

Competitors

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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.