!”

And there’s the anger.

“I didn’t say you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry, Meredith. That, that was wrong of me. You’re right: You didn’t say anything about my marriage. Let’s, you know, get back to the topic of the interview which is your new book. What can readers learn from it? How can they use your book to help their marriage?”

“Readers will learn from my book the true reason for marriage which is to mutually benefit each individual while providing protection against the harsh world. With that knowledge readers can use logic instead of emotion (meaning love) when seeking future partners so they can pick the right partner. If the reader is already married then he or she can use my book to improve their marriage. I provide lessons on how to do use logic instead of emotion throughout the book.”

“You said nothing of love in your reply. Isn’t that vital to a successful marriage?”

“Not necessarily. Romantic love in a marriage is a want, not a need. Men and women married each other without being in love with each other all the time in the past. What was important back then – and still now – was compatibility. If you’re not compatible then your relationship will eventually fail.”

“Meredith, I think your readers will learn to view marriage as a transaction.”

“Great!”

“What? Why?”

“I want people to view marriage that way so they go into it with the full knowledge and scope. You wouldn’t buy a car without doing your research. Marriage should be no different.”

“Let’s end it on that note as I’m all out of time. I’ll give you the chance to tell everyone where they can purchase your book.”

I give my spiel. Janet gives a few closing remarks before she stops recording. I can tell she doesn’t want to talk to me after our interview. I think I disgusted her. She gives me a quick goodbye and ends the meeting.

“It is what it is.”

I get up from my desk and leave my office. It's time to see what my family is up to.

I find Harry in his room painting. Again, I interrupt his flow.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I take it the interview is over?"

I nod as I walk over to view his painting.

"How did it go?"

"Good. I stunned the interviewer a couple of times. And she thought I condemned her marriage."

Harry chuckles.

"Your painting is coming together nicely, honey."

"Thank you. I had dreams about this landscape for the past few days. I'm doing my best to complete it while it's fresh in my mind."

"Well, keep going."

"I gotta make dinner. And the boys will be up from their nap soon."

"I'll take care of dinner, and I'll handle the boys."

"You're gonna have food delivered and allow the boys to watch TV while you work from your phone."

"Of course."

Harry gives me a quick kiss on the cheek and smiles at me with that soft look in his eyes that makes me melt inside.