

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

LISA
WINGATE

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE LAST
FATHER-DAUGHTER
DANCE

A short story



AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

LISA
WINGATE

THE LAST
FATHER-DAUGHTER
DANCE

A short story

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

Text copyright © 2026 by Wingate Media, LLC
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Amazon Original Stories are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781662537134 (digital)

Cover design by Kathleen Lynch/Black Kat Design

Cover image: © Susan Fox / ArcAngel Images; © proxyminder, © Malte Mueller, © Joshua Moore / Getty



For my dad

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1: THE DEATH STAR](#)

[Chapter 2: A DOGWOOD SPRING](#)

[Chapter 3: A BLACKBERRY SUMMER](#)

[Chapter 4: A HAUNTED AUTUMN](#)

[Chapter 5: A WINTER WEDDING](#)

[AUTHOR'S NOTE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

Chapter 1

THE DEATH STAR

April 2023, Atlanta, Georgia

Cal!” The desperate outcry of a man who has lost his traveling companion pierces the din.

Poor guy, I think as I hurry on. He may never see his person again. The Atlanta airport, affectionately known in my family as The Death Star, snatches up unsuspecting travelers at will, transporting them to a netherworld of endless airport purgatory.

“Cal!” He’s closer this time. I catch his outline silhouetted against the windowlight and a hand waving insistently above the multicolored human current. “Hey, Cal!”

Ducking my head, I keep on rolling. My ride is undoubtedly growing restless in the cell phone waiting lot, and nobody has referred to me as *Kal* since I moved to Atlanta in high school and stayed temporarily with my mother and stepfather while my father searched for a coaching job nearby. My maternal grandmother forbade the use of my childhood nickname. *A lady of distinction does not abbreviate herself.* She sniffed as if she could smell the forests of my father’s Blue Ridge Mountain hometown embedded in my T-shirt and jeans. Then she rested her hands on my shoulders, pressing down while adding, *Oh dear, I hope you stop growing soon, Kalista Jane. The boys of good quality don’t generally favor tall girls.*

In my grandmother’s world, boys of good quality preferred their sweethearts petite and with double first names, like *Kalista Jane*.

“Kalista!” The sound stops me short. “Kalista Brooks!”

He’s weaving through the crowd, his face hidden by an Atlanta Falcons ball cap. *Reporter*, I think, and my stomach sinks. But he called me *Kal*, and so I step into a clear space near the wall and wait while he threads through

the melee. He's agile, whoever he is, and casually dressed in hiking pants and a polo shirt.

My curiosity is piqued, but also salted with a measure of dread. What if he's heard the bad news? What if he asks me about it? I won't be able to comment without getting choked up, and displaying raw emotion in public is a no-no. Reporters will start theorizing on whether you're faltering under the pressure, dealing with an unreported injury, nursing an addiction, or having a mental health crisis. You're never seen as simply being human with normal human problems. Instead, you're viewed as lacking the mental toughness required of an elite-level athlete.

You're overreacting, I tell myself. We all promised to keep it in the family. Nobody else knows how bad it is.

When I spot him again, the guy wheels a hand as if to magically sweep along two dozen interconnected sorority girls. They stop dead in his path, and he turns his palms skyward before giving up and going around the long way.

"Kal," he says when he's finally close enough. His lips spread into a wide smile that's crooked, but in a nice way. A dimple forms in one cheek.

I have no idea who he is.

"Y-yes . . ." I rack my brain while trying not to be obvious about it. His dark hair curls slightly around the edges of his ball cap. His skin is tanned, even though it's only mid-April. *Maybe a friend of Dad's? Someone Dad coached with? A former student Dad coached in high school or junior college?*

Adjusting the ball cap higher, he blinks at me, eyes widening. The smile falls slack. The dimple fades.

"I don't . . ." I stammer. My mother, who never forgets a name, a face, or even a casual social encounter, would be mortified. "I'm sorry, I'm not . . . sure I . . ."

It's the eyes that finally do it. The windowlight catches them, turns the irises from medium brown to a bright, golden hazel, one eye tinged slightly green, the other slightly blue.

"Calvin?" The name erupts in a way that draws a curious glance from a passerby. "Calvin Calhoon?"

"About time." He feigns offense at my slow uptake, but even though I haven't seen him in more than a dozen years, I know better. It isn't possible

to offend a Calhoon. They're tough as nails, every last one of them. My father adored them as high school athletes. They were wiry and quick on their feet. There were oodles of them around the mountain town of Brookton, North Carolina—cousins, half brothers, half sisters, stepchildren. A Calhoon kid would run for miles in cross-country track, hang around the field afterward to help stack the hurdles and rake the sandpits, and never complain. Anything to avoid going home. Calhoons were notorious for chaotic family situations.

“Calvin Cal-*hoon*.” I gape at him like I’ve seen a ghost. I can’t equate the skinny, undersize class clown I once knew with . . . well . . . this fully grown male person who’s at least five eleven. Middle-school Calvin was the runt of the Calhoon clan. “Where . . . where in the world did you come from?”

“Well . . . over thataway.” He thumbs past his shoulder toward the windows. The slightest drawl stretches the words, but it’s nothing like when he was younger.

I smile at the joke. “Yes, I know. But where before there?”

“Farther over thataway.”

The laugh that bursts past my lips surprises me. Today’s journey is anything but a pleasure trip. I’ve had a lump in my throat for hours. The laugh eases it some.

His thick, black lashes arch upward around the mismatched hazel eyes, and fans of creases form at the corners. I’m momentarily transported to our middle-school stage production of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. Calvin was only the understudy . . . until the real George came down with mono. If it bothered Calvin that the costumes were oversize on him and I, playing Emily, was five inches taller, he didn’t let it show.

“It’s so good to see you.” My voice comes out unexpectedly tender, tinged with the emotional overload I thought had just dissipated.

“You too.” He angles away a bit, surprised.

My eyes moisten and I swipe at the corners. “I’m sorry. It’s been a hectic day.”

“Hey, this airport can make anybody cry.”

“Now, *that* is true.”

“You here to see your family or on business?” He arches a brow. “You giving a speech for the running club or someplace? Because if you are, I’ll

be disappointed. I'm outbound today for work."

"My dad is . . . Well, he . . . he might be having heart surgery today. We hope." I have no idea why I let the truth slip out rather than an easy lie. But I skip the fact that my father's presurgical assessment should already be underway, and everything hinges on the final go-ahead from the medical team. "Please don't say anything to anyone. Dad has been very private about it."

Calvin's smile fades. "Man, I'm sorry to hear that. Is it serious?"

"Yes." In reality, a heart transplant is as serious as it gets, and the notification window is short when a potential donor heart becomes available. Fortunately, when the news came, I was in Tampa on business, less than ninety minutes away by air.

"He need anything? You need anything?" A gate-change announcement echoes from the PA, and he turns an ear to it.

"I'm fine. It'll just be a relief if it all goes like we hope."

Calvin's lips pull skeptically to one side, an indication that I don't *seem* fine and I should tell him what's really wrong. The expression returns me to the eighth grade again, when I'd sit on the empty stadium bleachers after track practice, dramatizing about the relay team dropping the baton, or emoting about who said what in the cafeteria. Calvin would be perched one step below me, a track jersey hanging askew on his bony shoulders as he nodded and occasionally told me I shouldn't worry about the snotty girls' gossip—they were stupid and couldn't run the one hundred meter in under thirteen seconds if they tried.

What's really wrong, Kal? he'd ask then, and wait for me to finally fess up about something life altering, like bombing the math test and worrying that my grade in the class might make me ineligible to run track. *I can help you*, he'd say, and hold up a palm for a high five. *Cal-leaguers all the way, right?*

Even back then, I probably would've laughed at the insider reference to our secret society from the fourth grade, which included several Calhoon cousins, a Callaway, a Callahan, and by loose association me, due to my nickname, Kal. In the days of lining up in alphabetical order, my last name, Brooks, placed me right before all the *C* names, so the group of us was bonded.

Cal-leaguers all the way, I would've said to middle-school Calvin on the bleachers, and then slapped his palm and perhaps told myself I could no longer study with Calvin—he'd developed a crush on me lately, but I only liked him as a friend, and besides, I was middle-school dating some jock who could squash Calvin like a gnat.

Present-day Calvin wouldn't have that problem.

"Don't let me make you miss your flight," I tell him.

Taking out his wallet, he extracts a couple of business cards. "If I can do anything, let me know, and pass one along to your dad, too. He was really good to me when he didn't have to be. He hadn't seen me since freshman year of high school, after y'all moved to Atlanta, but when I needed help to get into college, he wrote a recommendation letter for me. I never knew for sure, but I think he also made some calls to people he knew at Georgia Tech."

"He did?" I read the top card, my mouth falling open a bit. Calvin Calhoon, who grew up pillar to post, shuttling from house to house and relative to relative, depending on his parents' current marital issues, is a hydrologist working for the Department of the Interior. "He never told me you were at Georgia Tech."

Calvin's smile manifests dimples in both cheeks this time. "He probably figured you had more important things on your mind—Olympics and all. I watched the broadcasts of your runs in Rio and Tokyo. How'd those medals feel when you held them?"

Like failure because I missed the gold, I think. I know that's the wrong response, so I offer, "Pretty good, actually."

"You still aiming for Paris next year?"

"That's the hope. But I'm twenty-eight, getting close to that borderline."

"Hey, me too," he teases, the drawl returning. Tucking away his wallet, he checks his phone. "Gotta go. Tell your dad I'd come by and see him if I weren't in the field these next few weeks. Ohio. The train wreck that leaked all the chems into the watershed a couple months ago."

"Oh, wow. I saw the stories about it." I consider telling Calvin that I plan to be in Atlanta for a month to help my father recover from the surgery, but then I think better of it. I don't know how Dad will feel about visitors. "It sounds like the aftermath of that train derailment will be bad for a while yet. Be careful out there, okay?"

“Oh, you know us Calhoons—*careful*’s practically our middle name.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are.” A quick wink, and he gives my arm a squeeze. “Tell your dad I said hey.” Just before vanishing into the fray, he adds, “Call me and let me know how he’s doing, okay?”

With a thumbs-up, I tuck the business cards into my jacket pocket before continuing on to baggage claim, then text my mother so she can relay my location to whoever is fetching me from the arrivals curb.

I’m skinning off my lightweight jacket when a silver BMW rolls up, sunlight reflecting off the chrome and obscuring the tinted windshield. I recognize the decorative license plate on the front: MORRELL-1. My mother and stepfather must have decided to test out the new birthday Beemer on an airport run, because there’s no way Ladybug would turn my twin stepbrothers or my two college-boy half brothers loose in her new ride.

Unzipping the front pocket of my computer bag, I grab the birthday card and token gift I brought for her. The silver filagree bookmark isn’t something my mother needs—there is nothing my mother needs except peace and quiet in a house with four slow-to-launch man-boys still living in it—but she’ll like the bookmark, and it will be something upbeat on this high-stress day.

Impulsively, I open the passenger door to hand her the birthday gift. I’m taken aback when the passenger seat is empty and my mother is behind the wheel.

“Mama?” My voice cracks, and I hesitate on the curb.

“Hello, sugar.” The tender tone and the reddened puffy eyes confirm my worst fear.

The only reason my mother would drive all the way across Atlanta to the airport during rush hour, by herself, is to deliver bad news about my dad . . . in private.