



The Good Stuff

By Michelle Stimpson

Publisher: Walk Worthy Press / Harrison House

1577948564

368 Pages

\$13.99

Prologue

Mrs. Irma K. Parker

Mrs. Irma K. Parker knows why every good romantic novel or movie ends with the engagement or the wedding. She'd be the first to say that by falling in love, "You really ain't done nothin'," because *falling* in love is the easy part. It's the getting back up, dusting off, getting nerve, forgiving again in love—that's the hard part. And after you learn to work through all that, well, *that's* when you get to the good stuff.

Throughout her service in the church and in cleaning homes, she'd seen it more times than she wanted to remember: the rise and fall of a marriage. Newlyweds sitting up on cloud ten, looking down on cloud nine, and things going well for a while. Then comes life. They decide to make some changes: go back to school, get a dog, have kids, move into a bigger home.

Now, Irma figured that if they added a few more chapters to those romance novels or a couple more scenes to the movies (at least past the honeymoon phase), that same couple would be getting up every day going to work, going to church, coming home, eating, going to bed, and then doing the same thing the next day and the next—only after a couple of years it's no longer a

pleasant consistency. It's boring. The freshness of that other person's features is gone, replaced by a common image. Just like every new puppy, every new outfit, and every new car takes on new meaning when it comes to scooping up that poop, opening that credit card bill, and paying that car note every month.

Makes a woman wonder why she ever got married in the first place. Makes her wonder if she would have been better off with what's-his-name. Makes her wonder if the person she married was really the one God had in mind or if, maybe, she should have waited for somebody else.

One day she wakes up, rolls over, takes a good long look at the man lying next her and asks herself the question that 99.9 percent of all married women (including Irma herself) have, at some point or another, asked themselves: "Why did I ever get married?"

Don't matter how old, how saved, how rich, how poor, how beautiful, or how many times folks have already been married; fact is, every marriage loses its innocence at some point. People make mistakes, bad choices, or whatever you want to call them. Priorities change, interests change, people change—as they should. That's all a part of growing. And there's no set formula for how people grow. Some grow faster than others, some take off and then stop for a while before starting again. Some wait around and then sprint so hard their feet kick their behinds toward the end. In the meanwhile, hearts get broken, families split up, people move on for better or for worse.

To Irma, it seems a shame that women who have been through all of this and come out with stronger, longer marriages don't get much chance to sit down with the less experienced wives and show them the art of standing by a man. Not behind him like a mother, or in front of him like his father, or over him like he's her child, or under him like a doormat.

Beside him. Like his wife.

After 42 years of marriage, what Irma K. Parker knew that Sonia Gipson-Riley and Adrian Jacobsen *didn't* know (after a combined total of 12 years of marriage) is that failure is a part of success. It's *not* all or nothing when it comes to a marriage.

Sometimes, you need to just sit down and listen to the older women tell it like it T-I-Z.

Chapter 1

Sonia and Kennard Riley

Sonia found a good stopping point and shut down her computer. She rushed to the breakroom where she sliced and wrapped two pieces of cake to give to her kids, Kamron and Kelsi. Thoughts of the afternoon's retirement gathering for Renee Johnson ran through Sonia's mind as she carefully selected pieces that hadn't been touched. The impromptu party had been nice, with a moment or two of sincere regret for Renee's departure. Sonia had to admit, she would miss walking into Renee's office for a chat with the door ajar, or a sister-girl session with the door shut. Renee and her husband were looking forward to moving to the country and sharing their golden years together. Sonia didn't envy Renee, however, because Sonia couldn't imagine spending her golden years with her husband, Kennard. They'd be lucky if they made it to their next anniversary because, in the words of Atlantic Starr, it was a fragile situation that could fall apart at any time.

Instead of thinking about Renee's happiness, Sonia focused on the fact that she was the first runner-up for Renee's position as senior account manager. . Though protocol required an

official posting of the vacancy, it was no secret that Sonia Gibson-Riley was the best fit for the job.. Renee herself had even made reference during her good-bye speech to Sonia's dedication. It was just a matter of time.

As Sonia finished wrapping plastic over the second piece of cake, she did think (for an instant) about getting a piece for Kennard, but decided against it. He would probably gobble it down and follow up with one of his sarcastic remarks about her imminent promotion.

Sonia grabbed a sticky note and a pencil from the counter and left a friendly message letting the custodial staff know that they were welcome to the rest of the cake. Down in the parking garage, she packed her laptop and briefcase into the trunk of her late-model Lexus and prepared herself for the "third shift"—the work that working moms do after work. A list of things-to-do flashed through her head as she accelerated onto the highway.

Once she'd made it through the downtown Dallas mix-master and onto her side of the city, she stopped at Lil' Ones to pick up the kids. Lang, the center director, met Sonia at the door. She and her staff had cared for Kamron and Kelsi since they were five weeks old, and Sonia appreciated her relationship with Lang. Lang never charged extra when Sonia picked the kids up late, and she let Sonia take them in early when necessary.

"Kelsi and Kamron!" Lang called the children as Sonia crossed the threshold into the center.

In unison, the twins rose to their feet and ran toward their mother. It was a picture worth taking—both twins missing their two front teeth and smiling like there was no tomorrow. Kamron with his shirttail flapping, Kelsi with her pigtails bouncing wildly. "Slow down," Sonia said for the sake of propriety, secretly thankful that her children seemed to live for the moment that she picked them up from daycare. It was nice to be missed.

“Mommy, did you get the new job?” Kelsi asked.

“Well, I told you, Miss Renee retired today. Mommy won’t know about the new job for a couple of weeks at least,” she curbed Kelsi’s curiosity. It was amazing how much that girl could remember. A casual conversation a month earlier and Kelsi was right on top of it like white on rice.

“Are you getting a new job?” Lang asked.

“I’m applying for a promotion,” Sonia downplayed the question as she secured the twins’ backpacks on their shoulders.

“I’m sure you’ll get it. You’re a great lady. They would be crazy not to promote you.” Lang gave her a smile loaded with genuine support.

“Thank you,” Sonia said, tilting her head to the side. It was all she could do to keep from crying. *How is it that my day-care provider can be more excited about my opportunity than my own husband?* “We’ll see you Monday.”

“Good-bye, kiddos!”

“Good-bye, Mrs. Lee,” the children chimed as they walked to the car.

After Sonia was sure that Kelsi and Kamron were safely strapped in, they headed home. She turned off the radio so she could talk with them about their day at school. First grade had been pretty good for Kelsi. Kamron seemed to be having a bit of trouble with reading, but his teacher, Mrs. Scott, was certain that Kamron would catch on in time. “We can’t all be Kelsi,” she’d remarked with laughter. Since that time, Sonia had taken the initiative to read to the children almost every night and, though he still didn’t read as well as Kelsi, Kamron improved significantly.

The canopy of trees overhead always produced “oohs!” and “aahs!” from the children as

they approached their quiet neighborhood via the back roads. It was out of the way, but Sonia needed the calming effect just then. Her thoughts drifted back to Renee's position; taking over would be a challenge. Maybe even more trouble than it was worth. But she couldn't imagine *not* moving up. After all, that was the purpose of the M.B.A.: career advancement, more money, more for the kids, more for retirement.

A cheer came from the backseat forward, filling the car with delight. "We're going down the tree-top way!" Kamron announced, air swishing through his gap with every word. It didn't take much to please them.

They rounded the last few blocks and then pulled into the garage. Once the car was parked, Kamron bounded out of his seat belt and ran to the front yard, chasing a flock of birds across the yard. Kelsi, six going on twenty-five, remarked that it was foolish for him to be chasing birds. "He won't never catch one," Kelsi said as she grabbed both backpacks from the seat.

Sonia joined her daughter at the rear of the car, and together they walked down the driveway's slope to the mailbox. "How do you know he won't *ever* catch one?"

"Cause the birds are too fast. They can fly."

Sonia pulled one of Kelsi's long, brown ponytails playfully. "Me-Maw says that you should never say never. Sometimes things that seem impossible happen."

"What does impossipull mean?" Kelsi asked.

"When something is impossi-*ble*, it means that you don't see a way for it to happen. You think it's impossible for Kamron to catch a bird, don't you?"

She nodded matter-of-factly. "Have *you* ever caught a bird?"

"No, Kelsi, I can't say that I have." Sonia laughed at her daughter's question—an

obvious challenge. “But I have seen some impossible things happen. When the impossible happens, we call that a miracle.”

“Ooh,” Kelsi smiled, “there’s a girl in my class named Miracle.”

“That’s a pretty name.” Sonia smiled back.

Kamron gave up his bird chase and followed them into the house, panting and begging for water. Kelsi pushed him away from the refrigerator, insisting that he allow her to get it for him. Kamron obeyed, taking a seat on a stool and waiting for his sister to serve him. Kelsi pulled a cup from the dishwasher, inspected it, and then proceeded to prepare the water for her brother. At the refrigerator, she pushed the lever, allowed a minimum number of ice cubes to fall into the cup, and tiptoed so that she could visually monitor the depth of the water. She rationed just enough to cover the tip of the ice.

Kamron wiped his forehead as Kelsi brought him the cup. When she placed it on the table before him, he thanked her. She gave a half “you’re welcome” and turned her back to him, heading for the fruit basket. She grabbed two apples, said “Here’s you go,” and plopped a Granny Smith down before him. She watched him gulp down the water and waited for him to lift the apple to his lips and take a bite. Satisfied that Kamron was in compliance, Kelsi took a bite of her own.

As Sonia watched Kelsi’s interaction with her brother, she couldn’t help but notice how close *this* apple had fallen from her maternal tree. In Kelsi’s six short years of life, she’d watched Sonia walk into a room, size up the situation, and take immediate action without consulting any of the parties involved. Kelsi could be overbearing, Sonia knew, but there was never a worry about anybody pushing Miss Kelsi Danielle Riley around. She would be a strong black woman, in the tradition of those before who kept going through tough times, even when men were

trippin' or absent or both. Black women had survived and were stronger for it. Sonia had to admit, she was proud of her daughter.

The house smelled of Pine-Sol and bleach. Irma Parker, their housekeeper, had come and gone after her biweekly routine. Sonia threw on a pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and a pair of fluffy house shoes—the kind that should have been thrown out a long time ago—and then walked the first floor, inspecting the bathrooms, the living area, the kitchen, and the master bedroom. She had never had a problem with Irma's work, but it was Sonia's habit to double-check things. On the second floor, she examined the children's bathroom. Every scrap of toothpaste they had managed to slap around the sink was gone. The spots where Kamron missed the toilet were gone. In the children's bedroom, linens were changed and furniture dusted. And even though Sonia had told Irma that she didn't need to worry with straightening up the kids' toy room (that was their job), Sonia could see that Irma had gone behind them and perfected their six-year-old efforts.

As always, Sonia gave Irma a call to let her know that she had done a good job. It was not what most people do with their housekeepers, but Irma was a dear. Sometimes Irma left an encouraging card on the refrigerator or a cheerful note on top of the mantel. It seemed a shame to Sonia that for all that Irma had done to keep the Riley household running smoothly for the past six years, the two women rarely got to see each other.

“Hello, Miss Irma, it's Sonia Riley. How are you?”

“I'm blessed of the Lord. How 'bout you?”

“I'm fine, too. Just wanted to let you know that the house looks great.”

“I tell you, those twins are sure growing up! I put in a load of laundry before I left—I see they're up to a size seven now!”

“Oh, Miss Irma, you didn’t have to do that.”

“Well, I finished a little early today and I figured I might as well.” Sonia could hear Irma’s sweet smile through the phone.

“Thank you, Miss Irma. I sure appreciate you.”

“I appreciate you, too, sweetheart. Bye, now.”

All appeared well in their four-bedroom, three-bathroom, three-thousand square-foot home in their master-planned community. When Sonia really thought about it, she was grateful for God’s blessings. She had more than a lot of people, financially and otherwise. Her kids were healthy, and that was something she never took for granted after the rough time they had coming into the world. Twins are always a risk. “Thank You, Lord,” Sonia exhaled.

After the kids finished their snacks, Sonia sent them off to their rooms, reminding them that because it was Friday, they would be going to Me-Maw’s house.

“Get your suitcases. They’re on your beds.”

Kelsi had already taken the liberty of going through her luggage. “Momma!” she called from her upstairs bedroom.

“What?”

“I want Me-Maw to see my pants with the glitter on them. Can I pack those, please?”

“I told you—those pants are for special occasions,” Sonia yelled back.

“But I don’t like the pants you packed. They look like *boy* pants.”

“Those are *not* boys’ pants. I bought them....” *Earth to Sonia. Am I really having a debate with my six-year-old about clothes?* “Kelsi, you are wearing the clothes that I packed for you. Now, if you don’t want to wear those clothes, you can just stay home.” Sometimes, Sonia had to catch herself with that girl.

Sonia shook her head and walked back into the kitchen to thaw out a few chicken breasts for herself and Kennard. With the children gone, they would need only two or three. Maybe not even that many, depending on what he had planned for the night.

A few minutes later, the children arrived at the foot of the staircase, luggage in tow. They were so strong and healthy now, nothing like the little helpless, unstable babies they had been at birth. “We’re ready,” Kelsi spoke for the two of them.

“Oh, I almost forgot—I’ve got a special treat for you two.”

“What is it?” Kamron asked with wonder in his eyes.

“I got some cake today at work,” Sonia announced as she unfurled the top to the breadbox, revealing the cake magician-style. Both children squealed with joy and followed Sonia to the table.

“Where did you get this cake from?” Kelsi asked as she took the plastic off her piece and dove into it.

“Well, it’s the cake I got from work. Miss Renee is retiring, so....”

Kelsi abruptly stopped eating her cake and asked, “Did you get a piece for Daddy?”

“No,” Sonia said without offering an explanation.

Kelsi slid her fork down the center of the corner piece she had left on her plate. “I’m gonna save this half for Daddy.”

Sonia mustered every ounce of Christian love within her and gave Kelsi a grin. She prayed silently for the strength to refrain from telling her daughter the truth: that he wouldn’t have done the same for her.

As good as that cake was, Kelsi rewrapped her Daddy’s half and placed it back in the breadbox. “When will Daddy be home?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll make sure he gets the cake,” Sonia assured her daughter.

Satisfied that her father would be taken care of, Kelsi threw her fork in the sink and joined her mother and brother again at the table. As Kamron finished his cake, they all rose and headed for the car and Sonia’s mother’s home. It was a short drive back into Dallas since they were on the lighter side of traffic. The kids entertained themselves with songs and a game of I-spy, and in no time Sonia was parking in her mother’s driveway, ready to drop off the kids and make way for peace and quiet.

“Hey, y’all!”

“Hey, Me-Maw,” the children echoed as they ran toward their grandmother. She received them with hugs and kisses.

Then Clarice kissed her daughter on the cheek and held back the screen door so that Sonia could reenter the home she used to call her own. With the way Clarice baked for the sick, shut-ins, and bereaved it always smelled like bread. The members at Gospel Temple always said that the best thing about being sick was Missionary Gibson’s homemade rolls. Though Sonia had stood by her mother’s side and watched her mix, knead, and bake countless dozens, she never could make those rolls quite the way Clarice did. “You gotta put your foot in it, girl,” Clarice would laugh.

The twins went off to the guest room to put their things away, while Sonia and Clarice detoured to the kitchen. “You want some prune juice?”

“No, thanks,” Sonia said, taking a seat.

“Keep you regular.” She poured herself a tall glass.

“I *am* regular.”

“You talked to your daddy?” Clarice forced a sore subject.

“Not in a couple of weeks.”

“Well, he’s down in Louisiana for the rest of the week. You should try him on his cell phone. I talked to him just the other day. Says he might be home by Monday, depends on if he wins or not.”

Sonia tap-danced on her mother’s nerves. “Why doesn’t he just stay there?”

“‘Cause I’m his wife and I’m here. *That’s* why. You know, the Lord works in mysterious ways.”

It was beyond Sonia how her mother could claim to be married to her father, ‘Buddy’ Gipson. For as long as Sonia could remember, her parents had lived two totally separate lives; her mother in the church, her father in the streets. Throughout Sonia’s childhood, Buddy kept a steady job Monday through Friday. He provided a roof over their heads, but that was the extent of his paternal presence. Now that Buddy was retired, the only evidence that he resided with Clarice was his name on the deed.

“I got some fresh bread in the oven. You want some?” Clarice switched gears.

Sonia laughed at her mother’s offer. “When have you *not* had fresh bread in the oven?” They both laughed while Clarice busied herself with fixing a plate of rolls for Sonia to take home.

Sonia looked around the kitchen and counted the same one hundred and thirteen stripes on the wallpaper that she’d been counting all her life. Then she watched her mother from behind. Clarice moved slower now, her back rounded ever so slightly. Her mother was getting old. And Sonia wondered if she should stop trying to make her mother realize that she was married only on paper. Maybe Sonia should just let her mother take this fantasy to the grave because, aside from Sonia and the kids, Clarice didn’t appear to have much left.

As for Clarice, she saw a younger version of herself when she looked at Sonia: mocha skin, brown eyes, big puffy lips, and a behind to match. Sonia had those two-tone microbraids that all the busy younger women seemed to be wearing these days. She'd twisted it around and secured the base with some kind of clip and left the ends of her hair to swing with every step.

Clarice placed the rolls in front of her daughter and sat down at the table with her. She watched her daughter sink her teeth into her hot, buttered roll and remembered the good old days, when Sonia thought the world of her and these rolls. Back then, Sonia didn't question where her daddy was or why he didn't come straight home after work. She just let it be.

"I'm gonna keep the kids 'til Sunday morning. We're having our youth day and I was going to take them to rehearsal with me tomorrow and have them sing on Sunday morning. Is that alright?" Clarice had obviously rehearsed this speech.

"Kamron's got a lot of reading to do." Sonia twisted the words out of her mouth.

"What's more important— readin' Jack and Jill or the Bible? Servin' the Lord pays off after while. And only what you do for Christ will last. That's what's wrong with kids now...."

And she's off! Clarice got up from the table and grabbed a washcloth, wiping spotless counters as she fussed. As crazy as it was, Sonia appreciated hearing her mother go off on these tangents. It was nice to be up under somebody again, to have Clarice tell her what to do instead of everybody just assuming that Sonia knew everything all the time, because she didn't.

"When was the last time *you* been to church?"

Now was Sonia's chance to redeem herself and let her mother know that she was not a heathen. "Sunday."

Clarice fussed as she folded a wet cloth in half and placed it across the faucet. "And here it is Friday. Almost a week since you set foot in the house of the Lord. I know I was glad when

they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord. Ooh, I tell you, me and your daddy raised you better than that.”

Sonia felt a *no-she-didn't* rising up in her throat. Aside from an occasional reference to “the Man upstairs” or attending somebody’s funeral, Buddy didn’t have anything to do with the Lord or church. Sonia moaned defiantly.

“We need more young folks to take part in the church,” Clarice continued. “Seems like Gospel Temple is dryin’ up. Folks is leavin’ for these big, flashy churches with singles groups and conferences and bookstores and durn near professional football teams.” She stopped and stared at Sonia. “Y’all still got Wednesday night service at your church?”

“Yes, ma’am. I didn’t get to go this week, but I can get the CD on Sunday and listen to it in the car through the week when I’m driving back and forth to work.”

She relented. “Well, all right. The truth will set you free. Did I tell you Gospel Temple might be closing?”

“Yes, you told me.”

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do if the church closes,” she said as she rolled her lips between her teeth and shook her head.

“You can come join my church; it’s not too big and you said yourself that you like Pastor Butler’s teaching.”

“I said I like his *teachin’*, not his *preachin’*,” she said as she gave her daughter a self-righteous snarl “He ain’t got no get-up-and-holla in him like Pastor Williams. I ain’t used to somebody just readin’ from the Word and talkin’. That’s dead.”

“I know it’s different from what you’re used to, but different doesn’t mean bad. Things are changing, you know. ”

“Whoo! I’m too old to change. Guess I’ll have service with just me and the Lord here at the house ‘cause I ain’t about to listen to no youth group come up and rap and dance in the pulpit. Lord’ll have to take me on home to glory first. Won’t be nobody there able to put me out.”

Sonia decided to end this conversation. “I’m gonna get on back, Momma. The Lord isn’t taking you anywhere just yet. You’ve got two grandkids to help raise.” She stood and kissed her mother on the cheek as the children rushed into the kitchen.

“You rested up?” Sonia asked as she slung her purse to her shoulder and grabbed her keys from the counter.

“Yeah, I’m always ready for my grandbabies.” The twins rushed into the kitchen and grabbed Clarice’s hands. They ushered her into the living room with promises of dazzling scenes from the Disney movies they’d packed.

On the way home, Sonia thought about all the things she wanted to tell her mother but couldn’t. There was no use in trying to overturn Clarice’s fantasy. Maybe this arrangement between her mother and father was okay for Clarice, but it wouldn’t do for Sonia. Sonia wanted more.