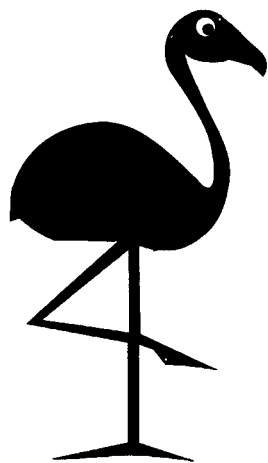


*Fancy
White Trash*



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Viking

Chapter 1

There are five rules for falling in love. I figured them out from watching my sisters and a lot of daytime television. There's wisdom in soap operas, especially the ones that have been around longer than most of us have been alive. I've paid attention, taken notes, and pooled all this accumulated knowledge into what I like to call my One True Love Plan.

Don't laugh. Believe me, if you'd watched two older, boy-crazy sisters totally bungle their love lives, you'd have a plan, too. If your mom divorced your dad then married him again, then left him again, and then married your sister's guitar instructor, you'd be extra careful about commitments. If your eighteen-year-old sister, only three years older than you, was pregnant with your oldest sister's ex-boyfriend's baby, you'd be saving it for Mr. Right. And you'd know that Mr. Right had not already dated one of your sisters.

That's why Rule #1 is Find Someone New. But at Union High, it is impossible to Find Someone New. We have all been together since our moms gave birth to us at the Cottonwood Medical Center. Because back then, there was only one hospital

in Cottonwood, Arizona, like there was only one elementary school, one middle school, one movie theater . . . you get the picture.

By ninth grade, everyone had already dated everyone else—or if they hadn't, there was a real good reason. Like Carolyn Schmitz's weird, drooly laugh or Lucas Fielding's lazy eye. Or like me, who was Not Into Boys after seeing exactly what giving birth looks like, thanks to my oldest sister's insistence that we all be present for the "miracle" of her daughter Hannah's delivery.

My sisters also went to Union High, but although they're both past their eighteenth birthdays now, they did not go to any of the best colleges. Or any college, for that matter. Shelby, the oldest at twenty-one and Hannah's mom, got married the week after graduation and divorced by that Christmas. Superpregnant Kaitlyn is a senior, again. Me, I'm cruising into sophomore year with my academic butt covered and my One True Love Plan waiting to be deployed.

That's a lot of people in not a lot of living space. Mom keeps saying we're moving to one of those big mansions in Scottsdale, but I'm not too worried about being forced to relocate. Although her new hubby is supposed to help with expenses, she still can barely pay the mortgage on our fake adobe five-girl, one-guy, one-bathroom house.

"Abby, phone!" Kait yells, even though she is in the same room, our room, and can see perfectly well that I'm right here. Eight months of pregnancy have not improved her personality, but she must be in a good mood because usually she hangs up on whoever asks for me.

I dog-ear the page I'm reading in *Soap Digest* and lunge for the phone which is, as always, on Kait's side of the room. Kait's idea of decorating is to bring home old movie posters from Blockbuster, where she works, which wouldn't be so bad if she had decent taste in movies. But no, she's got a thing for romantic comedies, especially old ones, so our room is an homage to Meg Ryan and Drew Barrymore. Hello, *You've Got Mail* and *Home Fries*. Kindly stay on your side of the room.

I grab the phone from Kait and flop back on my twin bed. The metal frame screeches in protest.

"Abigail Elizabeth Savage, we still on for our back-to-school shopping extravaganza tomorrow?" It's Cody Jennings, my next-door neighbor, who likes to stress the importance of something by using my full name.

Before you get your hopes up, let me tell you that this is not one of those situations where the girl goes out with the empty-headed jock only to realize that her soul mate was living next door to her all along. Cody is gay. He hasn't told me—or anyone—yet, but I know. When you've been best friends with a guy your whole life, it's pretty easy to figure out.

"Of course we're still on. Did you think I'd forget in the less than"—I check my *Little Mermaid* alarm clock for the time—"two hours since we talked about it? It's not like I have amnesia." Amnesia is a popular disease on daytime television. Everyone gets it at least once in their lives.

"First thing in the morning, right? Because you know I like to be there when the stores open."

"A.M. is no problem for me. The baby starts screaming early."

"Do not bring the baby," Cody says.

He isn't being paranoid. Shelby has dumped the baby on us many times. That is why Rule #2 is No Baggage from Past Relationships Allowed, and that definitely includes kids. It also includes psycho exes (Shelby has two) and pets. Kait's first boyfriend's snake is still living in our house—literally. Sometimes I think I hear it in the walls.

"Don't worry. I'm not babysitting tomorrow." The baby, three-year-old Hannah, is really not so bad, but she's not my kid—a concept Shelby has difficulty grasping.

"You're so good with her," Shelby always cajoles, which is actually her way of saying that she has a date that night. Shelby takes after our mom, who is, if not movie-star gorgeous, more beautiful than most women, with her shiny black hair and unusually light blue eyes. I have the same coloring but whack my hair off in uneven layers so I won't be mistaken for one of "those Savage girls."

"Hello?" Cody is impatient, which means I have spaced out. Thinking about my slutty sisters always sidetracks me. "I asked who's driving us."

This part he will not like. "My mom."

I can actually hear his teeth grinding through the phone. "You can't get anyone else?"

"What do you think? If you would hurry up and turn sixteen, we wouldn't have to risk our lives this way." Cody is three months older than I am, so he'll get his license before me, and also a car. I will not be getting a car.

"I'm working on it. You think I'm not dreaming about the day we can hop in my convertible and hit the mall whenever

we want?" Cody has been lobbying hard for the new Sebring but will be happy if he scores a used one. If not that, I'm pretty sure anything with wheels will do.

"What should I wear?" I ask him, not because he's gay, but because he's obsessive. Anal. Practically OCD. Which means he has strong opinions about how *everything* should be just so, especially when it comes to appearance. Nothing upsets him more than an outfit gone wrong. That's why it's easier for me to ask his opinion beforehand than to have to change everything once he sees me.

"You should wear the red tank so the bloodstains won't be as noticeable when the paramedics pry our dead bodies out of the remains of your mom's latest traffic accident." Car accidents are very popular on soap operas. They're also quite common in my family, at least when my mom is driving.

I think she has some kind of spatial-distortion/color-blindness learning disability, but she won't admit it. The whole town knows my mom's red "vintage" Mercedes sedan with the duct-taped plastic passenger-side window. No one parks next to her in the parking lots; no one demands right-of-way at four-way stops.

I hear the Mercedes pull into the drive. It's not sounding too good, like maybe it has pneumonia. *Hhhfft, hhhfft*. Doesn't bode well for our shopping trip tomorrow. Every part on that car costs \$500 to replace, so a lot of repairs get postponed. Or overlooked altogether. When the rear bumper fell off, Mom said, "I think the car looks better without that thing anyway." It's got to be the white-trashiest Mercedes-Benz in the world.

"Bad news," I say into the phone, about to warn Cody that

our trip may be off due to chronic car disease, but I'm interrupted when the front door slams against the wall. Uh-oh, dramatic entrance. Something's definitely up.

"Everyone!" my mom shrills at the top of her lungs. The Guitar Player comes running. Kait lurches to her feet, easily distracted from painting her fingernails *Totally Tangerine*, a completely hideous color if you ask me—which no one has, so I don't point out how it makes her fingers look stubby. I stay stretched out on my bed and contemplate the many hairstyles of Meg and Drew.

I hear whooping and what sounds like the Guitar Player jumping up and down on the wood floors in his motorcycle boots. He has a name, but to me he'll always be the Guitar Player, just like Dad will always be Dad.

"Pregnant?" Shelby shrieks. She's been living with us since the divorce. Which was three years ago. Some people should get their own lives, not hang around hogging all the bathroom time.

"Pregnant?" Cody echoes on the phone. "Who, Shelby?" Whether he's heard it through the phone or through the window, it's hard to tell.

"Gotta go." I hoist myself upright. "I'll call you back with the pedigree, but I think it's my mom."

"Your mom? I can't—" I hang up on him. I can't believe it, either. Didn't she get her tubes tied? Who has four kids nowadays? Who has their fourth kid fifteen years after the third?

Everyone is crammed into the kitchen when I get there. Although Kait shares our dark hair, she always looks the odd one out, taking after our dad with her brown eyes and stockier

body. She's the shortest, too, and since she's not the youngest, that infuriates her. Of course, her pregnancy hormones make it so she is always furious lately. Or crying. It's difficult to predict which way she'll go—throwing stuff or sobbing—so I mostly try to stay out of her way.

Kait sits at our big kitchen table with the cherries-in-a-bowl-patterned plastic tablecloth—easier than fabric for wiping up all of Hannah's spills—with her head in her hands. She's biting her lip so hard, I'm afraid it might bleed. Mom and the Guitar Player are also at the table, with Hannah playing on the floor at their feet. Shelby stands apart, in front of the stainless-steel sink, with the bright sun from the window backlighting her dramatically and bringing out the cinnamon highlights she recently added to her hair.

I fold my own long body into one of the kitchen chairs. It is older than I am and creaks under my weight. I make a mental note to remember to Super Glue the crossbars back in place. You'd think the Guitar Player, as the official and only man of the house for two months now, would be in charge of the manly chores like taking out the trash and Super Gluing things together. But apparently he's too busy getting my mom pregnant.

"It's too early to tell"—my mom pats her flat belly—"but I just know it's a boy." That's what she said about me and Hannah, too. I bet she pops out another girl. We already know Kait's baby is a girl. Our family should buy stock in Always brand products.

"When?" I ask the only sensible question while Shelby brings up whether Connor or Dylan is a better name for a boy.

It's not like I'm suspicious or anything, but Mom's figure is as slim as ever.

Kait lumbers to her feet, one hand under her tremendous belly, the other on the small of her back. "I'll be in my room," she says so softly I almost don't hear. Her lip is bleeding. She wipes at it with a fist and, eyes down, leaves the room.

"He may be a Valentine baby!" Mom announces once Kait is out of the kitchen, showing her usual amount of sensitivity—zero. She actually dances with excitement, a little two-steppy bounce that calls attention to the way her breasts fill out her tube top.

Math isn't my best subject, but even I can count backwards from nine. Mom must've conceived in May—the same month she and the Guitar Player tied the knot—making her almost three months pregnant now.

The Guitar Player looks pleased. So does Mom. She has no shame, marrying a guy half her age (that would be Shelby's age) and proceeding to get knocked up right away. Although, I hate to admit, soap operas also favor pregnancies as a way of cementing new relationships. I should've expected this, but I didn't.

I ask the next logistics question. "Where will we put the new baby?" We are already packed to the rafters when it comes to room occupancy. I can't imagine where another crib and all the other baby stuff can possibly fit.

"He'll be in our room, of course," Mom says, like that's the end of it. Like the baby won't grow up and need a toddler bed, then a regular bed, closet space, or time in the bathroom.

"I'll need to clear out a few things first, but I'm sure it'll work out. We'll get some of those walkie-talkie things so we can hear when he wakes up no matter where we are in the house. What're they called?"

"Baby monitors," Shelby supplies. She should know, since it was Mom who said we didn't have money for such high-tech gadgets when Hannah was born. Guess things'll be different with this baby. *His* baby. I glare in the general direction of the Guitar Player. Why doesn't he bring up something practical, like getting a combo dresser/changing table, instead of standing there with that stupid grin on his face?

Mom tilts her head and smiles. "Oh, I'm so excited. Let's go to Target right now! Abs, have you seen my keys?"

Like I'm the keeper of lost things. Except, I do know where they are. Instead of telling her, I say, "Do you really think you should be driving in your condition? Isn't it a little dangerous, considering . . ." I trail off, because everyone knows what I mean.

She starts to protest, but the Guitar Player agrees with me for once.

"Maybe you should take it easy for a while," he says.

"Steve, please, I drove with all my other pregnancies." Steve is the Guitar Player's real name.

"Not with my baby," he says, and Mom gives him a sharp look. A look I know well. The honeymoon is over. Even though they didn't go anywhere after their quickie marriage last May, they did enjoy a little over two months of disgusting togetherness.

The Guitar Player cradles her hand in his. He doesn't know it's over. "Come on, honey, I'll be your chauffeur. Won't that be fancy?"

Fancy White Trash, that's us all right.

"What about the mall tomorrow? You gonna drive then, too?" I look over the Guitar Player's shoulder. I never address him directly.

"Sure, Mona and I will need to pick up some other things for the baby. Right, honey?"

I want to point out that we have three tons of baby crap stored in the garage, but then I realize Kait's baby will need that stuff. We don't have two of everything.

I smile brightly and say, "Good point!"

Mom chews her lip and I say how Cody's coming, too. We all look at Shelby, who has been quiet—too quiet—through this whole conversation.

Once all eyes are on her, she flips back her waist-length hair and rubs her own stomach. "I was waiting until I was sure, but . . ." She looks at us expectantly.

She has got to be kidding. Mom shoots me a look, and I realize I've groaned out loud.

Shelby bursts into tears. "You always think the worst of me, Abby."

"Who's the dad?" I ask the question on everyone's mind.

Shelby's eyes dart toward the Guitar Player and away. Mom gasps.

"No, no!" Shelby puts a protective hand over her stomach.

But I saw the Guitar Player pale, and I know it wasn't that long ago that he and Shelby were doing it. Oh God, can

it be true? Would it take Shelby four months to notice she's pregnant?

Mom turns to the Guitar Player. "Steve?" Her face looks like it will collapse any minute.

"Let's have a pig roast!" the Guitar Player yells too loudly, fiddling nervously with one of the fake diamond studs in his ear. "What a lot to celebrate!" He spent his formative years in Miami, where, apparently, it's just not a celebration without a dead pig. He digs into his jeans for the keys. "Tonight! Everyone call somebody to come over. I'll be back with supplies in no time."

I don't know where he finds whole dead pigs in this town. I do know Cody is going to die when I tell him. Three babies on the way, all with the same dad. Obviously, no one in my family has contemplated the wisdom of Rule #1, Find Someone New, because they're all on the recycling program.

That's right, the Guitar Player "dated" Kait for about two weeks before he dumped her for Shelby. Since his idea of dating has less to do with romantic dinners and getaways to the river and more to do with getting the women in my family naked, it's not too surprising someone turned up pregnant. But three? Could my family be more embarrassing?