

Chapter One

Rape.

What an ugly four-letter word. The very idea was preposterous. He'd been arrested for rape. Michael Ward shook his head, remembering the charges written under his mug shot. He didn't have to take any woman by force. Just look at him.

He was at the top of his game. He began as an architectural designer. Then he moved into real estate where he purchased, rebuilt and resold properties. It took some time, but his name meant something in the hotel resort business. Patrons knew any building bearing the *MJW seal* signified quality and top-notch service, for a price, of course. He had two MJW Hotels in the New York City, three in Atlanta, two in London and one in Dubai. He had spa resorts sprinkled across Florida, Texas and Chicago—all with the MJW stamp of approval.

Now, after all his hard work to build his empire, Michael couldn't imagine a nineteen year old could bring him to his knees.

Just last week, he'd been cracking open a bottle of champagne, celebrating his newest property acquisition in Colorado. This week he was squatting in the corner of a four-foot cell, waiting on Verona "Tiger" Stachs to post his bail and to negotiate the terms of his release.

How had he gotten here?

He'd been booked on multiple sex and assault charges and had almost lost his cool at his arraignment. The fact that is was September 11th wasn't lost on him either.

Someone had set him up, and once he was out of here, he intended to find that person and make him pay. For the past few years of his life he'd become an expert at payback.

"Michael, it's all set," Verona stated from the more desirable side of the bars. "You'll be home within the hour."

"Took you long enough." He didn't say thank you. He paid her an annual salary to the tune of seven hundred thousand dollars and felt she should be thanking him. He walked to the entrance of the cell. "Did you bring it?"

She looked put out at his rudeness, but didn't say anything. Instead, she reached inside her briefcase and retrieved a handkerchief and wipes and handed them to him. "As you ordered."

Michael wiped his face and hands. He couldn't wait to take a shower and let the water run for days. He doubted he'd ever feel clean again. The stench of jail would remain with him. "What about the press?"

"The hounds are barking," came the wry reply.

He gave her a glance. "Is this amusing to you? Do you know what it's like to sit in this squalor inhaling the stink of dried urine and other body fluids that I refuse to dwell on?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. It was bad taste. It won't happen, again."

Michael sighed, taking pity on her. He was good-natured, but his reputation and life were on the line. That was no laughing matter. But she'd worked through the night to find a judge to grant his bail hearing. Thanks to her, he would spend the night in his own

bed. He could cut her some slack. “I’m sure I’ll laugh about this at some point in my life,” he said in a gentler tone, “but for now, I just want to get home.”

Verona yawned and stretched, but her eyes were still sharp. “Let me go over the terms of your release.”

The guard on duty unlocked his cell. Michael used the handkerchief to touch the iron door as he came out. His first stop was the rest room. Next Verona led him to a small meeting room. On the table, he saw Chinese food, juice and coffee. The smell of chicken lo mein and beef with broccoli filled the room. His stomach growled and his mouth watered. His smile was heartfelt. “Thank you.” He didn’t hesitate to dig in.

“With your estate, the judge sees you as a flight risk, so your business assets, banking accounts and credit card accounts are frozen. You also have to turn in your passport.”

Michael munched as he processed her words. He felt like punching a wall but took another bite of his food instead. He wasn’t a criminal. It was debasing to be treated as such, but what choice did he have?

He wiped his mouth. “Where do I sign the papers?”

“The press is camped outside the police station. You’re worldwide news. The chief of police agreed to shuttle you home in an unmarked police car. I’ve arranged for a stand-in to lead them off your trail.”

“I like the way you think.” Michael arched his eyebrow in appreciation. She wasn’t only smart but also cunning. Verona deserved every dollar he was paying her.

“There’s one other thing. I can’t represent you. I specialized in criminal trial in law school and I practiced for a short time so was able to fill in tonight. But you need the best. I have some referrals.”

“No, I have someone in mind.” Michael tapped his fingers on the table. He knew the perfect person. It had been years since Michael had spoken to him but there was no time like the present.

“Great! Who is he? Give me his name so I can brief him.”

“I’ll have to handle this one myself.” He didn’t relish begging, but he needed someone with tenacity and a proven track record of winning hard-to-prove cases. There was only one man who fit that bill.

Verona scrunched her nose. “Do I know him?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact you do,” Michael smirked. “Do you remember when you handled my paternity case?” He referred to the time when he had pursued custody of two children from his previous marriage. He knew they weren’t his, but he’d wanted them. It was selfish. But he’d been on a different track then.

“Oh, yes, I remember. If memory serves me right, didn’t you drop that case? Wait a minute wasn’t it against—”

He cut her off, but affirmed, “I sure did after I found out—”

Michael stopped. By the light in her eyes, he knew he’d said too much. No one but his mother knew he had children—fraternal two-year-old twins who had never seen him. The old hurt surfaced, but he hardened his heart.

“What happened? What aren’t you telling me?” Perched on the edge of the seat, her curiosity shone through her eyes.

Michael clammed up. He didn't share too much of himself anymore. Not after he'd been burned by love.

He ignored her question. "What you may not remember is that my ex-wife's husband, Keith is a former attorney. That's who I plan to ask if we go to trial. Note the word, *if*."

"The likelihood is one hundred percent," she said. "Wait. Are you talking about the same Keith I'm thinking of—minister and host of *Second Chances* that you put on blast on national television, when you revealed he'd slept with your ex-wife and fathered her two children? That Keith?"

She was looking at him like he was crazy.

Michael dared her to say something. He hadn't gotten where he was in business by being a coward. When he wanted something, he went after it with dogged tenacity. Right now, he wanted—no needed Pastor Keith Ward.

The man who'd stolen his wife.

His brother.

Chapter Two

“You can’t be serious about representing him! You haven’t practiced law in years. Have you forgotten what that man did to your children, you, and me on live television? And, did you forget that he was a no-show at his own mother’s funeral?”

“How can I? You’ve been reminding me about it for weeks,” Keith Ward replied. “He’s my brother, Gina. I’m going to take the case.”

“And, what about the church? Did you forget the four thousand members of Zion’s Hill who depend on you every week?”

“Did you forget that I have several qualified people like Bishop Combs and Deacon Broderson who are more than capable of delivering the word? I’m not abandoning the television show or the church. I’m taking a hiatus while I help my brother. He’s my blood. I have to help him.”

He saw her face crumble as she spoke. “He’s your brother but he’s also the one who put Trey and Epiphany through hell. You might be able to forgive that, but I won’t ever forget, and you’re all kinds of foolish for even talking to him. Michael is not the man you knew as a child. He’s bitter and evil. For all we know, he could’ve staged this whole thing just to get close to you.”

Keith looked up from his law journals. This time she’d call him foolish, which was better than stubborn mule, ox head, buffoon, or his personal favorite, nincompoop.

“Not even Michael is this diabolical. He could spend the rest of his life in jail.”

Her chocolate eyes were dark with anger. “So after three years of ex-communicating you, all he has to do is come begging and you jump to do his bidding. Some things never change.”

“He’s my brother and your ex-husband!” Keith pointed out.

She clutched her chest. “Don’t remind me. You don’t think I regret marrying him because of guilt? You don’t think I regret walking down that aisle, all the while knowing I was in love with you?”

Keith sighed. “I was only making a point that Michael—

“That Michael’s what?” she cut him off. “He’s not the same! He’s cold, unfeeling and heartless.”

He glared. “How would you know that?”

“Don’t you read the papers? He holds his employees to a high standard. Any little mistake and you’re fired.”

“Don’t believe everything you read.”

“Ha!” she scoffed. “It’s true. He’s bragged about it on CNN that his clientele is particular and he prides himself on delivering only the best.”

“That’s business. This rape charge is personal. Even if he’s tough and demanding, it doesn’t mean he’s a monster,” Keith said.

“Quit defending him!” Gina yelled.

He flailed his hands. The woman was exasperating! “I’m taking the job.” He injected a note of finality.

Gina rolled her eyes. “Well, make sure you charge him four times whatever your retainer used to be.”

Keith played with his tie. “I’m not accepting any money.”

“So you mean to tell me that you’re willing to bring this monster into our lives and disrupt our household for *free*?” She shook her head. “I’m not having it. He makes an obscene amount of money. You need to make him pay.”

Keith looked at her clenched fists. “Gina, this isn’t about money for me. I make enough money from my stocks and investments to live a comfortable life. Plus the church is more than generous.”

Her lip poked. “Yes, but you refused their money at first. If I hadn’t…”

Keith looked her square in the eyes. “Honey, we both know you don’t care about money. This isn’t about finances. You’re holding onto a grudge, which will fester and rot if you don’t give it to God.”

She jutted her chin. She wasn’t trying to hear anything he had to say. “He pays,” she reiterated.

Keith waved his hands, tired of arguing. He leaned further into his chair and studied her for several seconds.

How he loved this woman—his little spitfire. He couldn’t believe that she was his. He couldn’t help it, even when she aggravated him he had to smile.

“Don’t go showing me those pretty teeth of yours, cause they won’t distract me.” She rolled her eyes. “You think all you have to do is flash your dimples and I’m putty at your feet. Well, this time it’s not happening. I’m not caving.”

In a flash, Keith was on his feet. He moved towards her. She read his intent and retreated. “Stay away from me, Keith Ward. If you come any closer, I’ll… I’ll scream.”

“You wouldn’t.” Like a lion, he cornered her until she was flush against the door of his office. He bent his tall frame to bite her ear. “Hmm ... You’re wearing my favorite scent. Could it be that you’ve planned this whole seduction?” He peeked under her shirt. Seeing the lacy camisole confirmed his suspicions.

“Well, is it working?”

He laughed, admiring her spunk. “Yes. Your strategy is proving most successful.” He leaned closer. In rapid movements, he saw the rest of her get up. “Are the kids up, yet?”

She shook her head. Her labored breathing clued him in that she was as excited as he was.

“Well, let’s make the most of it. Shall we?” he asked.

Gina batted her lashes. “Does this mean you’ve changed your mind?”

He poked her on the nose. “No, it means I’m going to assure my wife that she doesn’t have anything to worry about. There’s no need to fear anyone but God.”

She pushed against his chest. “Too late. I am afraid. I’m afraid of Michael Ward and his malicious ways.”

“You leave my brother to me,” Keith urged. “I know how to deal with him. I’ve been praying for years for God to lead Michael home. Put him back on the straight and narrow. This may be the means through which God’s answering my prayer. It took a lot for my brother to call and ask for help. Believe me. I can’t turn my back on him.”

Gina’s face showed she didn’t follow his logic, but Keith didn’t want to explain. It would take too long, and he had a much better way to bring in Monday morning. He

lowered his voice. “How about you let me give you a good morning welcome, before you take off for one of your ministries and leave me here all by my lonesome.”

She undressed with speed, a sure sign she was more than ready for some good loving.

He scooped her in his arms and headed for a small door. It opened to a sparse room, boasting a queen-sized bed.

When they’d designed their home, Gina had had that built in. “For emergencies,” she’d said, slyly.

He’d caught on, and agreed.

Making love to his wife was an emergency. One that needed to his immediate attention.

Later that day, Keith reviewed the court files and police report. Evidence and motive were both there. The accuser, Mindy Laurelton, was the daughter of one of Michael’s business partners, William “Bill” Laurelton. As he examined the statements, he couldn’t fathom the Michael the young lady described. Nor could he see his brother dating one so young, although there was an intriguing email exchange.

Keith cupped his chin in thought. Michael could be described as many things, but a rapist wasn’t one of them.

“Mr. Ward? Your brother’s here.”

Keith looked up and flashed his Jamaican housekeeper, Josephine ‘Josie’ Smalls, a weary smile. He rubbed his eyes. “Okay, can you bring him back here?”

“I’ll go get him. I made oxtail and rice and peas if you’re hungry,” Josie offered, wiping the apron she always wore.

Keith looked at his watch, noting that it was about three in the afternoon. “Thanks, Josie. I’ll wait for when Gina gets home.”

Gina was out with Epiphany at Nassau Coliseum. *Dora the Explorer* was in town and Epiphany was ecstatic to go see her live. Trey was at basketball practice. Josie would pick him up and take him out for ice cream before bringing him home. Keith had it all planned down to a tee to avoid any run-ins with his brother and Gina and the kids.

He supposed he could’ve set up the meeting at the church, but Michael was his brother. He couldn’t remain impersonal.

“Thanks for taking my case. The grand jury returned with an indictment and now I’ll have to stand trial. But I suppose you know all that.”

Keith looked up towards the voice and his mouth dropped open. It had been three years since the brothers had seen each other. Michael looked cold and hard, and he’d lost weight. He looked lean, more like a runner, than the football player he’d been throughout high school and college. He had shaved his head and his signature goatee. The new him would take some getting used to.

Keith rested his palms on his cherry oak wooden desk to stand. He extended his hand, knowing that a hug wouldn’t be welcomed. “It’s been awhile. Sorry it took something so tragic to unite us.”

Michael shook his hand but didn’t waste time. “I’m here because I need you. You’re the only one I can trust.”

Keith arched an eyebrow. Trust. He never thought he would hear his brother use that word to describe him—traitor, hypocrite were two that sprung to mind.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Michael said, with a sad smile. “But, it’s true. My life is at stake and you’re the best. Name your fee. My freedom is worth any price.”

So, he was making this all business. Keith felt slight anger rise within him. “You don’t have to pay me, *brother*. We’re family. I love you and I’m happy to use my skills to help your case.” He hunched his shoulders waiting for the venom to spew at his family comment.

Michael scoffed but didn’t respond to that. Instead, he took a seat and clasped his hands. “So how are my ex-wife and my ex-children doing?”

Keith took a deep breath. *Lord, give me strength. Lead me and guide me. Help me keep my cool.* “My wife and children are well,” he emphasized in a brittle tone. He shuffled the papers on his desk to get down to business. He made up his mind this was the first and last time he’d invite his brother to his home for now. He’d relocated from his previous residence in Jamaica Estates to Garden City. His home was close to his church, which was an added bonus. Zion’s Hill was about twenty minutes away in the neighboring town of Hempstead.

“I’ve been looking over your file, and the evidence is damning. This is going to be a tough case.”

Michael followed his lead. “But that’s your specialty, isn’t it?”

Keith saw the confidence reflected in his brother’s eyes and felt the need to point out, “I’m going to do my best but it’s been years since I’ve practiced. I’ll need to do some

research and I'll have to hire an assistant. Because I've got my work cut out for me. I'll need your full cooperation."

Michael gave a dismissive wave. "You won't need to hire an assistant. Verona will help."

"Who's Verona?"

"You remember the attorney I hired for the custody case?"

Keith gritted his teeth. Oh, yes. How could he forget Verona Stachs? His brother had sued to take his children from he and Gina—their rightful parents.

"Yes. I do remember her." He couldn't disguise the edge in his voice. *Maybe Gina was right. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.* He felt resentment rise, along with his own guilt. *I rebuke this feeling, in Jesus' name.* God had delivered him, given him a second chance and he wasn't about to dwell in the past.

He knew God had a hand in all this. Somehow, his brother would be led to Christ. Michael would find the right path.

"What do you need from me?" Michael asked.

The question brought him back to the present. "I need you to tell me everything. Every contact you've ever made with Mindy Laurelton. Leave nothing out. I need the whole sordid truth."

"There's no sordid truth to tell more than I didn't do it." Michael's voice was firm but his eyes pleaded with Keith's. "You've got to believe me. I know how it looks, but I'm innocent."

For the first time since he entered, Keith saw humanity in his brother's demeanor. Underneath that tough guy cloak was a scared man, afraid of losing it all.

“I believe you. Tell me everything that happened,” Keith repeated.

Michael exhaled. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“How about you start with Mindy and the emails? Start by telling me why you made it very clear in your note that you had no problem taking her by force.”

Chapter Three

“That man is infuriating!” Verona plopped her purse on the couch. She yanked her teal blouse out of her white pencil skirt. In her haste, she twisted her ankle, almost breaking her five-inched red bottoms. “Awww!” she screamed.

“Michael Ward’s going to pay for these Louboutins.” She snatched the offensive shoe and its partner off her feet, and tossed them across the floor.

Her cell buzzed. She groaned..She ought to let it go to voicemail, she thought, while digging inside her bag. She didn’t feel like talking to anyone.

Nigel Lattimore’s face filled her screen and she swiped the answer button. “What’d you want?” she hurled.

“I hear you’ll be working with my former client,” he drawled. It irked her that her rudeness hadn’t affected him.

Verona rolled her eyes and sought to bring her temper under check. “And what of it?”

“Didn’t you tell me that you were quitting Ward Enterprises? So, what gives?”

“Nigel, I don’t have time for you,” Verona screamed. “And, I certainly don’t owe you any explanations! Why are you calling anyway? I only answered because I knew you’d keep calling until I picked up. Annoying!”

She was trying to start an argument. Again, he didn’t take the bait. “To offer my services as I know this isn’t your specialty. I told you we should start our own firm.”

“As if...” Verona heaved a long sigh. She heard his chuckle on the other end and cursed herself for allowing Nigel to get to her. He needled her on purpose, and when it

came to him, she was an easy target. “I don’t need your help. Besides, I wouldn’t open a firm with you no matter how you plead. You don’t have the capital,” she bragged.

“Not everyone can be as lucky as you were to score such a cushy retainer.”

She grinned at his sour tone, and served a jab of her own. “How’s Rupert?”

“His name is Raymond. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

She snickered; pleased she’d gotten under his skin. Nigel was a preacher’s kid, hailing from Tampa, Florida. He’d moved to New York, away from his father’s prying eyes, to live with his life partner. No one knew. Except for her. She’d found out by accident when they were back in Stanford.

She and Nigel had dated for a year and a half. He was the perfect gentleman, saying he didn’t believe in sex before marriage. Verona had been charmed by his old-fashioned ways until she caught him with his pants down.

Needless to say they were through after that.

He turned the tables on her. “Does Michael know you’re in love with him? Have you confessed your true feelings, yet?”

In a swift move, Verona cut the line. *Take that, you creep.* One lonely night at the bar they’d ran into each other and she’d blabbed. Big mistake.

Her cell buzzed. This time she saw Michael’s face. She grabbed the phone. “I made it clear I wasn’t going to continue on your case. I did specialize in criminal law but ... it wasn’t for me.”

“For what I’m paying you, I own you.”

Verona snarled at his superiority. “Listen, you might sign my checks, but you don’t own me. No one owns me. The fact that you’d fix your mouth to say something like

that is offensive.” She paused for a second. “Is this what you do to women? Treat them like your property? No wonder you have a rape charge.” Verona sucked in her breath and covered her mouth. Had she just said those words to her boss? “Michael, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.”

He wasn’t even rattled by her accusation. “Why are you so angry? So many attorneys would jump at the chance to work with the legendary Keith Ward.”

Because I’m in love with you. Because I can’t watch you lose this case. “Because you need the best and it’s not like you can’t afford it. I’ll be more than happy to write a check on your behalf.”

“Verona, quit being modest. It doesn’t suit you. You’re ruthless, you’re vicious, and you know the law.”

There was a time when his words would’ve been enough for her. But words weren’t a warm blanket at night. She was ready to fall in love and settle down. She wanted the babies, the pacifiers, the ... everything.

“You’re right. I am the best. But, there’s more to me. I’m more than all that.” *I’m also a woman. Why doesn’t he see me?* Every day men hollered at her about her translucent brown eyes, her golden bronze hair, her body, her style—but not Michael Ward. He remained impervious, seeing her as one of the boys.

He continued the conversation, clueless about her inner thoughts. “Yes, I forgot to mention your culinary skills. Is there anything you don’t do well, Verona?”

Yes, there was. She changed the subject. “Fine. You win. As usual. I’ll consult with Keith, tomorrow.” Verona let out a yawn on purpose. She wasn’t tired, but she wanted to get him off the phone.

“You’d better not be yawning, tomorrow,” Michael warned. “I need you here on your A game. Equipped with boxing gloves.”

“Wait!”

“Yes?”

Verona bit her lip. There was something she really needed to ask. She took a deep breath. “Were you in love with Mindy?”

“What?”

His voice rose an octave.

“As your attorney, I need to know.” She lied. The woman in her needed the truth.

“No,” he sputtered through the line. “Where’s your good sense? Mindy’s a kid for crying out loud. What do I look like? A pedophile?”

Verona’s heart sang. “I had to ask,” she breathed.

“I like my privacy,” she heard him mumble through the line. “I guess my life will now be up for public debate and scrutiny. If you must know, there’s only woman for me.”

“Gina?” Her heart pounded as she anticipated his response.

“No, Gina is history. It’s Lauren. Or did you forget about her?”

How could she? He mentioned Lauren Goodman at least twice a week. Lauren had been the reporter who helped him ‘out’ Keith as the real father of Gina’s two children on national television. During that time, he and Lauren had a brief tryst.

“She’s dead,” Verona pointed out. “Why are you harping on a ghost?”

She heard his sharp intake and could’ve bitten her tongue at her insensitivity.

“I don’t care what the obituary says. Lauren is very much alive and I won’t rest until I find her.”

Verona heard the steel in Michael's voice. She repeated with sympathy, "She's gone, Michael. You have to accept that. I showed you the death notice myself."

Lauren had been killed instantly in a bad car wreck in Alabama. The car caught fire upon impact. According to the report, Lauren suffered serious burns. Her mother, alive at the time but now deceased, decided to cremate her daughter's ashes.

"Never! I don't believe one word written on that paper." He disconnected the call.

"She's gone." Verona whispered. "Why can't you accept that?" She clenched her fists. "But, I'm here. I'm here."