

CORE FOUR

Second to None

S A R A B U R W E L L

Core Four: Second to None
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First Edition

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Dedication



To the challenges that made you stronger.

Content Warning



Warning: This book contains mature and sensitive content that some readers may find distressing. Themes include the sudden death of a parent, pregnancy and pregnancy-related complications, emergency medical procedures, bipolar depression disorder (relapse, treatment, and medication discussion), grief and bereavement, emotional distress and verbal conflict, alcohol use, and sexual content. 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



Colbie

For once in my life, I'm in a content mood. I feel okay. I know today is going to be a good day—or, at least, I hope so. Living a life with bipolar depression means nothing is ever certain. Not even I know which version of myself will appear. It's been getting progressively worse over the past year due to a merger at work and new management. I work as a financial analyst, dealing with investors all day, numbers and projections and pressure. But today I don't have to worry about that place, because today is the day that my best friend, Miley, gets engaged.

While I don't usually buy into the whole “true love” crap, I know what she has is real. Their connection is obvious, and I'm genuinely happy for her. Marriage, however, is not in my plans. I've never even had a serious relationship. Watching my parents divorce at the age of eight was enough to make me wary, and my mom's revolving door of boyfriends solidified my decision. To my parents' credit, they have always maintained a good co-parenting relationship. Still, witnessing her heartbreak repeatedly has deeply influenced my perspective. I simply don't have the time or patience for that bullshit.

After a long shower, I find myself just staring at my closet. I know we'll be taking pictures today, a visual record of Miley's happiness, and I desperately want to look...right. I slide hangers back and forth, trying to find something to wear, but nothing feels like it fits. My body isn't a size two, and I've got curves for days—a full bust, a generous backside, the kind of figure that turns heads. Which, ironically, is exactly what I don't want. What others see as a blessing feels like an invitation for unwanted attention. I prefer to keep things covered, to blend in, not stand out.

The frustration threatens to unravel me. I slam the closet doors and give up. Leggings, an oversized tee, and my favorite flannel it is. I apply minimal makeup and add a few waves in my thick-ass hair. After lacing up my sneakers, I grab my purse, sling it across my body, and head out the door.

The moment I slide into my Jeep, the gas light blares like a siren. I love this tank with everything I have, but when I say that this thing is a gas guzzler, this motherfucking thing is a gas guzzler. Every other day, I'm pumping it with fuel. But right now, I'm more annoyed that I have to make a five-minute detour, and now I'm going to be late. And if there's one thing that gets on my nerves more than...well, most things...it's being late. Punctuality isn't just a habit; it's a religion.

I pull into the nearest station and feed the hungry beast before continuing my short journey up north to Sutton's house.

Sutton and Miley are twins and they are both dear to me, but Miley's been my ride-or-die since kindergarten and I love her to death. Sutton's inseparable from Peyton, and the four of us, our "Core Four," are all the friends we need. Through every high and every low, we are always there for each other. We're family, plain and simple. Not by blood, but by choice, and I wouldn't trade them for the world.

The second I pull up, I see Miley and her soon-to-be fiancé, Greylan, fifty yards over. Miley is taking in the scenery, and Greylan is talking to a contractor, and I know that shit is about to go down. I don't know his exact plan to propose, but I do know that it's going to be outside, them alone, in front of their half-built home, so I book it. I run so friggin' fast inside, practically tripping, and push my face against the glass window that everyone is already staring out of.

Gathering at Sutton's house is nothing new, especially when the "band" is in town. Greylan is a famous country singer—like, famous, famous—and his hometown concert last night was insane. He's got two very close pals that he's always with. Ivan's the band's manager and he's always running on overdrive, juggling a million things while cracking jokes just to keep everyone smiling. Then there's Brody, who's usually calm and collected...until he says something so stupid it makes my palms tingle.

"Better late than never." Brody laughs, flashing a stupid grin that makes me want to wipe it right off his face.

"Oh my god! I think he's about to do it!" Peyton interrupts before I can even respond.

"Holy shit! Move out of my way!" Sutton pushes through, and we all rush forward, sprinting toward the back door. We burst outside, just in time to see him kneeling.

We all quietly watch them, while Ivan records, as Greylan asks Miley to marry him. After a short moment, he slides the ring on her finger, and we all cheer from the porch.

"It's about goddamn time!" I yell over.

"Way to ruin the moment," Brody responds rather loudly.

This is exactly what I mean. Miley and Greylan both know I'm kidding. Why even open his stupid mouth? Good god.

I turn to him. “If you could kindly shut the hell up, I’d really appreciate it.”

Confusion flashes over his face and he takes a step back, “Sorry. I was only joking.”

“Well your jokes are annoying. Now hush it—here they come.”

Brody

Growing up with a famous father definitely had its pros and cons. And it still does, even though it’s been almost a year since he passed. He was a man universally loved, a man I aspire to be. The real him, not the person everyone saw on stage.

My father, Richie Rivers, was the lead singer of the greatest rock band ever, Rivers Luck. He was my mentor, my guide, and his death completely shattered me.

I think the hardest part was the secret preparation once he received his cancer diagnosis. The things he shared with me and me alone. His last private instructions.

He started with the things most people avoid. He meticulously organized his finances, going over every account, every investment, with a level of detail that surprised me. He had me memorize passwords, account numbers, and contact information, drilling me until I could recite them in my sleep. He even went so far as to pre-plan his funeral, choosing the music, the readings, the flowers. “Don’t let them make a show of it,” he said. “Keep it simple.”

He made me promise to take care of my mom and my sisters, to be there for them, to protect them. *Family always comes first*, he said, his grip on my hand weakening.

One of the most difficult things he had me do was to help him with his last project. He was working on a song he wanted to finish before he passed. He described the melody, the lyrics, the feeling he wanted to convey, and I helped him transcribe it, to bring it to life. He tasked me with the responsibility of its release, ensuring that it would reach the world. *Make sure it's heard*, he told me, his voice filled with emotion.

I still haven't touched it. I think it's because once it's out there, then that's that. I have nothing left to hold onto. And I'm not ready for that yet. I need more time. Because I know that song is for me. His last gift, his final goodbye.

More than anything, my dad wanted to convey the lessons he learned over a lifetime: the importance of integrity, of empathy, and of staying true to yourself, even when the world is trying to mold you into something else.

He knew that was my biggest hurdle. It still is. Sorting the real from the fake. Who wants me, and who wants the Ritchie Rivers connection? It's why my inner circle is tiny, and my love life is even smaller. I've never been one for casual dating, and, honestly, no one's ever truly held my attention...until Colbie Moody.

She's unlike anyone I've ever met. She's wildly unpredictable, and she kind of terrifies me—yet, I'm completely fascinated. I stumble over my words and say the stupidest shit when she's around, and I have no idea how to stop it. Which, ironically, just happened again. And then, right in front of everyone, she calls me out and says I'm annoying.

My face burns, and I can feel the heat radiating off my ears. As Miley and Greylan make their way over to us, I force a smile, trying to act like I wasn't just humiliated, and clap along with everyone else.

“Congrats,” I manage, my voice strained, and I hope no one notices how flustered I am.

Miley throws her arms around me; the brief contact shocks my still-raw nerves. “Thank you! We’re so happy.” Her voice bubbles with excitement.

Greylan claps me on the shoulder, a wide, genuine grin splitting his face. “Thanks, man.”

I try to focus on them, on their happiness, but as I watch them, hand in hand, a strange mix of emotions washes over me. I’m happy for them, yes, but there’s also this sharp, unfamiliar pang of...loneliness? Envy? I don’t even know.

I snag a champagne flute from Sutton, then step off to the side, putting some distance between Colbie and me. But almost instantly, she’s standing right beside me, close enough that I can smell the faint, intoxicating scent of her perfume. I brace myself for another verbal jab, but she’s silent, her gaze fixed on Miley and Greylan, a distant look on her face. It completely throws me off.

“They look happy,” she says softly.

“Yeah,” I reply, my own voice tight. “They do.”

I try to read her expression, but her face is an unreadable mask.

And that’s the thing about her. There’s a magnetic pull to her, and it’s not just because of her good looks, though those have certainly stopped me in my tracks. I think it’s how she carries herself: strong and yet...something else. I’m constantly trying to understand her, to decipher what’s going on behind those beautiful golden-green eyes. She’s a puzzle, a mystery, and I can’t seem to put the pieces of her together, or look away.

Chapter 2

Colbie

“Congrats, you guys!” I say, pulling Miley and Greylan into a hug. They’re building something real, something major, and I love that I’m a small part of the foundation. Sutton’s already popped and poured the champagne, the bubbles fizzing softly in the light.

“To Miley and Greylan,” she says, lifting her glass. “Here’s to a lifetime of—”

Buzz.

A low, almost undetectable vibration in my pocket. I ignore it, focusing on Sutton’s toast, on the joy shining from both Miley and Greylan.

Buzz, buzz.

A little stronger this time, like the phone’s testing my willpower. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to recapture the warmth of the afternoon, the clinking glasses, the easy laughter, but my phone’s relentlessness shatters my peace.

The third vibration cuts through my patience like a knife. I yank the phone out, the screen glaring back at me.

Mom.

Predictable. I pick up.

“I’m busy, what!” I snap, my voice low with irritation.

This call is either a guilt trip for some shit she imagined, or I’m about to be the emotional sponge for her latest romantic catastrophe. Either way, I just don’t have the bandwidth. Not right now.

“Something’s wrong, he’s not answering, his car’s there but he’s not answering.” Her voice is a tangled knot of pure anxiety.

Here we fucking go.

I step inside Sutton’s house. “Who’s not answering?”

“Your father.” Wait, *what?* “I’m worried something’s wrong, Colbie. What if he’s—”

Mom, what are you talking about?”

“I haven’t heard from him in a while, and I had this...feeling. Like something wasn’t right. So, I went over there. And he’s not answering, Colbie.”

It’s been months since I’ve spoken to my father. Since I found out about his diabetes. He refuses to take it seriously. Peyton and Sutton, bless their nurse hearts, tried to show him the ropes, but he’s got his own stubborn agenda. Apparently, that agenda revolves around whatever nonsense the woman across the hall feeds him.

Our last conversation? A supernova of rage. I unloaded every ounce of fury I had. He wouldn’t listen. Not to his daughter, not to the nurses, and not even to Miley, who painstakingly drafted the healthcare proxy he couldn’t be bothered with.

My heart begins to race and my thoughts become frantic. “Where are you?”

“In my car, outside his complex.”

Something’s twisting in my gut. This whole thing feels wrong. I’m a mess of confusion. I don’t know what to think, let alone what to say.

My fingers tighten on the phone, the plastic digging into my skin.

“Mom,” I say, my voice suddenly thin, “did you...did you call the police?”

There’s a long, drawn-out silence, followed by the faint sound of her sniffing. “No,” she whispers. “I just...I don’t know what to do.”

I can feel the anger rising, a hot, prickly sensation that’s always been my default when dealing with her. But this is different. This isn’t about her latest boyfriend or nonsense. This is about *my* dad.

“Okay,” I say, forcing myself to take a deep breath. “Okay. I’m coming as fast as I can.” Keys and purse in hand, I push past Brody and outside, the front door slamming behind me. I don’t look back. I just get in the car and leave.

I grab my work phone from my center console and punch the numbers in, my fingers shaking.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

I explain the situation, the details tumbling out in a rush: my dad’s diabetes, his recent refusal to take care of himself, my mother’s growing anxiety, the unanswered calls, the locked door. The operator asks a barrage of questions—address, apartment number, my dad’s full name, his age, any known medical conditions. I answer them all as my voice trembles with panic.

“They’re dispatching a unit now,” the operator says. “Stay on the line. Are you currently on scene?”

“I’m on my way. My mother is there, outside his complex.”

“Okay, please tell your mother to remain outside. We’ll be there shortly.”

I switch back to my personal phone. “Mom, they’re sending someone. Stay outside. Don’t go in.”

“Okay,” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

On the drive to my dad's place, every red light, every slow-moving car, has me on the verge of losing my mind. As I pull into the parking lot of my dad's apartment complex, I see my mom's car parked haphazardly near the building entrance. She's standing beside it, her arms wrapped around herself, her face pale.

Brody

A cold, hard knot tightens in my stomach. I'm trapped, wedged between a rock and a hard place, and the worst part is, I have no clue what my next move should be. I'm replaying the last few minutes in my head, trying to make sense of it all. Colbie's strained voice on the phone, the way her words hung in the air, heavy and unsettling. Something in her tone sent a chill through me. That's why I followed her, foolishly, into the house when her phone wouldn't stop ringing. Now I'm regretting that decision, because I'm pretty sure her mom might be in some kind of trouble and Colbie is coming to her rescue.

But I don't know much about her or her family. I barely know Colbie. I know she's an only child, Miley's best friend, and some kind of finance whiz. That's it. That's all I've got.

And now I'm left here, caught in the undertow of someone else's crisis, and I don't know what to do with it. She just walked out, no explanation, no goodbye. Just gone. I know I should tell someone. But who? And what do I say? Miley and Greylan were just engaged; everyone is celebrating. Do I burden them with the weight of what I overheard, what I saw?

I hear the back door open and watch Peyton come inside. She looks around the room, and then her gaze lands on me. "Where's Colbie?"

I hesitate. “She left.”

“But...why? We’re celebrating.” Her brow furrows.

I think Peyton is the person I need to confide in. She’ll know what to do. “Her mom called.”

She pulls out her phone and dials Colbie’s number, but there’s no answer. “What aren’t you telling me?” she demands, her eyes sharp. “What do you know?”

Frustration washes over me because I barely know myself. “I...I think her mom is dealing with something and the police might be involved.”

“Good God, that woman is a trainwreck.” She takes a step toward the back door, but I reach out, stopping her.

“Wait, Peyton. Maybe try calling her again.”

She redials, but there’s still no answer. “Give me your phone.”

“Why?”

“I want to try to call her from a different number.”

I hand it over and watch as she dials, and it rings on speaker. Her voicemail picks up. “Hi, it’s Colbie, leave a message or, better yet, send a text. Bye.”

Peyton stares at the phone, her jaw clenched. “I have to tell Miley.”

“Tell me what?” We both look over and see Miley walking inside, her face etched with concern. “What’s going on?”

“Colbie left without saying a word and Brody overheard her on the phone with her mom and thinks she’s dealing with the police.”

“For fucks sake, again?” She pulls out her phone and dials Colbie’s number. It rings and rings, but there’s no answer, again. “She’s not picking up.”

“Try texting her,” Peyton suggests.

Miley nods, her fingers flying across the screen. “Okay, okay...I’m telling her to call me or I’m sending reinforcements.”

“Hold on,” Peyton interjects. “Don’t you track each other’s phones?”

Miley’s eyes widen. “Yes.”

“Find out where she is, and then Brody and I will go. You stay here and keep trying to reach her.”

“You stay here, too, Peyton. I have to be at the airport soon, anyways. I can go check in on her quickly.”

I truly don’t mind doing a drive-by. I’m going home for my father’s one year anniversary, and this will keep me distracted for a little while, at least. That way they can all enjoy the rest of the engagement gathering, and I can make sure all is good with Colbie, report back, and catch my flight. It’ll be a win-win for everyone...right?

The two of them communicate through their eyes and nod.

“Do you promise to text us all right away?” Miley asks hesitantly.

“I solemnly swear.” I laugh. “I’ll even put it in a group message.”

“Alright. Permission granted,” Peyton says. “Now give me your phone again so I can create the message. I’m adding Sutton, too.”

Oh shit. I was trying to make them feel better, but there are no takebacks, so I hand it over, not knowing what I’m getting myself into. I head outside to say bye to Ivan and Greytan. I will see them again in a couple days at our next show in Florida, and then I will finish the rest of the tour on the road with them.

I grab my phone from the girls inside and can already tell that this group chat is going to be nuts. I’m just going to go with the flow here and help them out, because something isn’t settling right in my stomach. But I can’t let them see that...or know that. I just need to make sure that Colbie is okay.