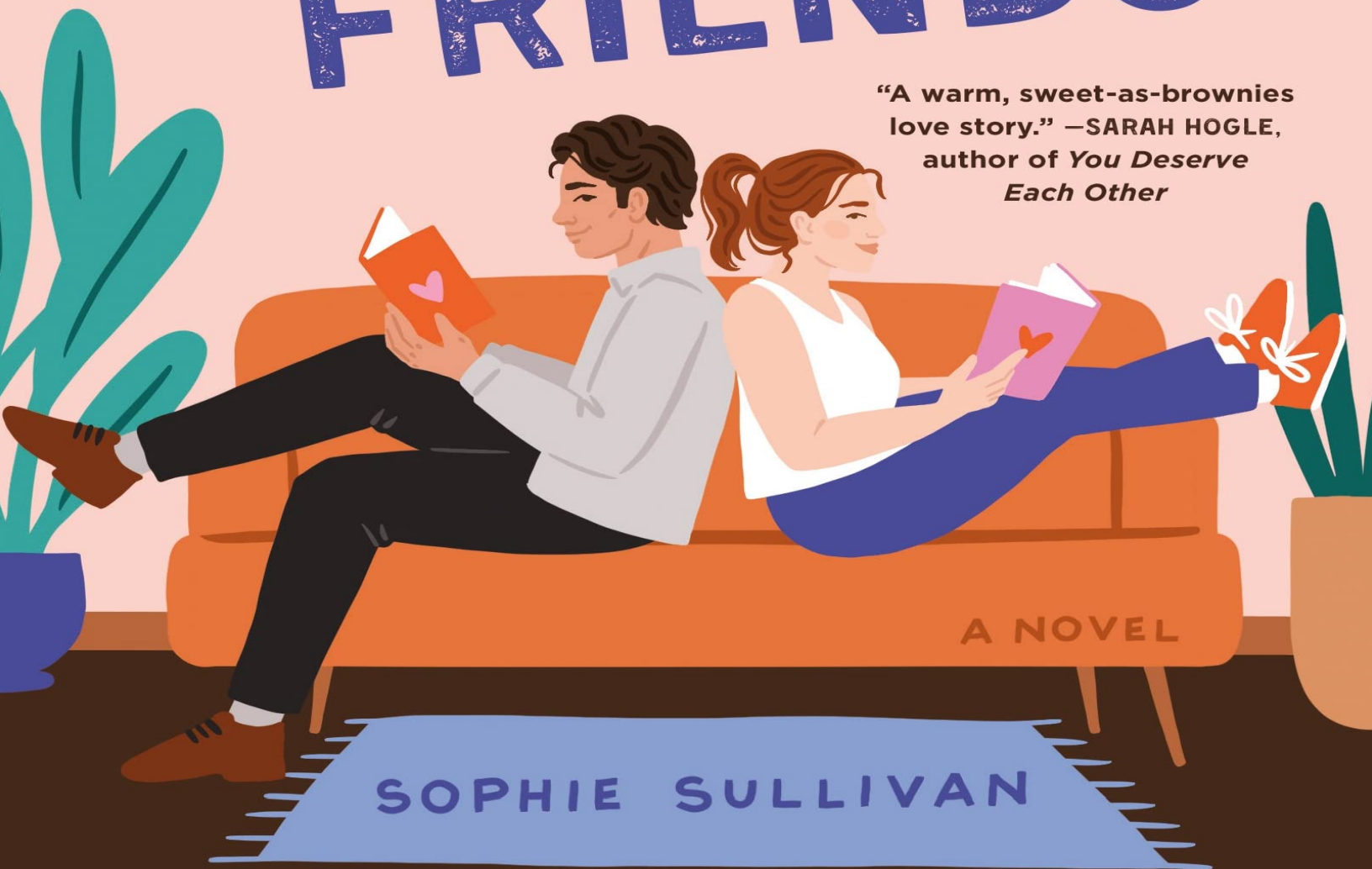


# A Guide to Being JUST FRIENDS

"A warm, sweet-as-brownies  
love story." —SARAH HOGLE,  
author of *You Deserve  
Each Other*



A  
**Guide**  
to Being Just  
**Friends**

A Novel

Sophie Sullivan



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NEW YORK

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To Kalie and Amy. You both inspire me every day to be the best version of myself.

LOVE CANNOT BE FOUND WHERE IT DOES NOT EXIST,  
NOR CAN IT BE HIDDEN WHERE IT TRULY DOES.

~William Shakespeare~

# 1

## September

Salad paid the bills. At least, it was supposed to. If it wasn't going to, Hailey Sharp needed copious amounts of chocolate. In all fairness to her very quiet, newly opened salad shop, By the Cup, she would use any excuse to feed her chocolate addiction.

Which was why she hadn't gone the bakery or chocolate shop route—she'd eat herself out of profits.

Looking around, desperate for something to do—or eat—that would take her mind off the lack of customers, she debated going next door to Baked, the coffee-shop-slash-bakery that served the most delicious brownie lava cakes.

Her Kindle was in her purse, just a few steps away, but if she went back to the book she'd been reading, she wouldn't come up for air. She was right at *that* moment when everything was about to get so good, she wouldn't be able to tear herself away.

Her stomach growled, distracting her from the temptation of her latest rom-com read. *Whip up a salad*. Her end-of-summer special was a dessert salad, which she topped with dark chocolate shavings. She wasn't in the mood though. Had she made a mistake opening this store?

*Why don't I have customers? This is California for God's sake. People love their greens and mine come in handy little to-go cups, perfect for the busy Californian.*

A few people walked past the shop window. They didn't even glance in. Maybe she should change the special. With that in mind, she grabbed a chalk marker and a cloth, heading toward the door of her supposed-to-be-thriving store. *It's been two weeks. Give it some time.*

The heat hit her like a giant blanket when she stepped out onto the sidewalk. She'd lived in California for years now, though she'd only moved to San Verde

recently, but some days the steady sunshine still surprised her. Deciding to put her San Verde Sunshine Cup—a mixture of lettuces, assorted yummy seeds, yellow tomatoes, and avocado with a homemade dressing—on sale, she added it to the board.

Then, because she was only human, she tucked the marker and cloth into the back pocket of her jeans and went into Baked.

Similar to her own store in layout, size, and the gorgeous picture window with seating, it set itself apart with the number of customers. Plus, the smell. *Salad doesn't smell. Hmm. Something to think about. Nothing lures people to buy like the scent of something freshly made or appetizing. Like coffee.*

She joined the line, thinking maybe that was the draw. Maybe she should add some specialty iced teas or something.

Almost every table was full. She scanned the room, once again wondering if she'd gone too far out of the box with her take-out, dine-in salad shop.

The line moved forward as people chatted and laughed over the sound of coffee machines and music. *I'll bring my Bluetooth speaker. At least then it won't be so quiet.*

Glancing out the window, she tapped her debit card against her thigh, wishing she could live in one of the apartments so conveniently located above this row of shops. Instead, she'd decided to save money by renting something smaller and farther away. The focus was the shop, and since she'd sunk all the proceeds from the sale of her apartment into this venture, that was the way it needed to be.

Forcing herself to inhale deeply and think about the scent of chocolate and the quiet hum of people, she felt her heart rate settle. The line moved forward again. *Everything will work out.* Hailey wanted to believe that one day soon, her own shop would be bustling with happy customers.

*Don't even need a bustle. I'll take a steady trickle.* Teens took up the center of the dining area, sitting at a long, scuffed wooden table. Most of them were on their phones despite laughing at the conversations around them. Two of the guys were flicking wadded-up paper balls back and forth. The bell jingled over the door, signaling more customers. Two guys who either really liked spandex or had just been cycling joined the line. *Maybe not the teens, but those guys should be next door getting a salad. Says you as you stand in line.*

Three women in yoga pants, workout tops, and high ponytails sat at the back of the store talking over each other, loudly, about dating. They looked like salad people.



“Next,” the male barista called. He didn’t look familiar and Hailey definitely had regular-customer status. Tara, the shop owner, must have just hired him.

Hailey pulled her loyalty card out of the pocket of her cell phone case. Chocolate would never have to doubt her commitment. “Hi. How are you today?”

His pierced brow arched like the question confused him. “Fine? You?”

“I’m great. Thanks for asking. I’ll have a vanilla latte and three mini chocolate caramel scones.” *They’re mini. They barely count as one.*

“Name?”

One day, when she hired staff, she’d ask them to not sound bored. “Hailey,” she said, watching as he wrote her name wrong on the cup.

She shuffled to the end of the high countertop, continuing her visual inventory of how her shop was different than this one. There was a free online marketing course that her cousin had sent her a link to. She needed to register for it.

A man at a corner table caught her gaze. A little zip of energy—like a shot of caffeine—whipped through her body. She tried to shake it off even as she smiled at him. His dark blond hair, square jaw, and strong shoulders were tempting. Beyond tempting if she was honest with herself, but she needed to keep herself on track.

She’d pushed aside her own dreams for a man for too long. She’d thought she was building a life with her ex, Dorian. While he took small acting gigs, she paid the bills and supported them, thinking her turn would be next.

But her turn never came. Selling the tiny apartment she’d been smart enough to buy in L.A. when she first arrived there had been her saving grace. The reason she could move to San Verde and really start fresh. It was less than two hours away but felt like a different world. One where she could breathe. Maybe even thrive. This time, nothing was holding her back. Not even his cute dimples and sexy, assessing gaze. She’d been fooled once with a pretty exterior. Now, she knew better.

The grumpy barista set her scones on the counter. She opened the pack and snuck a piece, holding in the sigh as the delicious taste hit her tongue. There was very little chocolate couldn’t cure. *One more bite.* Forcing herself to close the bag until she was back in her own place, she grabbed the drink she’d ordered, offering an unacknowledged “thanks.”

Turning, she nearly spilled her latte all over the man she’d been watching. He stood close enough for her to notice he smelled almost as good as the scones. Which was fine. Flowers smelled good, too. Didn’t mean she wouldn’t accidentally kill them within three days.

“Hi,” he said, a hint of those dimples appearing. Like a yummy preview of coming attractions.

*Nope. Stay strong. Dimple immunity shields activate.* “Hi.”

“I would have bought that for you if you’d given me a chance,” he said.

Hailey glanced around in case he was talking to someone else, but his dark blue eyes were locked on her. Cute or not, he needed a better opening line. “I’m perfectly capable of purchasing my own snacks and drinks, thanks.”

He frowned. “Why don’t we sit down? I have a table right there.” His eyes traveled along her body and she noted the spark of heat when they met her gaze again.

Not even Harry Styles’s dimples could excuse his resigned tone. “I’m good, thanks.”

Someone else joined the waiting area, making it hard for her to sidestep him and leave.

He sighed. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

*Oh, good Lord. Even when I’m not trying, I attract the wrong ones.* A high-pitched, thankfully short, laugh burst free. “That’s what they all say.” Actually, none of them said that. But he didn’t need to know that.

He stepped back, his square jaw dropping. His blue eyes flashed with ... hurt? She watched him gather himself, straighten his shoulders before speaking again. “Is this some sort of game to you?” His whispered words held a hint of embarrassment.

*Okay, then. He’s a few tomatoes short of a full salad.* Time to shut it down. Hailey stepped to the side so others could collect their purchases. “I have no clue what you’re talking about. We don’t know each other.”

He made a dismissive noise. “That’s the whole point, isn’t it?”

No! The point was *chocolate*! “I’m sorry. I think you’ve mistaken me for someone else.”

“Really. So, you’re *not* Hayden?”

Huh? She shook her head, realization dawning. Empathy welled up in her chest. He really was waiting for someone. But not her. She leaned in. “I’m not.”

Hailey wasn’t sure what she expected, but it wasn’t to have him cross his arms over his wide chest and look pointedly at her beverage. “Then explain your cup.”

Her emotions were giving her whiplash. His tone sent her right back to irritated. “What about my cup?” She turned the white container slowly, saying the letters as they appeared. “H-a-y ... wait.” The not-so-capable barista had printed “Hayden” on her cup. *Damn.*

She sent a side glare to the barista, who obviously took no notice, then looked back at Mr. Grumpy. “My name isn’t Hayden.”

He continued to stare, so she did the same despite the number of people milling about them.

“You don’t have to lie. Just say you don’t like what you saw and go.”

Her gaze widened even as her heart pinched. She didn’t even think about her next move. With her treat and cup in one hand, she put the other on his arm and guided them to the side, out of the way.

She needed to get back to the store but she didn’t want him to think something like that.

“Listen, I don’t know who you were meeting and I know my cup says Hayden, but I’m not her. Whoever stood you up is rude and an idiot.”

He still looked like he was having trouble believing her. At that moment, she was grateful she’d given up dating. Who needed this kind of blow to the confidence? If a guy like this was getting ghosted, the dating world was a sad place.

“You’re not Hayden but you’re taking her cup?”

She wasn’t sure if it was amusement or doubt in his tone.

“I’m *not* her but I’ll be anybody for one of these lattes.” She stepped back. “Good luck.”

He huffed out a sardonic laugh. “Luck has nothing to do with it.” He gave her one more glance then stalked away like she’d actually done something wrong.

Hurrying back to the shop, she was both relieved and disappointed no one was waiting at the door. After letting herself in, she set her cup down on the counter, then attacked the first scone. It never stood a chance.

“What a jerk.” Sure, he’d been stood up, but it was like he’d been waiting for disappointment. Not her fault or her problem. But she wondered if his date would actually show.

Midway through the second scone, she reached for her cup. She picked it up, grabbed a sharpie, and scribbled out the wrong name, wrote her own. And she damn well spelled it properly.

**“Sophie Sullivan’s writing feels like a warm hug.”**  
—RACHEL LYNN SOLOMON, bestselling author of *The Ex Talk*

**H**ailey Sharp has a one-track mind: *Get By the Cup salad shop off the ground. Do literally everything possible to make it a success. Repeat.* With a head full of entrepreneurial ideas and a bad ex in her rearview, her one and only focus is living life the way she wants to. No distractions.

Wes Jansen never did understand the fuss about relationships. With a string of lackluster first dates and the pain from his parents’ angry divorce following him around, he’d much rather find someone he likes but won’t love. Companionship, not passion, is the name of the game.

When Hailey and Wes find each other in a disastrous meet-cute that wasn’t even intended for them, they embarrassingly go their separate ways. But when Wes finds Hailey to apologize for his behavior, they strike up a friendship. Because that’s all this can be. Hailey doesn’t want any distractions. Wes doesn’t want to fall in love.

## WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?



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