



## Can I Get a Witness?

By ReShonda Tate Billingsley

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Thomas has a few more bombshells for Vanessa before they are court-ordered to attend a spiritual retreat. She goes—but not without a fight, and determined to emerge the victor. Then a twist of fate helps her see things in a whole new light, and Vanessa must face the hard questions: Can she rebuild a bond that she had a big part in destroying? Have her years on the bench made her wiser—or just bitter? Can she open her heart to the renewing power of love and forgiveness?

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## Editorial Review

About the Author

**ReShonda Tate Billingsley** is the #1 national bestselling author of over twenty novels. She lives in Houston, Texas.

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### Chapter 1

"Ain't nothing open at two in the morning but legs and liquor stores!" LaShawanna Jenkins wiggled her neck as she thrust a finger up in the air. Her golden braids swung from side to side like they were doing a sultry salsa dance. "And since he didn't come home drunk, you know where he was!"

Darius Jenkins's lip turned up as he fought back a smile.

"See, he thinks it's funny!" LaShawanna snapped. She threw her hands up in exasperation. "Your Honor, he got me messed up 'cuz I ain't the one." She cut her eyes at her husband of six years. "I told him, one mo' time. Just one mo' time and it was over. I guess he don't believe fat meat is greasy."

Judge Vanessa Colton-Kirk sighed as she gazed at the file in front of her. Every day, it was the same thing. Some couple who was once madly in love could no longer stand the sight of each other and came before her seeking a divorce.

Vanessa flipped through the stack of papers. Five kids. No assets. LaShawanna worked at a grocery store. Darius worked as an auto mechanic. Same story, different couple. Vanessa looked up from her papers. "So, Mrs. Jenkins, what is it that you are requesting?"

"I want out. And I want you to make him pay child support and alimony," LaShawanna barked. "And I want him to pay for my statue, which he broke when I put him out. That was my grandma's statue."

"It was a freakin' rooster, Your Honor," Darius said with a smirk.

"So? It was *my* rooster!" LaShawanna screamed.

Vanessa slammed down her gavel. "Please! Both of you, just be quiet." She turned toward LaShawanna.

"Mrs. Jenkins, Texas is a non-alimony state, so I can't award your request for alimony. I will, however, order that Mr. Jenkins pay fourteen hundred dollars a month in child support."

"Fourteen hundred dollars!" Darius cried. "I ain't got that kind of money!"

Vanessa looked down at the folder again. "It says here that you bring home roughly twenty-four hundred dollars a month."

"I do, but how am I supposed to live?" he huffed.

Vanessa struggled to maintain her composure. She got so tired of these men who came through her courtroom and didn't want to pay child support. "Mr. Jenkins, if you don't pay to support your five children, who do you suppose will?" she asked, putting her hands underneath her chin.

The smirk was definitely gone from his face now. "Man, this is messed up." He groaned, running his hand over his immaculately braided hair. "I don't even know if Darianna and Demarcus are mine."

"No, you didn't!" LaShawanna shouted. "You know doggone well them your kids!"

Darius folded his arms across his chest. "I don't know nothing."

Vanessa took a deep breath and reminded herself that she had to endure this divorce court craziness in order to climb the ladder of her political career. "Mr. Jenkins, how old are Darianna and Demarcus?"

"Seven and nine."

"And did you not sign the birth certificate?"

"That's beside the point."

"I'm afraid it's not." Vanessa began signing the necessary paperwork to close out this case. "You have taken care of Darianna and Demarcus, along with your other three children, since their births. You have maintained that you were their father since birth." She set her pen down and looked up. "So as far as the courts are concerned, you are the father of each and every one of them. My order stands at fourteen hundred dollars a month."

"Yeah!" LaShawanna sang as she did a victory dance. "That's what you get. Tell your little bimbo that y'all gon' have to make do on a thousand dollars a month. 'Cuz the minute you're late, I'ma have your sorry butt thrown in jail!"

"Mrs. Jenkins!" Vanessa snapped.

LaShawanna covered her mouth, though she was still delighted. "I'm sorry, Your Honor."

Vanessa shook her head. "Whatever," she mumbled. "Divorce is granted."

She pounded her gavel one more time as she stood, grabbed her folders, and headed back to her chambers.

Her secretary, Nicole, was waiting right outside her office. She had a folded-up newspaper clutched in her hand. "Judge Colton-Kirk, here's the article I was telling you about." She held the paper out toward Vanessa. "It's an awesome article. Everyone around the courthouse is talking about it."

Vanessa smiled as she took the *Houston Defender*. She had done the interview with the *Defender* reporter two weeks ago, but she had no idea it was going to be an entire five-column profile. " 'Houston Judge Is Heading Places,' " she recited, reading the headline.

"And it even has a quote in there from Judge Malveaux, talking about what a great judge you are and how you have such a promising future," Nicole excitedly said.

Vanessa was shocked. She and Judge Malveaux didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things, so she was surprised that he would go on record as saying something positive about her. She tucked the paper under her arm.

"Thanks, Nicole. I'll read it when I get a moment."

Nicole smiled in admiration before making her way back to her desk.

As much as Vanessa loved her job as the judge of Houston's infamous Divorce Court Number Three, these

people could work her nerves. Before the Jenkinses, she'd fielded a couple who had tried a ménage à trois and the wife had ended up falling for the other woman her husband brought in. Yesterday, it was an Anna Nicole wannabe who'd married a man old enough to be her grandfather and divorced him a year later, taking half his money. His family had been furious, but the law was the law, and the law said she was entitled to half.

"Well, I see you've destroyed yet another marriage."

Vanessa walked into her office and threw the folders on her desk, which was covered with a stack of files that all needed her immediate attention. "Hello to you, too, Aunt Ida."

Ida was sitting in the chair in front of Vanessa's large mahogany desk. She wore her usual conservative lace-collared dress and pearls, and her small-framed black glasses were perched on the edge of her nose. Her curly gray hair poked out from under her Sunday-best hat, which she wore proudly even though it was just Thursday. Her Bible, which she never went anywhere without, sat prominently on her lap.

"Don't hello me. You should've made them children go to counseling or something. That's what's wrong with young folks these days, don't want to work at nothing. Just want to throw in the towel at the first sign of trouble." She sighed heavily.

Sweeping the hem of her black robe to one side, Vanessa sat down behind her desk and smiled at her great-aunt. Ida Mae Colton had been like a mother to Vanessa since her own parents died in a fire when she was six years old. Her grandparents had died years before, and Aunt Ida -- her grandmother's youngest sister -- was the only one who could take in Vanessa and her two sisters, Rosolyn and Dionne.

"Auntie, I've told you before, I don't destroy marriages." Vanessa opened up a drawer and pulled out a small mirror. She gazed at her reflection, taking note of a gray hair that was sprouting at the top of her hairline. Her flawless caramelcolored skin made people think she was a lot younger than her thirty-five years. "I simply preside over their breakups," she continued, plucking the offending hair out.

"Umphh. You the one with all the power. Seems like to me you can make them stay together," Ida grumbled.

"That's absurd." Satisfied, Vanessa placed the mirror back in the drawer. "I can't make anyone stay together."

"I know you can't make them, but you can encourage them. They need Jesus." Aunt Ida reached over and picked up one of the folders to fan her robust frame.

Vanessa laughed as she stuck her hand out for her aunt to give her the folder. "That's your answer to everything, Aunt Ida."

Ida, ignoring the outstretched hand, kept fanning. "It sure is. There ain't no other answer. That's why these marriages today ain't working, 'cuz folks ain't got Jesus at the center of their marriage."

Aunt Ida was the most religious person Vanessa had ever met. But all her years of forcing Vanessa to go to church -- not to mention the shady things that went on at some of these churches -- had only turned Vanessa off. Now she didn't go unless she was making a personal appearance or it was an election year.

"So, are you ready to go?" Vanessa asked.

Ida stood, finally setting the folder back on the desk. "You can try to shush me all you want, but you know I'm telling you the truth."

"Mmm-hmm," Vanessa said as she stood and slipped out of her robe. She brushed a piece of lint off of her crisp navy Dana Buchman suit. "What time do you have to be at the doctor's office?"

"At four. And I could've gone by myself. I don't need an escort."

"I want to go, because it's the only way I can be sure you'll go." Ida had scared everyone after a mild heart attack last year. But she'd pulled through it, and Vanessa and her sisters had vowed to make sure she took care of herself: they took turns taking her to the doctor.

Vanessa glanced at her watch. "Let's get going. I have a reception at six."

"Reception? Isn't today your anniversary?"

Vanessa nodded as she reached for her purse. "Yes, and Thomas has called a hundred times, telling me to make sure I'm home at a decent hour because he has a special night planned."

"Don't sound so excited," Ida mumbled as she walked to the door. "You'd think a woman celebrating her five-year anniversary would be more enthusiastic."

Vanessa swung her crocodile Hermès purse over her shoulder. "It's not that. I just know he's going to start in on me about kids again, and I'm tired of that argument."

"I don't understand why you haven't given that boy any babies yet." Ida shook her head in amazement.

This was a sore point between them, and Vanessa was tired of Ida harping on it, too. "I keep telling you, the time just isn't right."

"The time will never be right, let you tell it."

Vanessa gently pushed her aunt out of the office. "Let's go." She didn't want to have this discussion with I...

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