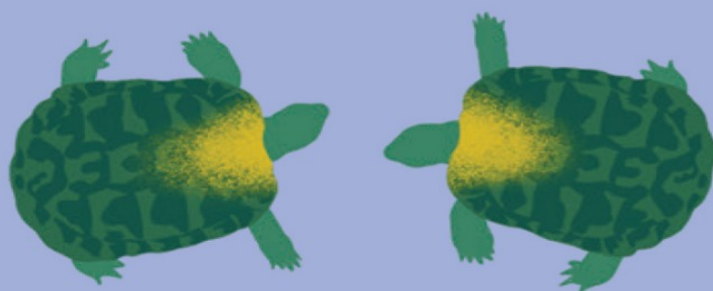


"Second First Impressions is the warmest, coziest, sweetest book of the year."

— EMILY HENRY, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Beach Read*



SECOND FIRST IMPRESSIONS

*a
novel*



SALLY THORNE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HATING GAME AND *99 PERCENT MINE*

SECOND FIRST IMPRESSIONS

*a
novel*

SALLY THORNE

wm

WILLIAM MORROW

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Dedication

For Taylor Haggerty

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Chapter One

One of the “benefits” of working in the front office of Providence Retirement Villa is I receive feedback on every aspect of my lifestyle and appearance, whether I want it or not. (I do not.) Here are the three questions the residents always have for me:

- How old are you? (Twenty-five)
- Do you have a boyfriend? (No)
- Why not? (Miscellaneous reasons, none of which will satisfy them)

“There’s more to life than having a boyfriend,” I once told Mrs. Whittaker as we walked up the rain-slicked front path to her town house, her arm hooked into mine. “I’m right where I want to be, helping you all.”

“That’s true, Ruthie, honey. You’re a good worker,” she replied to me. “But boyfriends are a very nice part of life. I once had three at the same time.” She shuffled inside, her walking stick clicking on the tiles. Just as I was thinking I’d misunderstood, she said over her shoulder, “They knew each other, so it wasn’t awkward. Boy oh boy, I was exhausted. You’re prettier than I was, why don’t you try doing that?”

I was left on the doorstep, fighting the urge to ask some follow-up questions, primarily:

- How?

It's likely Mrs. Whittaker could still get more action than me, and she's eighty-seven. I think about that conversation a lot.

While my boss, Sylvia, is on her cruise, I get her desk with the good view. I'm emailing maintenance, and I'm also grappling with my daily three P.M. wave of melancholy. I save a yogurt for this exact moment. Sitting at my usual desk is Melanie Sasaki, the temp. She doesn't understand the concept of pacing oneself, so she eats her lunch at 10:30 A.M. I can hear her stomach growling as I peel open my snack.

In a desperate outburst in the silence, she says, "Ruthie, I was thinking about you."

I wish she wouldn't. "Let me just finish this email to maintenance, then we can talk."

I know I sound like a prissy jerk, but to survive these next two months as acting office manager, I've been trying to enforce a quiet-time policy. When Sylvia is here, I never speak to her if she's typing. Or clicking. Or unless she speaks to me first.

Hey. I haven't been this relaxed in years.

Melanie would probably talk while under a general anesthetic. "Let's make you a dating profile."

I break my own silence rule. "How do you know I don't have one?" She's teasing me, I know it. The residents of Providence are, generally speaking, brutally honest with me. But it's always well intentioned.

She says, "You don't even have an Instagram account, so you're not exactly the type to put yourself out there. Am I wrong?"

She's not. "Let me just finish this, Mel." Quiet Time Shields Up.

I reword my request to maintenance from a *where the hell are you guys* to a more diplomatic *as per my last email*. There's only so much DIY I can learn from YouTube.

When that's sent, I find a Word document titled "RUTHIE_PROFILE" in my personal folder. According to the file history, it hasn't been accessed since I wrote it in a weird lonely moment last year, when online dating felt

like a good idea for about thirty seconds. Maybe it's not that bad? A workable base draft for a dating profile that will find me my Mr. Right? If Melanie wasn't staring at me, I'd read it through my fingers.

Can I Take You Home to My Churchy Parents?

I'm a very old soul (24 going on 124). I've only seen one penis firsthand (briefly) and was not impressed enough to seek out another (probably should, though). Seeking patient, safe cuddle-bug soul mate to tell me when my cardigan is buttoned crooked. I live and work in a retirement villa. At this rate I'll retire here, too.

Okay, so the only update to this I'd make is I'm now twenty-five going on a hundred and twenty-five.

Like she's my impatient supervisor, Melanie asks: "Are you done now?"

After deleting that incriminating evidence, I counter with, "How's that new resident profile you're setting up for me in the system?"

Melanie purses her lips like, *Spoilsport*. "I don't know why you wouldn't want to utilize my true talent. The one I can't put on my résumé." She pauses for dramatic effect. "Getting peeps all loved up. If you only knew who you had here sitting across from you, you'd be jumping on this chance."

When someone is that confident in themselves, it does make the offer tempting. "Well, you do have a lot of things on your résumé."

Melanie stretches her arms above her head. "You know I'm livin' dat temp life. I'm dating all the jobs, until I find my perfect match. And I'm dating all the boys, too. Answer this quick without thinking: Are you ready to be in love?"

"Yes." I don't have enough strength to hold that word in, and it's humiliating how much force my answer had.

Every night as part of my security rounds, I walk to the western edge of Providence to check that the roller door securing the dumpsters is padlocked. I know that no one wants to steal garbage. I lean on the chain-

link fence and stare at the town lights below. The knowledge that my cuddle-bug soul mate might be just there under that particular streetlight star, but I'm too chicken to go find him, makes my heart feel like a toothache. If I don't attend to it soon, it may have to be pulled out altogether.

Every night when I check the padlock, I look at the lights and apologize to him again.

Melanie is looking at me with such naked empathy in her expression that I scramble to try to cover up how much that word *yes* means. "I mean, everyone hopes they find—"

"Shush, shush, shush," she repeats until my face-saving caveats fade away. "Don't worry. I'll help you."

In the three weeks that she's been here, Mel's had at least four first dates, all at a tapas bar she calls "the Thunderdome." Before each one, she puts in an excessively long black ponytail extension and makes me check it from all angles. She also writes down the details of each date, "in case I'm murdered." She trusts me to be her police witness? I'm conflicted about how honored I am.

I recheck the calendar. She really has only been here three weeks. Maybe I should take the opportunity to consult with this seasoned professional. She's like an electrician for my love life. "Well, what's your dating profile say?"

Her phone is always in her hand. She can open the app without having to glance down. "Mine says: 'High-maintenance twenty-two-year-old half-Japanese princess who makes no apologies. Take me on adventures. No weirdos, little dicks, broke dudes, or fugs.'"

I can't categorically say any of those would be a deal breaker for me. "What if your soul mate is one of those things? A . . . broke weirdo, or . . ." I study the banana and the ChapStick on my desk. The world is full of a lot of variables. My neck is getting sweaty under my ponytail.

Melanie shakes her head. "He won't be. You believe in soul mates? I wouldn't have picked that." She studies me with an *Aaww* expression. "You secret l'il romantic you."

“You don’t need to help me, I’ll work it out myself.” I try to backpedal but it’s too late—she’s taken the case pro bono.

Melanie turns to a fresh page in her sparkly notebook. “Name: Do you prefer Ruth or Ruthie Midona?”

“Ruthie’s fine.” Less rhymes with it. The teachers used me as their airplane black box if they left the room and came back to chaos, hence my school nickname *Truthful Ruth*. I was the church girl with thrift store shoes; my classmates had ponies and Jet Skis.

Melanie is also distracted. “Oh, got a message. I’d give that a four out of ten. See? A dick.” She holds up the screen to me; it is indeed a dick. I need a banana or ChapStick for scale. She smirks as she prepares a response. “I always reply with a photo of a zebra’s dick. Gives them some perspective.” She shows me that too.

What human dick would get a ten out of ten? It dawns on me that this is the first page of a lawsuit. Dicks in the workplace: Sylvia would be furious. “We should do some work. I really don’t have time to date.” I file some paperwork under *B* for *Boring*.

“You’ve definitely got the time, let’s be real. How have you worked here for sixteen years?”

“How old do you think I am?” I see her eyes lower to my clothes. “Mel, I’ve worked here for six years. Not sixteen.”

“My contract goes until Christmas and that’s an eternity, no offense.” There’s complete desolation in her tone.

The only reply I can give to that is, “I’ve got a spare yogurt if you want it.”

“God, yes, please.” We find the strength to carry on.

“I’m twenty-five,” I say, feeling weirdly embarrassed by the fact.

“Twenty-five” she says in a marveling tone as she writes it down. “Only three years older than me, how’s that possible? But you have great skin,” she amends, realizing how that sounded. “You’re just so grown-up, running this place. That’s all I mean.”

I’ll follow her suggested profile format. “Low-maintenance twenty-five-year-old peasant who makes a lot of apologies.”

She snorts in amusement and taps her pen. Her dark eyes assessing me critically, she asks, “How do you know that you’re low maintenance?”

“Look at me.”

“It’s not just about looks.” Melanie is charitable. I’m okay-looking but I’m not fancy. “Do you like the guy to be all over you? Texting you all the time, taking you out places, giving you presents? Do you want him obsessed with you, or someone who gives you space?” She thinks of something. “Oh, whoops. If you’re not into guys, that’s cool too.”

“I’m really not sure.” I watch her blink several times and clarify, “I like guys. But I don’t know if I want him all over me.”

(Liar. I’d love that.)

(I think.)

“What was your last boyfriend like?”

“He was . . .” I can’t think of anything except *very religious*. I make a praying shape with my hands and hope that’s enough. “A long time ago.”

She narrows one eye. “How long ago, exactly?”

I cannot answer that without opening myself up for a total crucifixion. “Quite a while ago.”

If this were a teen movie, they’d intercut a couple of scenes here: Me in a prom dress slow-dancing with a Devout Young Man, literally named Adam. Cut to us in a single bed, partially naked. Adam is facing away from me, his shoulders shaking with sobs. If you think that memory can’t get any worse, what if I told you that:

- My dad is a reverend?
- Adam went to my dad for counseling the next morning?
- Counseling re: the sin he committed with me?
- Yeah.

My counseling was outsourced to Mom and she told me that Dad was “deeply disappointed” by my “choices.” Apparently, he was so disappointed

that we haven't had a proper talk since, and I've never made a bad choice again.

"Looking to jump back into the dating scene." Melanie writes that down. "I've written all my friends' dating profiles, and for my older sister Genevieve. My bridesmaid's dress is this pistachio color. That's the thanks I get."

An engaged sister? Melanie has some heavy-duty credentials. But this feels like the start of another teen movie and I have no intention of starring in it. "Please don't actually post anything without my permission."

"I won't," she replies, so puzzled by my suspicion that I'm ashamed. "We'll create a schedule of homework activities starting out very easy, until you're down at the Thunderdome getting your neck kissed by some sexy guy. We won't just pick the first one who comes along. By the time I leave here, you'll have someone."

I gape at her. "That is literally impossible."

"Not when you follow the Melanie Sasaki Method." She writes that down and underlines it many times. "The Sasaki Method. How catchy. That sounds just like a self-help book. That sounds like a Netflix series." She's sold the rights within ten seconds of having the idea.

She's not the only one jumping way ahead; I'm still caught up on the sexy-guy-neck-kissing concept. By the time she's worked her magic and left, I'll be watching the Christmas special of my favorite TV show, *Heaven Sent*, on my couch with someone who wants to kiss me. Is it actually impossible?

"So you in? The Sasaki Method?" Melanie grins widely. "It'll be a lot of fun."

I'm a sleep-on-it person. "Can I think about it?"

"I want a reply by Friday, close of business." Today is Monday.

She turns to her computer and begins typing. Just as I think a miracle has occurred—she's doing some work—my computer chimes with a meeting request for Friday five P.M. Subject? The Sasaki Method, of course. I click accept, and just like that, the conversation is not over, just rescheduled.

Chapter Two

After our yogurts, Melanie begins setting up the new resident profile in the system, but now that she's working, I kind of wish we were still chatting. It's a beautiful afternoon. Through the open office door, I can see the neat path leading to the residents' accommodations. There's perfect hedges, emerald grass, and a tiny sliver of blue sky. "I like Sylvia's view from this chair."

Melanie replies, still typing, "Are you angling to get her job?"

I nod. "If nothing disastrous happens, she says she can retire with confidence." I think she means, she'll retire before things get serious.

Prescott Development Corporation (PDC) acquired Providence eighteen months ago. They have a reputation for giving their acquisitions a glamorous, repurposing makeover. Would Providence become a wellness center? A boutique hotel? A set for a reality TV show? Time passed and nothing happened. There was no visit, no call, no bulldozers, but eventually a decree was issued on PDC letterhead: All tenancy agreements have been altered to have the same end date of December 31 next year.

"That's fine," Mrs. Whittaker (she of the legendary three boyfriends) told me when I dropped off the paperwork explaining the tenancy amendment. "I'll be dead by then, honey. Got a pen?" The attitude of residents has either been cheerful don't-careness or gossipy conspiracy theories. The calls from their families were stressed-out questions we still can't answer. By next Christmas we could be packing up this office.

We keep trying to impress PDC with the perfect investment they've made, by sending through regular financial reports and cute newspaper clippings about our contributions to the community. But our corporate daddy's too busy to notice our A+ report cards and flawless ballet recitals. We are the forgotten achievers. And I'm really okay with that.

Melanie's head turns. "Oh, I hear a scooter. Tag, you're it."

"Part of your duties is assisting the residents. Probably your top duty."

"They're all so old with see-through skin. I can't handle it." Melanie gets up and goes into the bathroom, phone in hand. I walk outside to create a drive-through service.

A sharp voice shouts, "You'd think for the price we pay, they'd do something about the turtles." Steaming down the hill toward me are the Parlioni sisters. The older sister taking the lead is Renata. She's just turned ninety-one. I put a birthday card in her mailbox and it was returned to me, torn into pieces. It's okay—I knew she'd do that.

"Be more careful, they're endangered" is what Agatha (Aggie) replies. She is younger at eighty-nine years old and she is correct: They're endangered tortoises and they're everywhere. Providence has the highest concentration of golden bonnet tortoises of anywhere on the planet. They swerve their scooters around the slow-motion lumps dotting the path and my heart is in my throat.

Renata bellows back, "I'm the one who's endangered around here. I want to turn them into hair combs." When they reach me, they brake to a stop. Britney Spears blares from a portable radio in Aggie's front basket.

Renata was once a fashion editor. The devil wears brands you've never even heard of. YouTube has footage of a fashion show in 1991 when she called Karl Lagerfeld "Weekend at Bernie's" to his face. He called her something far worse in French, but she considers it a triumph. *He had no creative reply.*

HOT OR NOT magazine is long gone, but Renata is not exactly retired. I can pick out brand logos all over her.

Her sister, Aggie Parlioni, is my style goal. Gray suit, white blouse, and black loafers. She has fine white hair cropped close to her head and is smart, neat, and reasonable. I get along with her great. Aggie is a quiet person, but she's noisy because of her radio. The local station has a competition: Win \$10,000 if they repeat the same song in a day. Aggie doesn't need the money, or any of the random prizes she's always trying to win. It's the what-if feeling between entering and the prize draw that she is addicted to.

I ask her loudly, "Any luck?"

Aggie turns down the volume a touch and holds out some envelopes to me. They're prestamped and ready for the afternoon's mail run. They'll be twenty-five-word-or-less entries. Collect-ten-coupons. Name This Yacht for a Chance to Win. "I did have a small windfall," she says carefully, like she knows she's about to be teased.

"She won a Frisbee," Renata cackles. "Let's ask the neighbors to toss it around, shall we? Break a few hips."

The mental image almost pixelates my vision. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" The fact that their assistant isn't in tow is a very bad sign.

Renata smiles, and it's pure evil. "We need a new one."

I know exactly what she means. "What happened to Phillip?"

She ignores me and lowers her sunglasses, cooler than I'll ever be, and looks through to Melanie's vacant chair. "Where's your pretty Asian minion? Or is that not PC? Inspired by her, I ordered a lovely black wig."

"You absolutely cannot call her that." I hold eye contact until I see she understands. "But in regard to the wig, Melanie will be very flattered. She's busy checking her social media in the bathroom."

Renata's cackle always hits my bloodstream like a drug. It's the Providence equivalent of making the popular girl at school laugh. "The youth of today. On the toilet, right where they belong. I wish I'd had 'the Instagram.'"

"Is it too late for you to try it?" Aggie's a quiet instigator. Thanks a bunch. Before the day's out, I'm going to be taking street-style shots of Renata leaning against a brick wall.

Renata narrows her eyes like I'm a magazine cover and I'm Not Hot. "You're looking very old today, young woman. Where's the visor I bought you for Christmas? You are asking for LIVER SPOTS," she booms, loud enough to scare birds. "Look at my spotty OLD HANDS. This song was playing this morning," Renata says to Aggie abruptly when the radio changes tracks. "Quick, call them."

Aggie consults her notebook. "It was 'Billie Jean' at 9:09 A.M. This is 'Thriller.' Tell her what you did to Phillip."

Renata is triumphant. "I gave him the joke pair of panties and told him to iron them. Who knew such a simple request would be the last straw?"

"He just picked up his keys and walked out," Aggie says wearily. "Two and a half days. He lasted longer than most."

For entertainment, some people go on safari. Renata Parloni prefers hunting a very specific type of game. She's reloading her weapon when she says, "We haven't had a Goth boy in a while. I want one that's constantly thinking about his mortality."

I steel myself. "We had an agreement. We're putting up a sensible advertisement. I'll go get it." Imagine being able to tell Sylvia that I fixed the Parloni situation once and for all.

Renata says when I'm back with my file: "Read the old ad. I want to hear what's wrong with it."

"Position Vacant. Two ancient old women residing at Providence Retirement Villa seek male assistant for casual exploitation and good-natured humiliation."

Renata interrupts. "What's wrong with that bit?" Both sisters are jiggling slightly on their scooters now. No one could stay still to "Thriller." I'm shifting foot to foot, trying to hold the dance in.

I explain, "It's illegal to discriminate based on gender. This says only males can apply."

"I have no desire to boss around a female. Read the rest," Renata bosses me. Aggie gives me a deeply empathetic look.

I continue, “Duties include boutique shopping, fast-food fetching, and sincerely rendered flattery. Good looks a bonus—but we aren’t picky.” I appeal to Aggie. “I’m not sure that’s legal either. You can see that isn’t going to get anyone who will be any use to you. All you’ve gotten so far are—”

Renata interrupts again. “Skinny boys with skateboards and dark circles under their eyes. Useless kids who don’t know how to peel an orange or drive a stick shift.”

I pull out my draft advertisement. “Wanted: Experienced aged-care nurse to provide assistance to two active elderly women residing at Providence Retirement Villa. Domestic duties, outings, and errands. Driver’s license plus police check required.” I try not to cringe under Renata’s poisonous stare. “We had a deal.”

Aggie is on my side. “Ren, I think we need to go with this new ad. It would be nice to have someone who could actually complete tasks. Laundry. Making the bed. I am too old to live in this kind of mess because of your strange hobby.”

Renata fires up. “We agreed that when we were rich and old—”

“That was fifty-five years ago,” Aggie cuts in. “You’ve gotten your revenge on the male species. Yes, having young people around the place is enjoyable. But I have no clean clothes. I have no clean coffee mug. Let me live comfortably. My hands are no good anymore.” She has peripheral neuropathy, causing numbness in her fingers.

Renata’s expression softens. “One last boy and I’ll retire. I’d better put in a good effort to really break him in. Find him for us, Ruthie.” She adjusts her visor. “I need a strong drink. But I have no boy to make it for me. Drat.”

“Maybe we’ll win the lottery with this last boy,” Aggie says to me with not much optimism. “Got to be in it to win it, I suppose.”

“I’ll go and sort out that ad for you and take your mail. Have a lovely afternoon.” I must have a shred of optimism left in me. I nearly make it back to the door before Renata stops me.

“We need you to put gas in the car. We need snacks. And get us some dinner—Thai, but nothing spicy. No noodles or rice. No soups or coconut.

Absolutely no cilantro or mint.”

My pulse bumps at the thought of leaving the grounds this evening, but I can’t exactly leave them up the hill to starve. “I was busy tonight, but . . . okay.”

Renata snorts. “You? Busy on a Monday night? Puh-lease. Look, keep this good service up and I’ll write you into my will.” (A common tactic. Her sister and I interject with admonishments and she moves on.) “Get us some fresh flowers—some sort of elegant mix. But no lilies. You know I don’t like feeling like I’m at my own funeral.”

I know exactly what sort of flowers will get me yelled at. I turn my face to the sky and send up a request: *I can’t take much more. Please send us the One.*

Renata revs her scooter and accelerates off. “Then come up and register me for the Instagram. Then fix our DVD player.” Her voice is fading into the distance. “Then stay and watch a DVD with us. And then you can wash all of Aggie’s . . .” (inaudible).

My only plan for tonight was walking 127 steps from the office to my cottage, to have a hot bath and then watch *Heaven Sent*. But it sounds like I’m going out instead. Gas is one of the only things that can’t be delivered, unfortunately for me.

“Thank you, Ruthie,” Aggie says to me. She has been struggling to liberate her purse from her smart handbag that I secretly covet. She peels out two hundred-dollar bills from an inch-thick stack. “Is this enough? I wish we could have you as our assistant, but Sylvia would never let us. Girls like you are gold dust.”

If Sylvia gave me to the Parlonis, I’d age ten years in a week, and that would make me 135. “I’ll find someone reliable. You need someone who can run your house for you. Life will be much easier.” *For you and me.* “I hope when Sylvia comes back—”

“Don’t worry. I’ll tell her you managed the place just fine.” Aggie peels out a third note from her purse. “I apologize for Ren. Here is a thank-you