

# Competitors

NOVEMBER 2025

19 January 2030

For years, Chris Braxton had been taking me down with a calculated effort. His fund, NovaTone Capital, had turned into a machine that ate smaller firms alive. Mine was next. I'm Nathan Reed, founder of Helix Quant – or what's left of it. I'd built our models from the ground up, mixing quantitative trading with biotech data streams. Genomic patents, drug-trial metadata, anonymized health records—anything that hinted at where the next pharmaceutical stock would spike.

I always felt like there was something personal between me and Chris. And I hate losing. So I spent my last cash on a revenge plan. There are many ways to fight back in that world, none of them clean. That was when I met Janus. A consultant, or a criminal, depending on who you asked. He laid out one blunt option: alter the past.



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His idea wasn't legal, or even ethical, but it was feasible. I traced down the secret of Chris's own success. I knew the man very well. His foundation was Kendra Booker. His long time girlfriend whom he had met in high school was the one who supported him through thin and thick and he often credited her for his success.

Off-market body-altering nanites and time travel offered an opportunity to go back in time and mess up with Chris's life.

As much as the idea was insane, our plan was for me to physically become Kendra. The nanites would reshape my body, my voice, my brain, everything, into her 18-year-old duplicate. Then a time jump would send me back to spring 2010: their prom, the night of their first kiss, and break his heart. I would replace it with a core memory of rejection and humiliation. It would break his spirit and prevent him from becoming the successful man he was.

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The thought made my stomach tighten. I tried to picture myself inside that body, that face, pretending to be her. The image sent a chill through me. Fuck, how weird would it be to be my worst enemy's sweetheart? I would find out soon.

Still thinking about it, I gave myself a few days and realized I could not tolerate living as a failed man. I had the nanites tailor made by the best labs thanks to my connections in the biotech industry. Then I wired Janus half the payment. The rest would follow at the end of the mission.

"I'm impressed by your commitment" - he said. "Few men would have the balls to go along with this." He was right, was I crazy? What if I messed up our timeline completely? What if my disappearance would be noted? No, every detail would have been taken care of. I had absolute trust in our plan.

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Inside the chamber, the hum started low and steady. I begged him to make the process quick and not too humiliating. He smiled.

I felt the nanites begin their work: tiny motions under my skin, a crawling warmth that tightened and then dissolved. My shoulders narrowed, my waist drew in, the light on my skin shifted tone by tone. Fat tissue accumulated on my thighs and chest. My skull morphed to that of a Black woman as my hair darkened, curling against my neck. I tried to breathe evenly as my height slipped away inch by inch. I went from 6' to 5'4".

By the time the pod opened, I felt weak and short. My voice, when I tested it, came out softer. Janus laughed loudly. "Looking good, Kendra!". I still felt like myself in my mind, and yet every cell in me said: *this is Kendra Booker*.

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I slipped out of the synthetic suit and tried to dress like an ordinary girl, a beige sweater and fitted slacks. The clothes were soft, ordinary, nothing like the slick suit I'd worn in the pod.

The transfer coordinates were set for **Columbus, Ohio**. The system would drop me in the afternoon of **April 15th, 2010**, right before prom season. I needed a few weeks to get adjusted and Janus would help me.

It felt strange packing so little: an iPhone 3GS, thick and heavy; a wad of old twenties printed in the 2000s; and a laminated ID that said *Kendra Booker, 18*. Time traveling costed a fortune for every ounce of weight to transfer. Everything else I needed would wait for me in an apartment which had been prepared for me. Janus would guide me through a video call interface. It turns out, the illegal business offering time-travel was pretty well organized.

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I stepped inside the second device, thinking about my family. I didn't even need to say goodbye to my wife and kids since I'd be back in a few minutes in that timeline but from my perspective, I wouldn't be able to see them for a month or so and that made me feel sad, anxious. It seemed like I felt emotions with a new intensity in that body and Janus felt the need to reassure me by hugging me. I hate to admit it, but it felt good to be hugged by a big, strong man. Then he checked his screen and pressed enter.

The air was damp and gray when I landed. I found myself standing in a narrow alley between brick buildings, a thin smell of rain and oil hanging in the air. A Black girl flashing into existence would have been noticed but thanks God nobody was around. It felt strange to move in her body, to feel her balance, her weight. I caught my breath and looked around.

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I took a bus to get to the apartment, buying the 2\$ ticket in cash. Nobody gave me a second look, apart from some unwanted male gazes. I sat by the aisle, my hands tight on my knees, trying to focus on my surroundings. The bus rattled through the city under a light drizzle, the windows fogging near the edges.

I felt a kind of loneliness I hadn't anticipated: the hollow awareness of being trapped in the body of a teenage Black girl, sent on a mission to break the heart of the man I had once sworn to destroy.

I tried to breathe, to focus on the details: the older sedans idling at intersections, the noise of internal combustion engines, the skinny jeans and flat-ironed hair of a different decade. People didn't look half-as wired as in 2030. For a fleeting moment, that calm almost comforted me, until the memory of why I was here returned.

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Columbus wasn't entirely new to me. I'd lived here once, I moved there in 2012. The streets hadn't changed much at least not this side of town. My apartment was surprisingly elegant. I ran a bath and let the steam rise. My body felt young again. The skin was smooth, hyper-sensitive, every droplet of water tracing a nerve. Afterward, I stood before the mirror, brushing through the long black curls. They would tighten quickly without the right relaxer shampoo. I had a few weeks before prom, just enough to learn how she talked, walked, laughed. How she wore her makeup, what music played in her earbuds. Janus and I had kept the plan simple. The real Kendra had applied to a summer leadership program in Atlanta, a competitive one, backed by Michelle Obama and aimed at young Black women with potential. She hadn't been sure she'd get in. Janus made sure she did. Then we forged an urgent letter from the program coordinator, urging her to leave immediately.

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By the end of the week, she was on a Greyhound heading south. I told myself I'd given her a better future – something more meaningful than ending up as that jerk's trophy wife. She was driven, ambitious. She deserved better.

I started settling into a quiet routine. Chats with Janus, watching videos of Kendra to mimic her tone and body language, makeup tutorials and lots of rest. Fuck, I hadn't slept for 9 hours in a row in so long! I loved falling asleep instantly and waking up fully rested.

Some days I woke up with strange urges. I had the body and mind of a straight girl, after all. My hands went down to my perky breasts, then down to my pelvic area. So I started learning more about Kendra's body. I was terribly ashamed of myself the first time it happened, but I got used to doing it on a regular basis.

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Most days I kept to myself, but I treated myself to a nail salon once, where a polite white girl painted my nails a soft beige with an embarrassed expression. I smiled at that circumstance. The racial element was also something new in my current condition. I found white people suddenly distant, cold to me, while other African-Americans were warm and welcoming.

Meanwhile, I didn't bother with school. Everyone already knew Kendra had been accepted to a summer leadership program in Atlanta and would return for her finals only, so her absence didn't raise eyebrows.

I stopped by the cafeteria a couple of times, just to keep up appearances, smiled, waved at her friends, said I was packing and would leave soon. They wished me luck. I enjoyed being around people "my age" for some reason.

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Chris wasn't her boyfriend yet, just a classmate who hovered near her orbit. I had his number so I sent him a short text making it look like it came from Kendra's phone: "hey sorry 4 going quiet. heading to atlanta 4 a few weeks but i'll be back 4 prom. Promise." At the same time, the real Kendra's messages got blocked. She would soon forget about him, not seeing any reply. 2010 tech was easy to hack for someone like Janus.

Then I put the phone down and waited. I didn't know yet what kind of person he had been at eighteen, only the man he would become, and I couldn't help wondering what version I'd meet first.

The day of the prom I started getting ready hours before. The dress was a perfect replica of the one used by the real Kendra, with a floor-length gown with a flowing, multi-layered skirt made of chiffon and tulle.

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I carefully put the dress on, it gently highlighted my curves without being too revealing. Damn, Kendra had good taste in fashion!

*"Holy shit, never in a million years I would have expected to wear a prom dress"* - I told myself, amused.

I looked hot. Like, really hot. I never liked Black girls but I'd totally hit on someone like me if I was a 18 years old boy.

Kendra had failed a class because of the lessons she missed during her parents' divorce and subsequent relocation to Columbus. So she was older than most prom girls and that now gave her an edge with her more grown up look compared to other prom girls, especially white girls. Chris was in a similar situation, and that made they bond together.

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I carefully did my makeup: foundation, eyeliner, lashes, lipstick. Not too heavy, I was a natural beauty after all, but some makeup was required for a prom.

The whole process made me feel more in character. My body language and movements now mirrored the real Kendra's, after days of training. Seeing myself as a young Black woman in a prom dress, doing her makeup helped reinforce that.

Being a woman, I was also much better at multitasking. As I was doing my makeup I kept an eye on a video with some instructions Janus sent me about prom etiquette. I was starting to get worried that after being in her body for too long, her brain structure would start affecting my thoughts. Luckily, my mission would end soon, very soon.

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I had a videocall with Janus through a device linking together the two timelines.

As soon as he saw me, he made some remarks on my dress I preferred to ignore. I never realized how certain comments could hurt you.

Then, he moved on something more serious: "One more thing, I have checked the impact on the future and it looks like Chris is a bit more resilient than we expected. Rejecting him tonight will only be a minor setback for him. I think we should extend your stay a little."

"What do you mean?"

"You should seduce him, make him fall for you and only then he'll be madly in love with you, dump him."

"Does that mean I'd have to... Kiss him?"

"I'm afraid so, sweetie!"

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"That's disgusting, I don't want to kiss him!"

"You sound like a little brat," Janus shot back, tired. "Don't you want to save your company?"

Helix Quant flashed through my mind: the late nights, the breakthroughs, the people who trusted me. The slow collapse, the humiliating margin calls, the way Chris Braxton had carved out my future with stolen data. Everything I'd built was hanging by a thread in a timeline thirty years ahead of this living room.

I'd already accepted becoming Kendra. I'd survived the pod, the nanites, the loneliness, the disorientation of waking up in 2010. After all that, what was one kiss? I let out a long breath and lowered my arms.

"Fine," I said. "I'll kiss him." But even then, the thought made something twist in my stomach.

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I left the apartment just before seven, the sky still holding on to the last trace of daylight. My dress felt too airy, brushing against my legs with every step. I'd never worn anything like it in my life. The fabric made me walk differently, more aware of my looks and legs. Men were staring, young and old. I cringed.

There were no ride apps in 2010. I had to call the taxi company from the slip of paper Janus left for me, reading the number twice to make sure I got it right.

While I waited on the curb, I checked Kendra's old flip phone again. Chris had sent two messages earlier: "Still on for tonight?" and then, "You look amazing in the photo you sent. I'll meet you inside."

Okay, be focused, I told myself. Don't think of him as your enemy. He's a cute boy and you're a pretty girl. Just go with the flow.

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He spotted me before I even managed to step fully inside. Chris Braxton – seventeen, awkward in the way only good kids are awkward, trying hard to look confident in a rented suit that didn't quite fit his shoulders. A faint smile tugged at his mouth when he saw me, warm and shy and completely disarming. For a moment I forgot every calculation, every motive, every reason I had come here.

All I could think was: Damn... he's actually cute. Really cute.

Not the sharp, ruthless man who would gut my company twenty years later. Just a boy. Soft-eyed. Hopeful. Trying not to mess this night up.

He stopped in front of me, his voice steady but his hands betraying him with small nervous gestures. "Kendra... wow. You look... I mean... you look incredible." I felt a flutter in my own chest, new and unwelcome.

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He held out his hand, tentative but hopeful.

“Can I dance with you?”

For a second I froze. But the look on his face, shy, expectant, melted whatever resistance I had left.

“Sure,” I said, and the smile that formed felt almost too soft, too natural. It wasn’t Kendra’s sweetness. It wasn’t Nathan’s calculation. It was a strange tenderness I hadn’t meant to show.

He stepped closer, his hand warm at my waist, the other curling around mine. The music was slow, the lights soft, and I felt the flutter again, that unwelcome tremor in my chest. His movements were careful, protective even, as if he was afraid to step on my dress or hurt me in any way.

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The song shifted and he drew me a little closer without even thinking about it. Our steps found a rhythm almost immediately, his hand resting warm and steady at the small of my back. I could feel the thrum of his nerves through his suit jacket, the way he tried to mask it by guiding us in small, careful circles.

He squeezed my hand once, light, tentative, like he wasn't sure if he was allowed to enjoy this. I closed my eyes, just for a second. It felt... safe. Ridiculously safe. And that was the problem. It was absurd. I'd come here to dismantle his future, and he was holding me like I meant something.

He leaned in just a little, his voice almost a whisper over the music. "You look really beautiful tonight."

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I swallowed hard.

Focus. Stay focused.

But my head dipped instinctively, my cheek brushing lightly against his shoulder as we swayed. The boy he was – open, gentle, unarmored – made everything harder.

Not because he didn't deserve what I'd come to do... But because for the first time, I could see exactly why the real Kendra had fallen for him.

The night wound down faster than I expected. One moment we were swaying under warm lights, the next the DJ was announcing the last dance, kids grabbing their jackets, heels clicking, laughter spilling through the double doors.

We walked out together into the cool air. A taxi idled near the curb.

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He opened the door for me, awkward. I kept my eyes on the window. When we reached my stop, I reached for the door, but he leaned forward. "I've got it," he said quickly, handing a few crumpled bills to the driver before I could react. I hated how warm that made me feel.

We stepped out onto the sidewalk. The night was still, almost tender. For a brief moment, neither of us spoke. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then looked at me with that same shy bravery he'd shown all night.

"I... had a great time," he said. He leaned in first, very slightly, giving me a chance to pull away. I didn't. Our lips met softly, just once. Warm, quick, almost fragile. When we pulled back, he looked dazed, hopeful, completely smitten. And all I could think was:

Not bad. Not bad at all.

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My heart was beating fast, oh so fast! My young brain felt like on drugs.

I took a deep breath and rushed home where I started undressing. Those heels were killing me.

I had to admit I had enjoyed it more than I thought I would. He was such a charmer as a young man! Damn! Maybe all my obsession for him in the years was hiding some envy for the man he was. Well, now I was envying Kendra more than anyone.

Anyway, my goal had been reached, right? Or would I have to date him a little longer, a little harder... Man oh man, what was I thinking?

I contacted Janus who encouraged me to keep going for a little while more. I was beaming inside but tried my best hiding it. A few more weeks of this would be nice. But I hated how much I wanted it.

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I was looking forward to seeing Chris every time I had a date with him. I hated how natural it felt to dress and get pretty for him.

I spent nearly every dollar I had in outfits - they were so cheap in 2010! And I was starting to enjoy seeing Kendra's body all dolled up for Chris. It felt like playing with dolls. Not that I ever liked that before, either.

An outfit I pulled together one evening wasn't something the real Kendra would've worn, but it suited the role I was sliding into. A fitted metallic silver top, a black leather mini-skirt hugging my hips and tall black heels that made my calves look more defined.

It was young, bold, a little reckless exactly the kind of look that said *I'm here to be seen*, even if the only person I really cared about seeing me was Chris.

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Pink wasn't usually my thing, but the outfit in the mirror that day was impossible to ignore.

A tight, cropped tank top in bright bubble-gum pink hugged my chest and left a clean strip of midriff exposed. The matching mini-skirt sat high on my waist, short enough that I had to straighten it every time I shifted, the fabric clinging to my hips in a way that felt both ridiculous and... flattering.

The stockings were the boldest part – sheer thigh-highs in a soft pink that nearly matched my skin's warmth, held up by a neat band that disappeared under the hem of the skirt. And the shoes... platform heels, glossy and loud, giving me the extra height I didn't really need but liked anyway. They made my legs look impossibly long.

And Kendra had great legs, I have to say.

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Eventually, I told myself I might as well enjoy that unexpected last bit of youth. Who cared if I was Black and female? I was young, healthy and in love - I could admit it to myself now.

That summer party felt like it had been pulled straight out of someone's nostalgic memory.

It was held in a wide backyard garden. Teenagers drifted between the snacks, laughing in little bursts, the sound carrying lightly over the grass. Music played from a cheap portable speaker. The air smelled like cut grass, sunscreen, and barbecue drifting in from somewhere down the block. And then there was me, walking in that short, sparkly pink dress, waiting for Chris. The skirt swayed in light tiers with each step, brushing my thighs. I could feel the grass brushing against my brown feet.

It was warm, bright, I felt alive in a way I hadn't been in years. I was happy.

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Summer slipped away slowly, then all at once. Long evenings turned shorter, the heat softened. Summer was over and, with that my time in Columbus.

I had done everything Janus asked. More than he asked.

I'd kissed Chris. I'd slept with him.

I'd fallen for him in a way that made no sense.

And Chris... I knew he felt it, too. The way he looked at me, touched me, trusted me... it was too real to be anything else.

Now came the part that would break his heart.

Unexpectedly, it would break mine, too.

I put together a simple outfit and got ready to meet Chris. Perhaps, for the last time.

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We had decided to meet in a pub that time. A fancy retro place he liked. I was half convinced I'd dump him there and then.

I was waiting for Chris, feeling a mix of emotions, sipping a drink to calm my nerves and checking the TV news. I had largely neglected that side of things but living in 2010 was wild. "I could bet on the Super Bowl", I thought, to distract myself from Chris. "That would be easy money! I think I remember who won it back then. Hmm but then I couldn't take the money with me, could I?"

Anyway, it was spring 2010, the following Super Bowl wouldn't be before February 2011. What else would happen soon? The soccer world cup in South Africa. Did Spain win? Or the Netherlands? Indy 500... Scott Dixon? Dan Wheldon? Fuck, why didn't I check before? - I asked myself.

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Actually, a few extra bucks would have been helpful since I was almost running out of money - luckily Chris was a gentleman and paid for me when we went out but all of my outfits costed me a bit. Anyway, I would leave 2010 soon...

I was deep in thought, scratching my young brain searching for old memories when I saw someone I did not expect to see.

Across the bar stood a young blonde my age. She turned around. She was Emily, my wife, or future wife I should say! I nearly dropped my glass. She looked amazing, so young and pretty.

She looked hopeful, excited, waiting for someone or something. She looked at me and smiled.

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I panicked.

What the hell was she doing there? She lived several miles away around that time, I was pretty sure.

Why was she dressed like she was on a date? We weren't dating back then, we'd meet in a few years, but still it bothered me.

So many questions...

And worse of all, messing up with her timeline could have resulted in me, the real me, never meeting her! This was pointed out by Janus, avoid any contact with important people in your future life other than the subject! No no no this was getting dangerous!

I didn't want to make a scene, so I quickly went the the toilet.

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I breathed deeply. I was probably just overreacting, I told myself.

I would just wait it out in the toilet, write Chris I wasn't feeling good and call it a day.

Jeez, what a day, seeing your wife as a teenager while looking like a Black hottie.

I was starting to forget important things. My wife, my family waiting for me in the future.

As much as being a teenage Black girl had been a fun and intoxicating adventure, it was time to go back and enjoy the results of my work. A future where Chris was not destroying my business and I could enjoy my life.

Maybe that shock was just what I needed to give me the determination I needed to break up with Chris.

Then the door opened.

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I was afraid it would be Emily, but it was Chris. He was smiling. "Chris! I... I'm not feeling well, we should..." - I stuttered. - What was he doing in the women's bathroom? Why did he look so confident? That grin... Oh God, no.

"Drop the act. I know who you are, Nathan." - he said, slowly.

My heart skipped a beat. My big brown eyes went even wider. I felt naked. More exposed than I ever had before. He knew everything. How?

"I knew something was off. You were too cold at the prom. I thought you were just mad at me. Then I noticed something weird. The taxi we took dropped you to a new address. I checked it the following days. I noticed the fancy neighborhood. Not like any place where the Bookers live. Plus, I found out they moved out of town."

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“When you invited me at your place I checked it while you were asleep and found your notes. Insane plan. Straight out of science fiction! Then I contacted your guy, Jakob or something.”

“Janus!” - I said, out of breath. Surely, he would help.

“He told me I end up richer than you. I offered him ten times your money. He didn’t hesitate to switch sides! Now he works for me! Janus doesn’t believe in loyalty, I’m afraid.”

I was utterly fucked.

“No! Nooooo! What will happen to the real Nathan then? And why is Emily here?” - I asked worried for the real me, Nathan, and my wife Emily.

“I’ll target Nathan from now on. I’ll make sure he never succeeds in anything.” - he replied.

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"He'll probably end up as a high school gym teacher or something. As for Emily, well... Since you wanted to separate me from my woman it's only fair I do the same to you!"

I felt defeated. "Listen, ok, it's true, that was my plan initially but then... I fell for you. I don't care that I used to hate you, I love you now! I'll let you do anything you want to me! Think about it, your former enemy now your lover. You can get me pregnant, marry me! I'll be a housewife for you and we'll forget about this, just leave Emily and Nathan alone please!" - I begged.

Impressed by my commitment or perverted love, he stared at me, amused. "I won't touch you anymore, you freak! Plus, I'll have the real Kendra soon!"

I changed register. "Ok, fine, you've won. I beg you man to man. I'll let you succeed but let Janus turn me back into myself in my time! Or at least a man, any man!"

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"Haha, you're no man! No real man would have done what you have done! You could have done so many things with that technology and you turned yourself into a Black chick! You're right on one thing though, I have won and you have lost. You've lost your wealth, your future, your balls and your white privilege. You have no cards to play anymore."

"Noo you can't leave me like this, I'll give you money, I'll..." - I started crying.

"It's over, bitch. Anyway, before me and Kendra get engaged I'll take your wife's virginity. Hopefully, she'll be addicted to Black men and will never feel anything for Nathan! And don't dare interfering with my plans, remember your Janus can do anything I want now."

"But... But I can't be Kendra, there's another Kendra in this world!" - I noticed, implicitly accepting that I'd be a Black girl forever.

## DRIVERS LICENSE

### DRIVERS LICENSE

**Name:** DANYELLE MYLES

**Date of Birth:** JANUARY 15, 1992

**Issue Year:** 2010

**City:** Columbus, Ohio



Chris handed me a driver's license.

"Danyelle Myers? That's my name?"

"Courtesy of your guy Janus! You're a distant cousin of Kendra, high school dropout, dropped out senior year, with some minor record. Nothing dramatic. Petty theft. Mall stuff."

"Shoplifting?" I whispered.

"The kind of thing that doesn't ruin you outright, just makes your professional life harder." Chris shrugged. My heart dropped even more.

"Hey, nothing a businessman like you can't overcome, right? This time, your life might be a little bit harder than before but I'm sure you'll do fine. And don't forget you're a very pretty woman. That always help!"

Despite the mess I was in, I blushed a little.

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My head was spinning when I left the toilet, cursing Chris, as he approached my wife Emily. I didn't wait to see more. I turned and ran home. My day was not over though. I had to quickly empty the apartment Janus had given me and find a place to stay. Apparently, he had prepared the fake ID with my new identity as a backup plan in case something went differently, and some extra dollars to help me out. Obviously I couldn't complain about the service since everything was highly illegal. Anyway, my remaining dollars covered a few weeks in a cheap motel in the bad part of town, saving the essential for food. When I finally sat down on the bed, I had no plans left. No next move waiting to be executed. Just time. That's when it hit me. I was a Black woman. Not for a game, not for a few weeks. For life. I needed to stop telling myself "Actually..." I tried to think of myself as Danyelle, a poor Black girl with no past not future. It was brutal. I cried myself to sleep.

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I packed what I could carry. Dresses, heels, makeup - too much of it, really. I chose the expensive things on purpose. If it came down to it, silk and sequins could be sold and turned into rent and meals. Sweatpants couldn't.

After a couple of days I realized I needed a distraction. I put on a glittery dress - one of the flashiest I had - I bought a couple of joints from a guy on the corner and headed out towards a pub I used to know, far enough to be sure I wouldn't meet Chris, yet too far from my motel to walk there. I was penniless though so I had no choice. Being high, though, everything felt better.

Only later did it dawn on me how exposed I'd been: a teenage Black girl, alone, dressed like that, cutting through the worst part of town after dark. For some reason though, nobody groped me or anything. It took me long enough to realize the reason: everybody assumed I was simply a prostitute with a pimp looking after me.

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When a dark Lexus slowed down, and the window went open, I thought they were lost and needed directions. A fine white man with grey hair asked me: "How much?"

"What? How much for what?" - I asked, surprised.

"Right... Let's say half an hour, with a blowjob."

"Oh I... I'm not..."

Fuck - I told myself - I can't believe I am thinking about this but I could use the money.

"150\$" - I said.

The man cursed. "And how old are you?"

"18"

"Fuck it, ok. You're pretty. Jump in! Your place?"

I smiled. My first money as Danyelle.

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In the end of the night I had had the fun I needed, plus 150\$. Easy money. However, my money problems were far from over. I needed a steady source of income. I found a part-time job a few blocks away, waiting tables in a small fast-food place. Family-owned. I showed them my driver's license. They barely looked at it. When they asked about school, I said I'd dropped out and needed work. It was humiliating.

The job itself was dull. Same orders, same faces. The worst though were the customers. Men gazed at me. Some made sexist comments, some brushed past me on purpose. Black, white, it didn't matter. They felt equally entitled. I learned to swallow whatever reaction wanted to come out. By the end of each shift my feet ached, my patience was gone, and something inside me felt smaller. My male ego was agonizing. Eventually, my mind went back to that crazy night in the streets.

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A few nights like that per week and I could support myself for a bit, so on my free days I resumed my side gig, in the streets. The motel guy eventually noticed the pattern of different Johns coming back with me every time and understood what was going on. He mumbled something but when I offered him more money for the following month he understood I'd be a steady source of income for him. Eventually, he gave me his best suite for a discounted price.

One evening, I was doing my makeup before a night of work, in the crappy motel bathroom. I'd had a joint and I was a little high. Smoking helped me cope.

I took a moment to look at myself in the eyes for the first time in a while and tried thinking of myself as Nathan again for the first time in some time. It was weird. I began talking to myself, as if I was someone else.

## COMPETITORS

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"You have been a bad boy Nathan. You wanted to ruin Chris because you were envious of him. You kissed him and lied to him. You sent his girl away. Bad boy! Like Pinocchio, you got punished. Your dick retreated instead of growing, and now you have a beautiful pussy. You also grew tits and your skin is dark dark now. Your blue eyes are dark chocolate now, your hair black. You're Black like Chris. That's right, Nathan, you're not a white man anymore... You're a pretty, young Black girl now. People call you Danyelle now. You know it's not true. Deep down, you know you're still the same person. But it doesn't matter. No one would believe you're really Nathan." And you..." - I stared at my pretty face "You deserve it all, Nathan. You fucked up big time."

I took a slow breath. Yes, I could live with this version. I deserved this punishment. My actions had been cruel, my plan far from flawless, and this was the consequence.

## COMPETITORS

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I continued my monologue.

“There’s no technology right now that can give you back your real body. Not for the next twenty-five years. Maybe by the time the 2030s roll around again, if you’ve been good and saved enough, you could buy a new body sleeve and become a white man again. But let’s be real. What will twenty-five years living as a Black woman do to your mind? It’s been a few months and your mind is already very different. Nathan is gone. You need to say it, and mean it: I am Danyelle for the rest of my life. No more Nathan. I am Danyelle, and I am a bitch. Look at these lips. Bitch lips. That’s all you are now, a beautiful Black bitch.”

“I think... I hated Chris as much for being Black as for anything else. Not anymore. I love being Black now. I’m... I’m proud of it.” I paused, letting the new truth sink in.

## COMPETITORS

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I caught myself drifting, my attention snagged by the mirror again.

My brain still held Nathan's memories but the mental architecture was Kendra's and the wiring was changing. Hormones did their work too, without asking permission. So did habit. So did being looked at, measured, commented on, day after day. Without meaning to, I'd started comparing myself to other women. To other Black women, my new sisters.

*"I have Kendra Booker's DNA"*, I thought. Roughly West African, a trace of European somewhere far back. I tilted my head, studying the reflection with a patience I'd never had before. The nose was soft, pretty. The lips, full, sensual. "They're good," I murmured. "But... they could use some extra volume." A future detail to tweak once there was money. A few cc's, nothing dramatic.

## COMPETITORS

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My gaze traveled down, settling on the gentle swell of my chest—a weight and presence I was still getting used to. Kendra had been pretty, but... modest here. A bit lacking in the boobs department, Nathan's old, critical voice observed, now speaking from behind Danyelle's lips. A boob job wouldn't be the worst idea. Think of the eyes that would linger, the easier negotiations, the faster cash. A much better return on the investment.

I was just dreaming since I was barely making ends meet, but think of all the men I could get with bigger boobs!

Why not, after all? I had no parents to disappoint, no old friends to raise an eyebrow. There was a strange, shameful freedom in being utterly alone.

## COMPETITORS

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A sudden, sharp laugh escaped me, too loud. God, I was losing it. This new brain was rerouting all my circuits. Poor Pinocchio, no Blue Fairy this time, just a different kind of puppet string.

I finished getting ready and left the squalid motel. Soon I could afford a better place to live, hopefully. I walked to my usual place for my evening of work. I knew the other prostitutes of the area, and we respected each other's zone of influence. There was quite some traffic. I had a feeling it would have been a good night.

Unfortunately, it would not be my night.

The late September night was humid, clinging to my skin like a second dress. I'd just leaned into the passenger window of a sedan, negotiating with a gray-haired man in a polo shirt, when the flicker of red and blue stained the brick wall of the alley behind me. My spine went rigid.



“Cops,” I hissed, pulling back from the window.

The john’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Drive. Now,” I urged, forcing a smile. My heart hammered against my ribs. Nothing to see. I has simply asked him for directions. Right? The man in the sedan hesitated, then stomped on the gas, his tires squealing as he vanished around the corner. People turned their heads towards us.

I took a wobbly step back onto the sidewalk, smoothing my dress, trying to morph my posture into that of a lost pedestrian. Damn! Why did I choose such a slutty outfit that night?

Maybe it worked. I turned, aiming for a nonchalant stroll away from the now-idling cruiser. But the headlights pinned me, flooding me in stark white light. My performance collapsed. The walk, the smile, the story—all of it evaporated under that brutal glare.

## COMPETITORS

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The doors of the squad car opened. There was no running. Not that I could, really, wearing those heels. Only the slow, inevitable approach of two policemen, and the sound of my own breath. I was scared. I knew how policemen treated us Black folks. Hopefully they would treat me better since I was a young girl.

The cuffs clicked cold against my wrists, much tighter than they needed to be. The cop—a burly white guy that screamed "small-town authority"—looked me dead in the eyes with hatred as he read me my rights. Solicitation. Loitering with intent. I wanted to explain I wasn't being myself, quite literally, that I was the victim of a complicated feud from the future, but I couldn't. What was the point?

My dress rode up as he shoved me into the back of the cruiser, the cheap fabric sticking to my thighs from the sweat of panic.

## COMPETITORS

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At the station, they fingerprinted me, took my mugshot. Danyelle Myers, 19, no priors beyond that petty theft bullshit Janus had baked into my fake record. I cursed him once more. This was all his fault!

The female officer processing me gave me a once-over, her expression a mix of pity and judgment. "First time, honey?" she asked, kindly. I nodded, my voice small. "Yeah." Nathan Reed, the biotech quant wizard, reduced to this. They tossed me in a holding cell with a couple of others—a strung-out white woman and a Latina girl about my age, chewing her nails. No one talked. The Latina girl met my eyes for a second—a flash of shared, silent understanding—before looking away, her jaw tight.

I sat on the hard bench, knees pressed together, trying not to think about how the dress made me look even more like the stereotype they'd pegged me for.

## COMPETITORS

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Down the hall, in the glow of a bank of security monitors, two officers leaned back in their chairs.

"New one in three," said the older cop, sipping his coffee. The younger one leaned in, squinting. "Huh. She doesn't really look the part, does she? Too... put together. Not strung out."

"Yeah, well. That means she's new, or thinks she's smarter than the game." He took a bite of a glazed donut. "Pretty girl, though. Shame."

"Big shame. They come in like that, thinking they're just gonna make quick cash and bounce. They never do... Look at her. Sitting there like she's waiting for a bus. She's in for a real education." "Another sad story. Probably running from something worse. They always are." The older cop shook his head. "She'll be hardened or broken within a year. If she even lasts that long."

## COMPETITORS

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I sat in that cold holding cell for I don't know how long, probably a couple of days. Nobody paid the bail, obviously. I had been fingerprinted, mugshotted, incarcerated and humiliated. My jail mates had verbally abused me. The Latina, who seemed nice, was simply into girls. I was disgusted by lesbian sex, so it was not pleasant. The white lady insulted me and complained about being stuck in the clink with a n\*\*\*\*. The whole ordeal broke my ego in an irreparable way. Moreover, when I got out, I had a pretty serious criminal record. I stopped thinking about revenge against Chris, my wife Emily and any delusion of grandeur. I was a lonely Black prostitute with a criminal record who needed desperately to find a way to survive in the hard world without holding on to any sort of pride.

I hugged the prison guard who opened the door, a Black guy showing some empathy for me, with tears on my cheeks.

## COMPETITORS

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Since I had missed my shift at the fast food, and I hadn't picked up any calls, they assumed I had left or something. They rescinded my contract without paying me for the previous week. What could I say? "Sorry, I was in jail for prostitution, can I come back tomorrow?" Never mind. I wouldn't miss that tedious fast-food job. I needed some honest income though.

Hooters had just opened a new branch on the east side of town. The manager who interviewed me, Brad, asked me to turn around, his gaze lingering on my legs. "Experience?" "I've waited tables in fast food." He smiled. "This is different, sweetheart. Here, you're part of the product." He handed me a uniform. "Go change. Let's see how it looks on you." I pulled on the laughably small tank top and the orange shorts that barely reached my thighs.

Brad whistled. "Jesus. You're hired."

## COMPETITORS

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On my first day I made \$120 in tips. I learned how to bend just enough to reveal a hint of cleavage, how to cut off overly probing customers with laughter, how to hitch the edge of my shorts up another millimeter as I turned away.

A month later, I rented a small apartment on the edge of downtown. I felt a weird sense of “achievement” for the first time. This was no longer survival, this was life - built on being watched and objectified, but earned honestly.

One night, a regular—a middle-aged man who always sat in the corner—handed me a business card. “My friend’s making movies,” he said casually. “Independent productions. Looking for new faces. You’re very photogenic.” The card had a production company’s name on it.

“What kind of movies?” I asked, calm but secretly excited about it.

## COMPETITORS

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He smiled, no mockery in his eyes, just businesslike honesty. “Adult films. High production value, scripts and all. Pay’s good, per scene. Better than bending over burgers here.” I didn’t say yes right away but a few days later, after Hooters closed for the night, I sat on my apartment with a porn magazine I’d bought at a convenience store spread open in front of me. I tuned in on an adult channel. Was this really my future? Oh God I could be rich but at what price? I called the number on the card, my heart pounding loud.

I’d managed to stay away from outright prostitution for a few weeks, and yet here I was again, drawn toward another indecent shortcut. What was wrong with me? Plenty of poor, pretty women scraped by honestly, working double shifts. Why did I always end up here—selling my body, my image, myself? This wasn’t Nathan anymore. It wasn’t even Kendra.

## COMPETITORS

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Kendra wouldn't behave like this. Danyelle was a completely new person, whose only assets were the body Nathan had been trapped in and the ruthless, adaptive intelligence that hadn't completely dissolved. This wasn't about being decent. It was about being smart.

They asked for a few photos, my measures and my availability. A few days later, a shipment arrived with instructions and an outfit: a fitted black long-sleeve top, plain and tight enough to show my shape. A high-waisted purple skirt that flared slightly at the hips, short but neat. Nude stockings, heels. My role was minor—a young secretary, just a side story. Easy money. I put the outfit on.

The shoot was in a converted warehouse. The set was a depressingly accurate replica of a generic corporate office. The director, a tired-looking man named Gary, gave me three lines of dialogue.

## COMPETITORS

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My role was to walk into the "boss's" office, drop a file, catch him in a compromising situation, and react with a blend of shock and curiosity that quickly melted into something else.

When the lights hit me, a strange calm descended. I remembered the countless pitches I'd given for Helix Quant, the way I'd modulated my voice and posture to project confidence. The principles were the same. Sell the story.

"Action." I walked in, shoulders back, heels clicking with purpose. I dropped the file, my gaze snapping to the "boss." "Cut! Good. Let's go again from the door, but this time, let's see a little more of that smile earlier." We did it seven times. Each time, I refined it. Gary seemed pleased. "You're a natural. You've got a good face for camera. Expressive." I wasn't a victim of circumstance anymore. I was a businesswoman with one product: Danyelle.

## COMPETITORS

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The next day, I called the number from the business card. I asked for Gary.

"The girl from yesterday," I said when he came on the line. "The secretary."

"Yeah, Danyelle. Good work."

"I want to do more," I said, my voice steady. "What do I need to do to get leading roles?"

There was a pause. I could hear him thinking, reassessing. "You're serious?" He chuckled. "Alright. Look, you've got the look. But the top tier... it's competitive. The girls who really blow up, they've got a... a marketable asset. Sometimes it's natural, sometimes it's enhanced."

"Enhanced, right." I repeated, trying to hide my excitement. "Think of it as investing in your brand," he said, sensing my fears.