



**THE MASKS  
WE WEAR**

**STACIE COOPER**

The Masks We Wear  
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*Dedication:*

*To Mike, for always believing in me,  
and for reminding me every single day that we create our own  
destiny.*

*To my family and friends who have supported me  
unconditionally through the years,  
reminding me of my passion for writing.*

## ***PART ONE: DISILLUSIONMENT***

Misfortune shows those who are not really friends.

***~Aristotle, Eudemian Ethics***

You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, 'I have lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.' You must do the thing you think you cannot do.

***~Eleanor Roosevelt***

# **The Masks We Wear**

**By: Stacie Cooper**

# Chapter One

Harmony Cole crawled along the Hollywood Freeway in her Ford Expedition, tapping her fingers along the armrest to the beat of Leona Lewis', "Bleeding Love," as she casually held the steering wheel in the other.

*Man, they play this song to death, she thought. What a shame - too much of a good thing makes it lose its magic.*

She began to run her fingers through her wavy, golden blonde hair, glancing into the rearview mirror to check her make-up. *Damn!*

She examined her complexion through self-critical emerald eyes. *I wish I could keep a tan and get rid of these freaking freckles! They totally plaster my cheeks!*

As she tossed ringlets of hair over her shoulder, they fell carelessly between her breasts. Ever since her mother had paid for her implants as her high school graduation gift, that was always one of the few parts of her body that she found herself capable of admiring without an overpowering critical voice drowning out all other sounds.

Harmony tugged on the flimsy strap of her pale blue silk sundress and smiled. *Yeab, I guess I do have some style, even for LA standards,* she thought as she approved of her stylish 4-inch hoop earrings and layers of gleaming, golden necklaces falling over the front of her sundress.

"Drive, people!" Harmony lay on the horn and craned her neck to peer ahead in an attempt to see what was causing the horrendous traffic. *I know traffic tends to be bad around here, but this is ridiculous!!*

True, LA traffic has gone from having what was referred to

as “rush hour,” to more of a constant state of jam-packed metal boxes creeping along on a stagnant sea of black pavement.

The strap of her sandals, also adorned with golden beads, caught on the brake pedal as she lifted her foot up. Two small beads snapped off and rolled down toward the pedal. “Shit!” She took a deep breath and calmed immediately when she realized that the sandal remained relatively unscathed.

When she returned her gaze forward, she noticed flashing ambulance and police lights ahead in the distance. There was an overturned sedan off to the side of the road with smoke billowing out of the hood. Harmony felt a slight twinge of guilt as she silently cursed the careless driver for slowing down her trip to Beverly Hills for her breakfast date with her fiancé. Of course, she also prayed to herself that no one was seriously injured, but what an inconvenience for her at this moment. I mean, she had places to go and sitting in this mess was just a waste of life.

Amazing what traffic can do to your ability to empathize. Harmony could swear she used to be a sweet, patient little girl who cared for injured animals and helped other students in her kindergarten class when they had trouble pronouncing words in the picture books. She wondered, *What has L.A. done to me?* She blamed it on the culture - on the isolating metal boxes people sat in during their exhausting, 2-hour long daily commutes to drive a total of 10 miles - on the commercials and billboards promoting selfishness and egocentrism - on the fact that her family and friends were more likely to drop a hundred bucks to go to a fancy dinner than they were to donate it to a homeless shelter or charity drive. She signed in resignation, disappointed and embarrassed at who she had become.

A million thoughts were running through her mind as she sat in the “parking lot,” otherwise known as the Hollywood Freeway, on her way to meet Parker Owen. Oh, Parker...such a perfect guy in so many ways...on paper, that is. Well, and he was great eye candy in person. If you like the rich, famous, beautiful type with a voice like silk that envelops you and practically forces you

to melt into the depths of its intoxicating gravity, he was perfect. Oh, and if you enjoy being spoiled to death at trendy Hollywood restaurants, shown off like a trophy to all of the producers, musicians, and paparazzi, he was a dream. And, of course, if you enjoy worshipping your ‘perfect king’ in his nightly performances at clubs and concert venues around the country, your life would be complete with him as your fiancé.

Sure, it had been a whirlwind since their engagement- a year of excitement, glitz, and glamour. She had tried to savor every moment of her time with him, partly because she knew that so many girls would kill to be in her position, and partly because she had been raised amidst the power-hungry, fast-paced metropolis of plastic, gold, and cameras in greater Los Angeles. To be perfectly honest, it was all she had known. Plus, he was her high school sweetheart who had been “discovered” soon after graduation, so she had a long and significant history with him. She knew him before he began to lose his identity to “Indigo.”

Harmony mentally prepared for their breakfast discussion, which was sure to involve more wedding planning. Parker was obsessed with the idea of having a first-class wedding on the Italian Riviera next spring. The problem was, and had been, that Harmony’s folks were hell-bent on hosting a black-tie event in the backyard of their 5,000 square foot home in Malibu. She felt like she was in a tug-of-war match between Parker and her parents on this one.

Truthfully, Harmony couldn’t care less where they got married, how they got married, what kind of cake they had, what her dress looked like, or who came. Unfortunately, to admit that in her social world would be a virtual act of suicide, so she played along and pretended to be torn between the two opposing ideas.

As she daydreamed for a moment, she imagined herself just picking up and leaving town: leaving the life she had become accustomed to, and taking off to explore the world. Walking into the international terminal of the airport and randomly choosing a destination with the mere point of a finger. *What a rush that would be,*

*she thought, resting her head on her hand. To be so carefree and spontaneous, to fly off to exotic parts of the world on a whim.*

If only she were so brave. She shrugged it off, reminding herself that courage and self-direction were not in the cards for her. She was defined by LA now, and she was no more than Parker's fiancé, her parents' daughter, and a blonde hottie.

Maybe this was just a temporary case of the pre-wedding jitters. Perhaps the thought of committing to a life with Parker was making her reflect upon the greater impact that decision would make on the future course of her life. If she was really being honest with herself, could she really imagine herself being a "groupie" and following him around as he toured with the band? Putting up with more lonely nights as he was off doing photo shoots, rehearsals, interviews with local radio stations, signing autographs on various body parts of his obsessive fans? Would she have the chance to go to Europe, Thailand, Africa, see the world for real rather than in one-night stints for Indigo's concerts? Could she imagine starting a family with him down the road once they were more settled and had a home?

She shook her head and tried to talk herself out of these foreign thoughts that were trying to confuse her, trying to complicate her life. *I love Parker, and I am such a lucky girl right now. I mean, who wouldn't kill for my life – I live in L.A., went to a great school, my family has always provided me with pretty much everything I have ever wanted, and I'll never have to worry about struggling to make a living on my own.*

As she tried to convince herself that she believed these rationalizations, she laughed nervously. A twinge of doubt crept through her, slowly and insidiously. What if there was something more out there for her?

"Where are these crazy ideas coming from, Harmony!!" She hit her head lightly with the palm of her hand, hard enough that her gold earrings jingled against her neck as she gave herself a pep talk. "Stop trying to complicate things. Your life is good. It makes sense. Don't screw things up for yourself, chica," she announced aloud to herself. The pep talk didn't seem to be working, however. Some

part of her knew, deep in her heart, that something was missing.

As she signaled to exit the freeway off-ramp at Melrose, she began to take a few deep breaths. Something didn't feel right. She couldn't place her finger on it, but it was a sense of foreboding - a premonition of sorts that something awful was about to happen. Harmony actually began to feel her chest tighten up, she noticed her breath becoming increasingly shallow, and her hands began to tremble forcefully. She thought, *Oh God, not again!!*

She immediately jerked the steering wheel to the right and tried to pull off to the side of the road by the Chevron station on Melrose. She began wheezing and clutched her chest and throat, as if somehow this would help her get some oxygen into her lungs and make her heart settle down. She wiped her sweaty palms on her dress, acutely aware of the sound of her rapid heartbeat moving through her stomach.

Harmony had been having what the psychiatrist referred to as "panic attacks," something that was related to apparent anxiety issues that she had been struggling with for a few years. At first, a few specialists tested her for a heart condition when she began to have the attacks. She remembered all too well going in for an EKG, followed by stress testing on her heart. Finally, they sent her to Dr. Patel, who diagnosed her with something called panic disorder. Dr. Patel was thoughtful enough to send her on her way with a mere pat on the shoulder and some nice anti-anxiety medication. She stopped taking the meds a few months ago after she started feeling better and wanted to try to control them on her own. True, Harmony tended to be quite stubborn, but she was also a determined and strong young woman with a lot of fight in her. All too often, she was unaware of how capable she truly was.

She closed her eyes, placed one hand on her stomach, and began to do the deep breathing exercise Dr. Patel had taught her to help with the attacks. "No one dies from these, I can control my breath, I am capable of slowing my heart rate down," she repeated to herself. "In, one, out, two. In, three, out, four." She tracked her breathing and felt her body relax as she melted into the plush,

leather seat.

“Knock, knock!” An elderly man, wrinkled from the sun, hands greasy and black from the day’s labor, rapped on her window. She jumped, startled, and re-entered the world of human beings.

He held a squeegee in his hand. “Miss, you need window wash today? Two dollars only.” His smile was so warm, so sincere, and he began to look concerned as he noticed her clutching her stomach. His eyebrows furrowed.

“Miss, you okay? You need help?” He exclaimed with a worried tone.

“Oh, no, no.” She rolled the window down, “I’m fine thank you. No window wash today, but here you go.” She tossed a five-dollar bill in his direction and quickly rolled the window back up without making eye contact. She tried to gather her thoughts again to continue on her way.

The phone rang as she pulled out of the gas station. It was Parker. Shit. Harmony hoped that she had calmed down enough to play a convincing part of a sane fiancé who did not have some serious psychological issues. He would not want to have to deal with that “baggage.” Parker knew nothing of Harmony’s struggle with panic attacks. Her fiancé definitely had no idea that she had ever been to a psychiatrist, much less that she had taken medication for a few years. Everything involving emotions, anything requiring time and effort, all topics of conversation that necessitated active listening - all were off limits to Parker and termed “baggage” in his extremely limited vocabulary.

“Hey, P. Yeah, I am on my way. Should be there in a few. Traffic is murder today.” She looked in the mirror and was disturbed by how dilated her pupils still looked, masking much of the green hue in her eyes. They almost appeared black, as if possessed by some demon of anxiety.

Oblivious to his girlfriend’s gasps for air, Parker responded casually. “Alright, Harm. I’m seated in our usual spot. See you in a few, hopefully.” She thought she heard a yawn.

“Okay. I will see you inside, then.”

Deep breath in, deep breath out. She exhaled. Her sigh transmitted through the phone when she put her lips a bit too close. Whoops.

“Uh – everything okay over there, Harm?” Now, her gasps were hard to miss.

“No, everything is fine. Just annoyed at the traffic.” She lied through her teeth and slammed the phone shut before he could hear too much more.

Harmony groaned and threw her head back in exasperation, secretly wishing that she had someone to confide in about what just happened. It was so exhausting always trying to put on a smile, wear a pretty face, dress to impress wherever you go just in case you happen to run into someone, and worry how people would react if they knew your flaws...if they only knew you were human.

She pulled into the valet in front of the quaint (and chic) French café and left her keys with the attendant as she briskly walked inside. Parker was already sitting at a table next to the window, casually resting his arm on the back of the wooden chair. He wore a dark grey t-shirt and skinny jeans. His jet-black hair was spiked up, as usual, with entirely too much gel. His brown, almond-shaped eyes sparkled, and she saw him smile at her as she approached the table. Damn! ...she thought, as she admired his Adonis-like beauty. His ancestors had blessed him with an exotic mixture of European and Japanese features that blended to make a visual masterpiece. He arose from his seat to greet her with a light kiss and simultaneous tap on her ass.

“Hey, babe. Good to see you. Man, am I starving! Let’s order before we dive into wedding talk, okay?” He casually tossed his menu across the table in her direction.

“Yeah, of course. Sounds good. I’m pretty hungry, too.” Harmony opened the menu to briefly glance at the breakfast options she already had memorized. This was a favorite spot of hers. She used to come here like once a week with her brother before he moved to the east coast, and Parker had sort of taken his place in the family tradition since then. The experience wasn’t

quite the same as it had been with Jesse, though. *God, how I miss him!*

“I was thinking of getting the frittata this morning. Are you still on that diet, babe?”

Harmony threw him a threatening glance, but he completely missed it and continued.

“You are looking so smoking hot these days. Better keep it up for the wedding so you look killer. Ha, everyone would be so jealous of me, that is for sure.”

Harmony sunk a bit into her chair. Why did he always have to bring up her diet in a way that seemed to imply she needed to continue it? She secretly wondered what it would be like to be married, ten years down the road, and, heaven forbid - she were a bit heavier! Would he still love her? Would he encourage her to get to the gym more often, to cut out dessert? She couldn't imagine her life without chocolate and cookies! Would he find some young, toned sex kitten to play with on the side? Would he drop her like a ton of bricks when she was wrinkled, graying, and drinking prune juice instead of martinis?

She decided to test him a bit. “No, I'm over that diet. No need. I think diets are overrated anyway. I think I'm gonna order the stuffed French toast, with a side of scrambled eggs and bacon.”

She stared at her menu with determination, stealing a quick glance out of the corner of her eye to gauge his reaction.

The lead singer's mouth dropped to the floor. “Oh, well, whatever you think.” He lowered his eyes for a second. “I just remember you saying that at work, you get better tips when you look good.”

Parker continued to dig his own grave, as he noticed her cross her arms and lean back in her chair defensively. “I mean, man, Jeff has been on my ass to stay super skinny for the next tour. Says that skinny is in right now, even for guys, so I gotta lose a few pounds.”

Harmony tried not to roll her eyes. Was everywhere this obsessed with waist measurements and body mass index? She hoped it was just L.A., but Hollywood culture transmits and translates to the world, just like New York and Paris. What if Hollywood's warped

view of beauty has been brainwashing the rest of the planet?!

“Oh, yeah, well, I mean, it does matter at work. I guess I just wish it didn’t and sometimes I just want to, you know, say screw it and screw what they think.”

“I guess so, but that doesn’t pay the bills or get you anywhere.” He paused, running a hand through his perfect hair. “You have to be practical, Harm. We are always on stage, always being judged, watched, and I gotta be, like, a role model.”

Parker tossed his head to the side with a bold statement of arrogance. “You know, like, so many kids look up to me now.”

Harmony thought, *I know! That is exactly why you should be setting a better example. Maybe trying to change this totally messed up view of what is cool, what is beautiful, would prevent some kids from having to go to therapy for years after they realize they don’t fit that mold perfectly.*

Parker immediately put an end to her train of thought. “So, babe, let’s talk wedding. I know your folks are hell-bent on having the wedding at your place in Malibu, but don’t you think it would be sweet to go to Italy? I mean, picture this: an outdoor wedding on a veranda, overlooking the Tuscan hills.”

He gazed off into the distance, mesmerized by his visualization. He waved his hands and spread them apart to draw a picture on the imaginary horizon. “Reception in the middle of a vineyard, a white tent with lights draped all around. I can even bring the band out to play live for a few hours - what do you think?”

They had been over this about ten times already. Harmony internally rolled her eyes, sighing in resignation. “Whatever you think. I guess both ideas sound fine to me, but I don’t want to make anyone upset. Plus, if my folks are footing the bill, I can’t really just cut down their dream plans for us! I don’t know what to do. Maybe we should just elope and, like, travel around Europe or Thailand or something for a few months, just you and me.”

She became excited at the possibility, eyes lighting up. “In fact, I just read this awesome book where a woman goes off to live in Italy for a while, then goes to learn about Buddhism in a monastery. I’m just saying it would be pretty sweet to do something

spontaneous, right?”

“Harmony, my balance, my peace...” That was what he called her when he was trying to persuade her to do what he wanted - he actually wrote a song for her entitled, “My Balance, My Peace” that ended up being a hit. *Ugh*, she thought, *it makes my skin crawl every time he says that!*

She hated when he referred to her as, “My Balance, My Peace.” but never had the heart to tell him. It actually made her feel like throwing up in her mouth a little bit. She ended to take all possible measures to avoid hurting others, even when it led her to lie.

“You know I have responsibilities to the guys. I can’t just take off and say ‘Hasta’ to our tour, to my fans. Plus, we have to make this a huge event, invite everyone we know! This is a big deal, and I am sure people will want to know about it, right? It just seems, I don’t know, like it may be a bit selfish to take off and do it on our own.”

Harmony sunk a bit more in her chair, feeling deflated and defeated. “Let’s just figure it out later. It’s not like we’re in a huge hurry.”

She felt her phone buzz in her purse, and glanced at the number. She didn’t recognize it, so she let it go to voicemail.

A few moments later, her phone began to buzz again...same unknown phone number. “Oh, fine, I’ll get it.” She threw her hand in the air with exasperation as Parker crossed his arms in disapproval.

“Hello? Yes, this is she.” The motherly voice on the other end sounded so unfamiliar as she promptly delivered horrifying news.

“What? Oh my god!” Harmony felt like she was in a dream – or a nightmare – as she listened to this matter-of-fact report of news that would forever change her world.

“Are – are you sure?” Harmony dropped the phone from her hand. It crashed to the table, just as she dropped her head in her hands and began to sob uncontrollably. This couldn’t be happening....