

### Chapter 3: Tabby

I wasn't the best mother; I'll give you that. I mean, it's not as if I could get away with lying about it. I don't know how long the state of Florida keeps records, but I know for a good many years they had stacks and stacks of files on me, so many they had to wheel them into court on a dolly.

I hadn't set out to be a bad mother. Hell, I hadn't set out to be a mother at all. No, what I'd set out to do was get high. Cocaine was my drug of choice in those days, blow, we called it, and it was everywhere, coming in through the southern tip of the peninsula and winding through a network of buyers and sellers until it made its way to me. Or, more accurately, to Vernon Clark, who was only too happy to share. That sorry bastard has—*bad*, I suppose I should say, given the morning news—no end of ways to try to wreck my sorry life.

Let me tell you, one sure-fire way to catch the attention of Florida authorities is to show up at the hospital half dead of an overdose and fourteen weeks pregnant with twins. Even more shocking than waking up in a hospital bed was the barrage of angry questions from the doctor.

“When was your last period?”

“What?”

“Your period. When did you last have it?”

I blinked up at him, trying to figure out where I was and who he was. Why was this angry man asking me about my period, and what business was it of his? Besides, I had no idea what the answer might be. It could have been days, weeks, or months. Hell, for all I knew, I was on it at that moment. My days weren't cut up into the usual twenty-four hour stretches of time.

Vernon and I existed in a haze, either using blow or scheming ways to get it. During our most desperate times we'd set up along the off ramps from I-4, holding up signs saying *Homeless and Hungry* or some such thing. It wasn't a lie, exactly. We *were* homeless and hungry, wandering from binge to binge, crashing on floors and couches in the nastiest of places, sometimes hiding under bushes and park benches when that was the only option. But we didn't want the money for food, no siree; we needed it to avoid the comedown. An addict will do just about anything to dodge the crash.

Besides, we were used to being homeless. By the time I was put out on the street at eighteen I'd spent time in nine different foster homes and done a stint at the Baptist Children's Home, which is where I met Vernon. Maybe it was inevitable that in the early hours of that dark March morning, I'd once again caught the attention of the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services, only this time from the opposite end. I'd gone from victim to perpetrator, abused to abuser.

“You’re pregnant,” the doctor enunciated, the syllables harsh and exaggerated. “I’ll ask you one more time. When was your last period?”

I shook my head and shrugged, not meaning to be disrespectful, but too ashamed to admit I’d had no inkling, no awareness of physical changes, no memory of ... well, of much of anything for quite a stretch of time.

The look of disgust on the doctor’s face was unmistakable, but to his credit all he said was, “We’ll need an ultrasound,” before turning to bark orders at someone outside my line of vision.

The next few hours were a blur, but two phrases ring clear as a bell through my memory: *there are two of them*, and *call the Department*. It took a minute for the *there are two of them* part to sink in, but the *call the Department* one took hold immediately.

I was a young, lost, foolish junkie, a bag bitch, as Vernon called me whenever I rejected his advances. But one thing I did know, maybe the only thing I knew, was that I did not want my babies taken care of by the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services. I knew an argument could be made that they’d saved me from a childhood of abuse and neglect, but there are different degrees to the word *saved*. If you’ve ever been caught up in the system, you’ll know what I mean.

I vowed then and there no matter what it took or how painful it got, I’d get clean. And I’m proud to say, even with Vernon’s constant badgering and temptations, even with social workers all around me watching my every move, even with the paralyzing fear of prenatal damage hanging over me, I was clean when I delivered my beautiful boys.

Now, the years afterward ... well, that’s a different story.