

SARA BURWELL

COKE FOUR

THE ONE



CORE FOUR

The One

S A R A B U R W E L L

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This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Content Warning



Warning: This book contains mature and sensitive content that some readers may find distressing. The narrative explores difficult themes including, but not limited to, drug addiction, alcoholism, the grieving process following the death of a sibling, the legal and emotional ramifications of a DWI arrest, struggles with anxiety, and a severe phobia concerning death and the afterlife. These topics are addressed within the context of the story and are not intended to provide a commentary on these issues. While the author has made every effort to handle these subjects with sensitivity, readers who are particularly susceptible to such material are advised to exercise caution.

Chapter 1



Miley

Have you ever woken up and thought, *What the actual fuck am I doing with my life?*

I'm thirty-one years old, recently divorced, and I hate my job with a burning passion. I absolutely despise walking through those doors every goddamn morning. My boss is an arrogant prick who I would love nothing more than to punch directly in the face. He's as pompous as they come. But I guess he can be with his award-winning streak as being one of the best defense attorneys in the country. His specialty, DWIs.

Yup, that's right. He defends those who choose to make the wrong decision.

People who literally put others' lives at risk. But that's not all he does. He defends all different types of criminals. He gives zero fucks. If you have the money, he will defend you.

And I work for him.

Yay for me.

I've been Jeff O'Connell's executive legal assistant for seven years. At first I tolerated it and pushed the ignorance of others to the back of my head. I didn't let it consume my life. I left work at work and didn't overthink it.

But now, now that I'm riding solo and am trying to busy myself by working extra hours, I loathe it. I don't want to assist with defending these dumbasses. They should get what they deserve.

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But here I am, at 8:52 a.m., sitting in my car, staring at the front entrance, because I don't think I'm mentally capable of working at this firm anymore. It's killing me.

Well, maybe not killing me, but it's definitely not helping me. I refuse to live a life being unhappy. Which is why I asked my husband for a divorce eighteen months ago.

"MILEY!"

Jesus, Mary, and motherfucking Joseph. I look to my left outside my driver-side window and see my best friend, Colbie, standing there laughing. Colbie and I have gone to school together since kindergarten, besties ever since, and coincidentally, we work in the same building together on Broadway in downtown Albany. It's a historic area with a complex of government buildings, shoulder-to-shoulder storefronts, and the timeless charm of cobblestone pathways.

Colbie is a financial advisor on the eleventh floor at some hoity-toity institution, and I'm someone's bitch for a living.

I'm not bitter. I'm just saying.

That said, I don't like being startled, let alone first thing in the morning, and she purposely does that shit all the time.

"Asshole!" I scream through the glass while simultaneously rolling down my window.

"What cha doing?" Colbie says so cheerfully, it makes me again reconsider all my life choices.

"I'm debating if my salary is worth my misery."

Colbie dramatically rolls her eyes. "Your pity party is over. You've had months to dwell. I stood by your side when you ended your marriage, and I'll do it again if and when you tell your boss to go suck a duck."

She really is the best. She's been there for me since day dot. Her advice means everything, especially when others are always tiptoeing around me.

"I think today might be that day. I just want happiness. And this isn't cutting it anymore."

"No shit, Sherlock." She opens my door and takes my hand, practically dragging me out of my car. "You've been unhappy for so

long”—she brings me in for a hug—“and I know you’ve solved one issue, but you need to solve the next.”

Colbie is referring to two different things. The first being me ending my marriage of four years, and the second being my outlook on life, aka my severe anxiety about life as we know it.

I know that sounds absolutely insane, but let me try to break it down for you, even if it’s just a little bit.

I need to live this one life that I’ve been granted with to its fullest. I won’t accept anything less.

I have under one hundred years on this planet, and I’m going to enjoy every minute.

Why, might you ask?

Because I’m afraid to die.

I cannot grasp the concept of death.

I don’t understand it.

I have so many fucking questions.

I need to know if heaven is real, or if the lights just turn out and you’re done, to the black hole you go.

These are some of my serious questions that I need answers to.

Oh, and before you ask yourself what kind of religious shit am I into? Just know, I’m not a churchgoer. Not my thing, I’m good.

It’s taken a long time and a lot of therapy to accept that there are no other options. I, at some point in my life, am going to die.

And because of that, I freak the fuck out. Full-blown panic attacks and everything.

My family and closest friends know this about me.

It started when I was five years old and continued until last year, when I finally sought help.

I now have to medicate myself in order to sleep at night.

But it’s working for the most part, so that’s a plus.

Once I grasped the fact that I only get this one life to live, I made it a priority to make myself as happy as I possibly could. First up was my marriage. I needed him to change. I needed him to be the person I married. I needed to feel loved, to feel wanted. But every night, I felt empty. I felt worthless. And I tried, I really, really tried,

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but he didn't and he wouldn't. He didn't care. It left me heartbroken, which ultimately led to me asking for a divorce.

I look at Colbie, and I know she's right. I'm the only one stopping myself from being happy at work. I need to move on. I did this once. I can do it again.

"I know, I'm going to talk to Jeff, I promise," I tell Colbie, half lying.

I've promised her this same thing multiple times. There's no way she believes me. Although she did almost shit herself when I told her that I asked Derek for a divorce.

We walk through the front door and into the open elevators where she presses the buttons for floors 7 and 11. The ride up is silent. She knows that I've met my max for today, and thankfully, she doesn't press the issue any further.

When the elevator stops on floor 7 and the doors slowly open, I know it's my time to depart.

Ugh. Fuck. My. Life.

"Love you. See you at noon for lunch?" I ask while giving her a hug goodbye.

"Yes. Text me if anything changes," she says as I exit the elevator, and it immediately begins to close.

"Will do." I half smile at her and continue toward my destination. Hell.

Approximately sixteen seconds later, I am greeted with the world's most annoying receptionist.

"Mr. O'Connell has two consults today," she says while practically shoving the files in my face.

"Thanks, Tracey—"

She doesn't let me finish my sentence. Typical.

"Your first is a college kid who got a DWI and has rich parents."

Oh, lovely. Can't wait.

"And the second?" I ask, even though it makes me cringe.

"A musician that let fame go to his head."

Okay, wow.

I thought I was blunt. Zero filter on this one over here.

"Was anyone hurt?" I interrupt.

"I'm just the receptionist, how would I know?" she responds fakely as she rounds her desk to answer the phone.

Ew. Bitch.

I take a deep breath so that I can gather myself and not lash out at the receptionist who's just doing her job.

"Thank you, Tracey."

She nods and adjusts her stupid-ass 2010 pencil skirt while greeting the caller on the other end of the receiver.

I head toward my office and am immediately summoned by Jeff. "Miley, when you're settled, I need you for a second."

Um, okay. On a typical day, you need me around thirty thousand seconds. Yes, I've done the math, but today, you just need me for one? Probably not. I call bullshit.

I set my shit down on my desk and head to his office. "What's up?"

He stares at me blankly. "Take a seat."

Alrighty then. This is weird. He typically barks his orders out or forwards me emails that I need to handle.

I make myself comfortable in one of the two chairs strategically placed in front of his desk and open my steno pad so that I can write down all his needs for today.

"I need you to sign this." He slides a document toward me.

"What is it?"

"It's a nondisclosure agreement," he responds quickly.

No shit.

"Why am I signing a nondisclosure agreement? I've worked here for years. This is a first."

"It's a requirement for our three o'clock consultation," he says firmly while typing away on his computer.

"I'm confused."

"Just sign the NDA, or I will find someone else to sit in on the consultation." He stands, taking off his suit jacket and hanging it on a hook near his entrance door.

I pinch my eyes together (Well, at least I try to. Thank god for Botox; those elevens aren't moving for another six to eight weeks)

and stare down and skim the document. It appears to be pretty standard. The content basically says, “Fuck around and find out.”

I look back up at Jeff as he sits back down at his desk and ask, “Did you sign one too?”

Being the top-notch douchebag that he is, he smirks and says, “Yup, signed it last night around eleven, so scribble on the paper so we can discuss.”

Don't flip your switch, Miley. Take a deep breath. Don't react. You know he's an asshole. This is how he operates. Just sign the NDA, and let's get through this day.

I “scribble” on the paper and slide it back to him and smile. “Here you go.”

He takes the document and says, “Greytan Asher was involved in an incident last night and is looking to retain us.”

Why do I know that name?

Greytan

“Get up!” I hear someone yell from across the room, but I ignore them.

Why is my head pounding? Where am I? Who the hell is screaming?

“I said wake the fuck up!” the person says firmly, and I hear them walking toward me. I physically cannot lift my head from the pillow. It’s painful to open my eyes. My mouth is so dry that I can’t speak. I feel like death.

I slowly turn from my stomach and onto my back and slightly open one eye to see who is hovering over me like an asshole.

“Go shower. I left clothes in my bathroom for you,” my manager, Ivan Stevens, says strictly.

I am so confused. What is happening right now?

I start to sit up and look around. I have absolutely no idea where I am. This isn’t good.

“Where am I?” I mumble.

“At my parents’ house.” He looks super pissed. “You idiot.”

Ivan has been my best friend since high school and is now my manager. I began singing in high school and continued throughout college. After I graduated, Ivan moved with me to Nashville and has been by my side ever since. It was a long journey, and to be honest, I never thought I was going to make it. I still feel like I got lucky. And I know if it wasn't for Ivan, I wouldn't be as fortunate as I am today.

"Why?" it's the only thing I am able to croak out.

"Jesus Christ, Greytan," he snaps. "You fucked up bad last night, and now we have to spend the entire day trying to fix it!"

Shit. I try to think. *What did I do yesterday?*

We arrived in New York around noon. I remember that. I played basketball outside of the arena with Ivan and some of the other guys on my tour before heading inside for a mic check around three o'clock. After that, a few of my buddies from college arrived since we are only less than an hour away from where we all went. A local college next to my hometown.

I played my sold-out show.

The same show I've played twenty-three other times in fourteen different states over the last three and a half months.

And then I went out with my boys.

I haven't been back to my hometown since my mother's funeral a few years back. I've never had a reason to. There's nothing left for me here anymore.

My dad passed away when I was an infant, and my only sibling, Jillian, has been gone now for almost a decade.

And then it hits me, and it hits me fast. Those vague memories from last night flash before my eyes, and my stomach completely drops.

"Fuck, man," I say as I attempt to get out of the bed. "What do I do?" I start to freak out a little bit. The only thing that's been able to calm me since my sister's death is music.

Ivan looks down at his watch. "Get in the shower quick. IV therapy will be here in twenty minutes, and once you can think straight, we will talk." And then he walks away.

I stumble toward the bathroom, take the fastest shower of my life, and try to replay everything in my head.

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I walk into the kitchen and see a nurse setting up my IV. I can't say this is a first. I like to compare IV therapy to magic.

I take a seat and look toward Ivan. He responds with his eyes, which basically say, "Shut the fuck up, and don't say a goddamn word in front of this lady."

And that's what I do. I sit there in complete silence for forty-five minutes and continue to piece all the details from last night together.

After the nurse packs up and leaves, I look at Ivan. "What do I do?"

For a second, it looks like he might feel sorry for me, but then turns his back, and through clenched teeth, he slowly says, "I told you not to fucking go."

"Ivan, what do I do?"

"We're going to meet with my uncle Jeff," he says while texting someone on his phone. "And before you even ask, yes, I made him sign an NDA."

Chapter 2



Miley

“Who is Greytan Asher?” I ask while sitting back in his stiff leather guest chair.

“Seriously?” he says while typing away on his computer.

“I mean, the name sounds familiar, but I can’t place it at this very second.”

He turns his computer screen toward me and shows me a photo. “He’s a rising pop country singer.”

“Oh, that Greytan Asher,” I deadpan. I definitely know the name, but I’m not sure if I know any of his music.

“Anyways,” Jeff says, “I don’t know much about the incident, but my nephew, Ivan, called me late last night asking for help.”

“How does your nephew know him?” I ask because I’m genuinely curious.

“Irrelevant.” He intertwines his fingers and places them over his gut while leaning back in his stupidly expensive chair, which I’m sure is much more comfortable than the one I’m sitting in.

What an asshole, am I right? Or am I right?

“This doesn’t feel right. They made us sign a nondisclosure agreement. They probably killed someone.”

“Probably not.” He sits up and reaches for his phone. “I told Tracey to leave after lunch.”

“Did she have to sign one?” I ask.

“No. This stays between us. All she knows is that we have a high-net worth musician coming in this afternoon, and I prefer it

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to stay that way.” He sends a quick text, and when he is finished, he looks at me and says, “I’ll need you to bring them up the back way.”

I’m sorry, what did he just say?

“That’s ridiculous,” I say quickly.

“That’s a requirement,” he replies even faster.

I’m so annoyed right now that I don’t even respond. I just stand up from my chair and walk directly out of his office.

This is absolutely insane.

And he’s being dead serious.

I head to my office, shut the door, and hide behind my screen until it’s time to go to lunch with Colbie.

I grab my bag, keys, and phone and head toward the exit, but as I’m walking out, Tracey stops me. “Mr. O’Connell wanted me to tell you that your client is coming early and to be back by two.”

I think I literally just stare at her for a solid eight seconds. “Thanks.”

I take the elevator down to the cafeteria on level B and head toward the corner table where I always sit with Colbie a couple times a week.

“My day has been so weird, and I’m so baffled that I’m practically speechless.”

I plop down on my seat, sitting directly across from her where she looks at me, waiting for me to continue.

“I was just forced into signing a nondisclosure agreement before a potential client would come meet with us. We don’t even know what the guy did. Oh, and I was ordered to bring him in using the back staircase. That’s fucking weird, right?” I ramble. “And do you know what O’Douchebag said? He said, ‘It’s a requirement!’ It’s a fucking requirement that I escort some guy I don’t even know to and from his vehicle and the firm.”

She just stares at me.

“Make that make sense,” I finish.

Colbie stands up and walks by me, taps the top of my head twice, and says, “I need a second to process all of that information. I’m going to grab a wrap. Be right back.” She then walks away.

I follow behind her, grab a quesadilla with extra sour cream, and cash out.

On the way back to the table, she says, “I’m confused about the back door thing.”

“Me too.” I grab my stainless steel mug and go refill it. By the time I’m back, her wrap is almost completely gone.

I sit down and open my to-go container. “This entire scenario is confusing, but the crazy thing is, I’m actually looking forward to it. It’s drawing me in. And that, to me, is alarming, considering I hate my job.”

“It’s very mysterious.” She winks.

I scoop the end of my quesadilla into the sour cream, a glob of it clinging to the tortilla. “Hopefully he isn’t a murderer,” I mumble, my mouth full of cheesy goodness. If it’s on the menu, I’ll order it.

We finish lunch, and I head back upstairs to my office. I have approximately forty-eight minutes until they arrive.

My phone buzzes, and I slide open the text message.

Jeff: I gave Ivan your number. He will text you when they are out back.

Miley: Okay.

Thanks for asking me if that was okay, prick.

Jeff: I will be in the conference room.

I don’t respond. Instead, I Google our soon-to-be client.

WikiBio: Greytan Asher is an emerging singer, songwriter, and musician from Gansevoort, New York, in the United States of America. Born on September 5, 1995, Greytan Asher is 29 years old as of October 2024. Details regarding his parents and siblings or their names, ages, and occupations are not available at the moment. Moreover, he has not shared anything regarding his early life with the public yet.

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Okay, he's a super private person. Noted.

And he grew up around here. That's interesting.

I click on the Images tab in Google, and sweet baby Jesus, he is insanely good-looking. His dark almost black eyes look like they could pierce through your soul. His short textured hair accentuates his strong jawline and trimmed facial hair, which adds a touch of rugged sophistication.

I grab my phone and open my Instagram app and search his name. Right at the top with a blue check mark is his profile. Good lord, 2.7M followers. He's *famous* famous.

I scroll through more photos and videos and then switch to my YouTube app. I type in his name and play the first video that comes up.

Empty whiskey bottle, sunrise
peekin' through the blinds
Another night I chased the shadows,
leavin' good sense behind
It used to be your laughter, that
chased away the mornin' dew
Now it's just the bottom of this
glass, and a memory of you

Wow, that's dark.

Greylan is extremely talented, I will say that.

His music blends country, hip-hop, and pop elements, and his stage presence radiates an undeniable sense of "I know what I'm doing." It's very entertaining.

That said, I still feel a bit uneasy about him and his situation.

After watching a few more videos on YouTube, I grab my stupid steno pad and a pen, walk it over to the empty conference room, setting it down on the table where I typically sit, and then head toward the back staircase where I await for their arrival.

Greylan

I love my fans, but they don't need to know about my personal life before I became famous. If they knew, they'd talk about it. And if they talk about it, I'll sink. I'd probably drown.

It's not something I'm able to handle. Which is why I ask anyone who steps into my circle, even if it's just for a little bit, to sign a nondisclosure agreement.

Because my past still very much haunts my present and will likely haunt my future.

Never coming home mostly masks my broken heart, but occasionally, I'll have a severe panic attack.

And last night's incident definitely has me on the verge. Especially being so close to my hometown. Thankfully, Ivan knows this, which is why he asked his uncle to sign the agreement. He knows it's going to be a topic that needs to be talked about. He's seen me at my absolute worst. He stood by my side at my sister's funeral, and he was with me each and every night while I stayed with my mom when she was on hospice.

My mom was his second mom, and his mom is still mine. I honestly consider Ivan a brother to me. His family is all I have left.

"Thanks for asking him to sign the agreement. I appreciate that." I look over at him, and he acknowledges my statement with a nod.

"Where are your parents?" I haven't seen them in the couple hours that I've been here.

"Albany," he responds with a single word.

Shit. Mr. and Mrs. Stevens have always supported me. I knew they'd be there. Ivan probably didn't want to bother me with making plans with them because he knew my college friends were driving in. My college friends whom he absolutely hates.

"Do they know?" I ask him curiously.

"Do they know what, Greylan?" He seems pretty annoyed that I'm asking him questions when I'm sure he's the one who should be asking me the questions.

"What happened last night?"

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“Do you even remember what happened last night?” he snaps.

“Yes.” Well, at least I think I remember.

“I highly doubt that.” He finally takes a seat at the table and says, “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking, Ivan.” I put my head in my hands. “I was reacting.”

“That’s one way to put it. You’re lucky I was close by.” Ivan’s parents’ house is only minutes from the bar I was at.

“I know, thank you.” If it weren’t for him, I’d probably be in a jail cell right now.

“Let’s get going. We have an hour drive.” He stands and grabs I’m guessing his parents’ car keys off the counter. “We can talk more in the car.”

The car is silent. We don’t talk. Each minute is a weighted pause. The slow, building tension, filling the space between us. We pull into a back parking lot shortly before two o’clock. Ivan grabs his phone to text someone. “Just letting him know that we are here,” his eyes still on the screen. “His assistant is going to bring us in through the back so no one sees you.”

I stay quiet, not wanting to complain that another person is going to be involved.

The back door opens, and out comes a woman with long dark hair and full lips wearing a fitted dress that accentuates her entire body.

We exit the vehicle as she approaches. “HI, Ivan. It’s good to see you.”

They know each other? I’ve never met her.

“Hey, Miley, thanks for meeting us out back. We appreciate it. This is my friend, Greytan. Greytan, this is Miley, my uncle Jeff’s assistant.”

Wow, this girl is naturally beautiful.

I extend my hand. “Nice to meet you, Miley.”

“You as well.” She heads for the door. “We’re going to need to take the stairs up to the seventh floor. We don’t have elevators in the back.”

I’m so thankful for that IV therapy earlier. I’d be toast if I had to hike up seven floors being in the condition that I was in this morning.