

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

# CHRISTINA LAUREN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



# FALLING



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**CHRISTINA  
LAUREN**

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# Chapter One

There was an infinite number of things Cat would rather be doing tonight, and the options scrolled through her mind as she trailed behind Jake down Lexington: Sitting on the couch in her apartment with a glass of wine and a movie. A dinner out with her best friend back home in Denver. A hot shower, a cold beer. A massage, a concert, the ballet.

She'd even take something as typically unappealing as a few hours in a dentist chair right now. Short of terrible illness or injury, Cat couldn't think of anything much worse than attending a Halloween party hosted by the best friend of a guy she planned to break up with later.

Cat and Jake had been together for only three months, so there was no real devastation involved, just exasperation. He was cute and funny and always happy enough to spend time with her, but he was oblivious in the way that so many guys were: He was willing to put in the effort, but only if she told him precisely what that effort entailed. A quiet night at Jake's apartment often found Cat squashed between a handful of guys on a shabby couch as they shouted at whatever basketball game was on the TV. If she suggested they do something, just the two of them, he'd take her out for sports trivia at a rowdy bar or a quick bite somewhere before heading back to his place for sex.

Basketball and trivia and bars and sex were fine for now, but Cat had realized earlier—when Jake appeared at her doorstep *not* in the agreed-upon shepherd's robe to match her stupid lamb costume but dressed as his favorite Knicks player—that he mostly forgot about her the moment she left the room. The fact that they were still relative strangers wasn't really a surprise, but given that Jake was either unknowable or not very deep, he and Cat were likely going to remain strangers even if they stayed together for the next fifty years.

So, no, she wasn't upset about ending things. The sadness came whenever she considered that Jake—even barely knowing him—was still her closest friend here in New York. It was hard to make friends when most of your time was spent studying or in class, especially when the only free time you *did* have was monopolized by a beer-drinking, sports-watching, *fine-for-now* kind of guy like Jake. She only wished this realization would have occurred to her three months ago.

Already a little buzzed from pregaming with his friends, Jake pushed open the front door to Harry's brownstone and walked in ahead of her. Tossing their coats on the couch, he clapped friends on the back and greeted a half dozen people before it occurred to him that Cat knew nobody here except for Harry—messy, loud Harry, always with a nauseating string of spit connecting his upper and lower lip—and turned around to take her hand, dragging her through the room.

“Ellie . . . Nova . . . Ashley! Nice costume, girl!” He dropped these names without offering hers in return. Everyone smiled, friendly but vague, and Cat did her best to connect faces to names, to give her bright, wide-open smile, but they were moving through the crowded room too fast for anything to stick. “That guy over there is the other Jake, we call him Ohio Jake . . .” Still walking, still a blur. “Ting, Ava . . . that's Asher . . . Sophie! It's been fucking forever!”

In the kitchen, he tugged on Cat's hand again, leading her to a keg where he poured beer into a red plastic cup. Foam rose up and spilled over the lip as he distractedly handed it to her. Jake pressed a hard kiss to her cheek. “You good?” he asked.

She frowned at him, understanding immediately: He was going to pawn her off on someone. “I'm fine, but where are you—”

Jake looked around quickly before settling his gaze on a woman dressed as a witch and bent at the waist while reaching for a can of wine in the refrigerator.

“Regina,” he said, bright with relief. The woman straightened, smiling in surprise and hugging Jake. “Regina, this is my girlfriend, Cat.”

Cracking the top on her wine, Regina turned her warm, dark eyes to Cat and smiled again.

“Could you hang with her for a sec?” Jake asked. “I have to go find the boys.”

Before Regina could answer, he jogged out of the kitchen.

Unsurprised, Cat watched him go and then turned her wry grin up to the other woman. “You don’t have to babysit me; I promise I’m fine.”

Regina laughed and tilted her head for Cat to follow. “Jake is hopeless. Come on. There’s a group of us over by the couch.”

---

From the side of the room, he watched the little lamb. He’d been unable to take his eyes off her, in fact, tracking her from the moment she was dragged in behind the basketball player—a truly aspirational costume, given that the man couldn’t be more than five foot six—who deposited her unceremoniously in the kitchen with a woman she clearly had never met before. He stared at the lamb’s face—enormous hazel eyes, sharp cheekbones, a mouth like a soft, edible heart—and then took in the rest of her. Brown curls fell past her shoulders; she was petite but stood with a posture that spoke of a stubbornness and passion that made his skin hum. Feeding was endlessly more fun when they had a little fire in them.

He watched as the costumed witch led the lamb to a sofa where several humans sat and gossiped. The lamb turned from him, and he stared at the firm swell of her backside in her white leggings. A flurry of debauched images raced through his mind before he pulled his gaze away.

Stifling a yawn, he surveyed the party around him. Same shit, different setting. Forever twenty-five, he easily blended in with the crowd here, but even if he hadn’t, it wouldn’t matter. Sometimes he wondered if people even saw his face or only reacted to the pull of his power. After all, he’d been there barely ten minutes, but several women had approached him already, their eyes glazed in that familiar way, their offer simple and straightforward. He’d

politely declined, compelling them to return to their friends, although he wasn't sure why.

He needed to feed.

It was the singular reason he'd left his penthouse, wandered uptown, and followed the group of unexceptional humans down the sidewalk, up the front steps, and into this dull party. He should get what he came here for and be done with it.

And yet a familiar restlessness ate at him, made a tight, agitated sensation take seed in his gut and spread into his limbs. He was too impatient to spend hours slowly siphoning energy from the room, but he didn't want to take one of these dazed women into a dark bedroom for pleasure and feeding either. He wanted the same thing he'd wanted for centuries: to not have to live like this anymore.

He knew that when he felt this way, the best thing was to run or swim or fly, but tonight he wanted something else more than he wanted relief from the tension of perpetual boredom or the urge to siphon from humans: Tonight, he simply didn't want to feel alone for a little while.

He didn't lie to himself; of course he was lonely. In this way, he supposed, sex served two purposes—companionship and sustenance—though of course for him *companionship* was a term to be used loosely. Centuries ago, when he'd been cursed and transformed, he quickly learned that a beat of eye contact was all it took. In a way, humans became drunk—not on fairy dust or pheromones or alcohol, but on the very essence of *him*, which turned their attraction or fascination into a raw, carnal hunger. From there it was as simple as finding a private space—an apartment, a dark hallway, an alley—where he could pleasure them for as long as he wished and breathe in their vitality until he was sated and they were drowsy enough for him to vanish without notice.

The unfortunate paradox, of course, was that no human in this state was very good company. Beguiled as they were by him, as soon as he was alone with a human, they were reduced to vacant, hypersexual beggars. The

ensuing encounters sustained him, and certainly the sex itself was enjoyable, but it made the loneliness expand inside him into a dark, yawning pit.

His eyes returned to the little lamb, shifting anxiously on her feet with the group of strangers chatting amiably around her. She lifted her gaze, searching the room, her eyes passing, unseeing, over where he stood; despite his size, his tailored but nondescript black trousers and sweater as well as centuries of experience allowed him to blend into the shadows.

And then her attention traveled the same path, but in reverse, and despite the absurd Halloween mask that covered half of his face, she *saw* him, her gaze clashing with his for a single, excruciating heartbeat, long enough for most humans to lose whatever trivial thought occupied their minds and move directly toward him. But strangely, the lamb's pulse didn't lurch, her lips didn't part in a gasp, her eyes didn't ignite and then glaze over. She simply blinked away, uninterested.

Shock flooded him, and he was immediately—desperately—*curious*.

In a world where every second was predictable, the sensation of surprise was blissfully foreign to him. *Turn around*, he murmured to her, using the low, vibrating voice that seemed to run down a human's spine, compelling them to unquestioningly do his bidding. For much of his existence, he'd used this power greedily, to amass property and riches, to wordlessly coerce humans to dance and sing and make general fools of themselves to his great amusement, but in recent decades, he'd mostly used it to direct them away.

The lamb frowned, turning her head to the side as if she'd sensed something behind her, someone speaking in her ear. But then, to his utter disbelief, she turned forward again.

*Can you not hear me?* he said to her. If a heart still beat in his chest, it would be pounding in anticipation. *I said turn around, little lamb. Look at me.*

This time she did turn, confused, and peering all the way over her shoulder to where he stood at the wall behind her.

Their eyes met again, and her brow creased in confusion. Her expression spoke of uncertainty, thinking perhaps that she couldn't possibly have heard a man whispering to her from all the way across the room. When she tore her gaze from his, returning her attention to the group of humans before her, he pushed from the wall, his entire body vibrating with thrill.

She'd heard his command but been unaffected by it.

*How?*

He needed to get her alone.

He studied the other humans gathered in the living room. The man she'd come with had yet to return. What kind of idiot brought the most beautiful girl to a tawdry, cacophonous party like this and deserted her? If only he knew there were monsters out there, waiting for their turn.

# Chapter Two

The brownstone belonged to Harry's father, a man douchily named Royal, who Cat vaguely remembered Jake telling her was an asshole but seriously loaded. What Harry apparently lacked in parental love he had in spades when it came to housing. Cat had moved to the city for graduate school only a few months ago, but she knew living here for even a decade she'd be unlikely to meet another twentysomething with a house like this all to himself. The party was on the ground floor—mostly contained to the common living spaces—but there were three levels to the place, and Cat was tempted to escape the party to explore them all.

But first: a restroom.

The one on the first floor was occupied, so she peeked into the empty bedrooms, ducking through the doorway of one with an en suite. With a sigh of relief, she crossed the room and closed the bathroom door behind her, sealing herself up inside.

At the mirror, Cat studied her reflection and exhaled a slow, annoyed breath. When Jake suggested the coordinated costumes, his idea that she be the lamb to his shepherd struck her as vaguely patronizing and overtly patriarchal—not to mention the unspoken expectation that she somehow manage to be a *sexy* lamb. But she'd agreed because, frankly, she was lazy about Halloween and happy for once to not be asked to be a sexy Cat. That Jake hadn't even remembered the plan felt like salt rubbed into a paper cut. She wore all white—white leggings, white sneakers, and a fluffy, cropped white sweater. Her woolly hat had soft lamb ears, and she'd drawn a circle of black over the tip of her own nose.

"You're dressed like a toddler," she told her reflection, swiping off the hat. She turned on the sink, washing the sticky, dried beer from the back of her hand before wiping the black makeup from her nose.

Drying her hands and then leaning back against the counter, Cat ran through in her mind how and when she would end things tonight. She'd been the dumper and the dumped enough times to know that this breakup was unlikely to come as a surprise to Jake, but she still dreaded it, in part because there could be no brunch with girlfriends tomorrow to process it all. Everyone she knew and loved was hundreds of miles away.

*Can't I just text him?* her mind whined, before deciding: Yes. A text was exactly the level of engagement this three-month mistake deserved. Pulling out her phone, she typed the simple ending:

I don't think this is working. We have fun together, but I think friends-only is the right vibe for us.

She waited, staring at her phone, and in only a few seconds, her text was decorated with the blandest of reactions: a thumbs-up.

*To be fair, it's the correct reaction to a breakup text,* she thought.

With a laugh-groan, she pushed off the counter and walked to the door, intending to put on her big-girl-lamb pants and return to the party, unwilling to let Jake be her only tether to other people. But the door to the hallway was no longer open. And when her eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw, too, that the room was no longer empty. A man—*that* man—tall as a tree and just as broad, leaned against the wall near the closed door, casually scrolling on his phone.

He looked up when she stepped out, and from behind his ornate black-feathered mask, his eyes went wide in the way she knew hers had too—as if they'd each been caught doing something they weren't supposed to.

"Oh." She hooked a thumb behind her, saying, "The bathroom in the hall was occupied," just as he said, "I needed a spot of quiet."

His voice was low and rich, a melted confection, the words curled with a proper British accent. His clothes were all black, and something about him *felt* attractive, even though she couldn't make his features out in the darkness, behind his mask.

“Okay, good,” she said, exhaling. “So I haven’t been caught sneaking around your room.”

His eyes drifted to the enormous blue-and-orange Knicks banner over the bed, and he uttered a sardonic “No.”

Cat was stunned into silence when he stepped forward into a bit of streetlight slanting in through the window and lifted his mask. She revised her thought that he must be attractive; in fact, she’d never seen a more gorgeous person in her life. His features were severe and aristocratic: thick, dark brows, intense brown eyes, strong cheekbones and jaw, and a mouth she was positive was equally skilled at kissing and mockery. And then he smiled, becoming devastatingly more beautiful. Deep smile lines carved into his cheeks, his eyes lit with mischief, crinkling at the corners. Cat felt her rib cage shove a shaking breath out and suck another back in, hungrily.

She couldn’t tear her eyes away. Time stretched, and the walls of the room seemed to shrink down to a shoebox. A weight in her chest heaved forward, the desire to move toward him, but she fought it, frowning in concentration as her hands reached back and curled around the edge of the windowsill.

He was frowning too, confused. Silence pulsed between them, a force compelling her forward, growing heavily in the air, and then she heard it, a soft *Yes, darling, stay there*, in that deep, luxurious voice she swore she’d heard back in the living room, like an invisible man’s voice had whispered directly into her ear. The tension snapped, freeing her to blink, to breathe, to retreat a step and feel the wood of the windowsill dig into the backs of her thighs.

She shook her head. “What did you say?” she asked.

He frowned, his “What do you mean?” coming too slow, like a clunky lie.

Awareness began at the base of Cat’s spine. She didn’t know how she was so certain, but she was: She’d been ensnared by him somehow, a fish lured in and caught on the end of a line before being released. The surreal question rose up her throat and stuck there: *Did you do that to me?*

She was being ridiculous. She should head back to the party. “Nothing. My mistake.”

He smiled warmly again, and the expression lit a small fire inside her.

“Happy Halloween,” she added.

He laughed, a sound so deep and intoxicating she felt it spreading like smoke through her bloodstream. “Is it?” he asked, smile turning wry.

Cat felt the laugh rise out of her. “Yeah . . . not really.”

---

He sent a hand into the pocket of his trousers and pulled in a deep breath that only seemed to heighten his hunger for this strange human. He’d discovered that she could hear the voice but wasn’t commanded by it; she’d felt his allure, been tempted by it, but it hadn’t made her mindless. He could taste her in the air, her lust like golden licks of flame all around her—but she’d kept her own mind.

It had never happened, not once, in his entire immortal existence.

“I see you went all out with the costume,” she joked, and on the heels of his wonder, his dead heart jerked to life for a phantom beat before he realized what she meant. He gazed down at the mask in his hand.

“Yes, well, it was a last-minute decision to come here.”

“Are you a friend of Harry’s?”

“Is he the host?” he asked, looking back to her. “The poor sod dressed as a block of cheese?”

She laughed, and it sent vibrations down his spine. “Yes, that’s Harry. But I think he’s supposed to be a box of cereal.”

“Shall I take that more seriously?”

Her laugh turned round and playful, and the sound absolutely delighted him. It was rolling, golden joy, a delighted uprising inside her. A flurry of images barraged him—his mouth on her stomach, nipping, tickling, licking that light from her skin—and he sucked in a breath, momentarily disoriented.

“Who are you here with?” she asked.

“Only myself.”

She frowned, that heart-shaped mouth turning into a pout he wanted to devour. “Then who do you know here?” she pressed.

“I don’t know anyone,” he admitted, knowing how stiff and awkward he must seem, so unaccustomed he was to conversation. “Who accompanied you?”

“Accompanied?” She laughed again. “My newly ex-boyfriend.”

“Newly? Cheers. I’m glad to hear it.”

“You are? Why?”

He could tell she found him odd, and dug around in his thoughts, searching for the words. Already it was the longest conversation he’d had with a human in decades, and the skill felt rusty and slow in his mind. “Because he looked like a bloody fool dragging you through a party and abandoning you immediately.”

Her eyes turned guarded. “*He* looked like a fool?”

“Do you think it’s appropriate for a man to treat a woman that way?”

“No, but if anyone looked like a fool back there, it was me.”

“For being with him?” He leaned forward, wanting to understand. For so long, he hadn’t bothered to care about human feelings and motivations beyond what he needed from them. He felt, at once, like he was learning a new language.

She parroted his words back to him: “For letting him drag me through a party and abandon me immediately.”

“Did you really let him? You seemed rather taken aback.”

“And you seem to have been paying very close attention.” Her voice had a thin film of unease.

“You’re beautiful, little lamb. Everyone in that room noticed you.” He smiled. “I’d wager everyone in any room notices you.”

She turned her gaze from his then, behind him to the door, and he had to shove down the instinct to command it back, suspecting it wouldn’t work. Her hazel eyes were like glimmering amber; her focus made him ravenous.

He wanted her with a keening drive that felt like a twin heartbeat just beneath his skin. But the novelty of conversing with her was too hard to give up.

“Why did you stay?” he asked. “Why not just leave the party?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “It feels rude somehow.”

“Ruder than walking into poor Harry’s bedroom uninvited?” he teased.

“Ruder than crashing someone’s party you don’t even know?” she parried back.

He laughed. “Touché.”

She studied him, tilting her head. “This party seems like a weird fit with . . .” She gestured a hand down the length of his body. “Your whole vibe.”

Frowning, he asked, “My ‘vibe’?”

The lamb lifted her hands daintily, mimicking a cup and saucer, and pretended to take a sip of tea.

“Are you accusing me of being posh?” he asked, grinning.

Her British accent was both terrible and charming: “Quite right. Fancy a turn around the room?”

He gave a wary glance around. “I’d be afraid of what the cereal bloke’s got shoved behind his dresser.”

“Fair.” Her smile straightened, and he dug around in his thoughts for something to keep her talking. She beat him to it: “Who are you?”

“My name is Brigan.”

He stilled after he said it, his smile evaporating. *Why* had he said it? Brigan hadn’t told a human his real name in . . . centuries. The closest he’d gotten to even *speaking* it had been words like *twig* or *rig*, which had always felt like a familiar echo on his tongue.

It had been Michael, Edgar, George, Louis . . . He’d rotated through a handful of names for decades. The old driver’s license in his wallet said Samuel James Miller, an identity he would soon need to abandon because the date of birth printed there was 1943 and—at least until the curse was broken—Brigan would forever look twenty-five, not eighty-one. But right now, here with her, it hadn’t even occurred to him to prevaricate.

But she, of course, was unaware of his shock. “Why did you come in here?” she asked.

Honesty slipped free: “I followed you.”

At this, she stiffened, pressing back into the window, and he shook his head. “I’ve scared you. I’m sorry.” He stepped to the side, giving her a clear path to the door, and reached back to open it. “I’m not trapping you in here.”

*I’m not here to hurt you.*

Her brow creased. “What did you just say?”

“I said I’m not trapping you in here.”

“No, after that.”

He shook his head, shocked again that she could hear the voice but that it didn’t reach that obedient, instinctive part of her. “I don’t—”

“So I’m imagining it?” she asked, frustrated. “Why did you follow me in here?”

Brigan took in her guarded expression, her tense posture. But also the blazing frankness in her eyes, the steady angle of her jaw. “How honest do you want me to be?” he asked.

“Completely.”

“I followed you in here because you looked lonely. I followed you in here because you’re beautiful, and I like beautiful things.” A pause, and then the rest slipped out of him: “I followed you in here because I’m lonely too.”

Her jaw worked and she cut her gaze from his again, staring behind him to the door he’d left slightly ajar. She was considering leaving. She *should* leave, and he would let her, of course. Naturally, with the cursed allure that had humans hurling themselves at him—the nameless woman who entered a trance and crossed a room to offer herself to him, the man who sidled up to him on the subway, the woman who turned at first glimpse to follow him on the street—consent was murky at best.

But with every cursed cell in his body, Brigan wanted the little lamb to voluntarily stay.

He registered that he wanted her in a way he hadn’t wanted anyone since *before*, when his human body had ached for connection and touch and

relief, not merely sustenance. Sex had lost its meaning, becoming synonymous with feeding, but now the word whispered through him, sibilant and seductive, turning his muscles taut.

Everything about this human—the inquisitive tilt of her head, the angle of her wary smile, the clarity in her eyes—suggested to him that sex with her could be different. That it wouldn't only be pleasure rolling off her in waves for him to consume, it might be pleasure uncorked for him too.

“What's your name, little lamb?”

She chewed her lip, and then said, “Catalina.”

---

The rational part of Cat's mind wondered what the hell she was doing, why she hadn't bolted the second he admitted he'd followed her in here, the second he'd opened the door, stepping aside for her to escape. All of this was something out of a podcast, a newspaper article, a story where everyone already knows the ending, that has the audience yelling at her to leave, *immediately*.

But even though Brigan was clearly *other* and she didn't know exactly what that meant quite yet, her pulse wasn't a panicky staccato. She felt curiosity, not fear.

He was tall—enormous, really; she could only guess he was well over six feet, towering over her even from where he stood on the other side of the bed. She wished she'd seen him enter the room to know whether he'd had to angle his body to get through without his astounding costume wings colliding with the doorframe. She'd caught a glimpse of his hands before he'd tucked them into the pockets of his expensive pants, and they'd been huge. By any measure of logic, Cat should have been afraid of him.

But somehow, she wasn't. Not even when she'd surfaced from the thrall she'd felt when she first saw his face, not even when he spoke in that low, hypnotic voice.

It was his eyes, maybe, how they sparkled with light even in the shadows, or how they held a mischievous smile even when his mouth straightened. Maybe it was the mix of innocence and wisdom in his face, the hunger and sadness, his gaze somehow both young and old, although he couldn't have been much older than she was. Or maybe it was the boyish way his thick, dark hair fell over his forehead and how right now he seemed to be sweetly looking up at her, even from above.

Strangely, Cat felt like she knew him. There was something so *familiar* about Brigan, so much so that when he'd told her his name, she'd almost answered, "Right, I forgot."

Maybe she did know him. In a past life, or in dreams, or in something else that seemed impossible but true at the same time. Cat had always been fascinated by the paranormal. She was never afraid of the dark, never worried about monsters under her bed. She happily took a dare to spend the night in a haunted house in high school and knew the most dangerous things for her were other humans. And even though the thought rang in her head like a bell—*Brigan is different, Cat, pay attention*—she'd never felt such a disorienting mix of lust and curiosity and attraction and protectiveness before.

Her instincts solidified like a steel frame inside her, and so she stayed put, her back to the window, and said softly, "Close the door again." For a beat, he looked surprised, and she clarified, "I don't feel like dealing with them if Jake or Harry were to walk by right now."

With a small smile, Brigan obliged, turning to softly shut them in the room together.

The words rose up and out of her: "Come closer."

He pushed off the wall, walking slowly to her and stopping barely a foot away. Cat didn't know how it was possible that he smelled like fresh air winding through a forest, but she had to resist leaning forward and taking a deep, greedy breath. He stared gently down at her, those eyes bright even in the shadows. He really did dwarf her; her gaze was level with the solid expanse of his chest.