

Crisp(er) consequences

DECEMBER 2024



Dr. Kimberly Wells was the picture of a classic British female academic. At 38, she was not what one would call hot; she was cute but her attractiveness was muted by her sensible wardrobe of grey outfits and buttoned blouses. She had medium-length light brown hair that used to be blonde in her youth but had lost its shine, and blue eyes that would be pretty if not hidden behind glasses. She was polished but uptight, and had an air of serious dedication that bordered on dullness, a reputation she was well aware of but didn't seem to bother her. It wasn't that Kimberly didn't care for connection; she was simply more comfortable with controlled environments and predictable outcomes—qualities that also made her an exceptional researcher.

She was married with Alex, a British electronic engineer and had no kids.

She had grown up in a rather conservative family from Kent and lived in London since her college years. After so many years in the city, however, she was no stranger to diversity. Her students ranged across nationalities, with many hailing from Chinese expatriate backgrounds or second-generation Indian and Bangladeshi Londoners.

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One of Dr. Wells's students was Anaya Rahman, a young British undergrad of Bangladeshi descent with the nervous energy and determination of someone trying to succeed and blend in at all costs. Anaya was short, with thick black hair and pretty brown eyes. She was low-key cute but her insecurities hampered her natural charm. Intelligent and kind, Anaya was an easy target for teasing; the popular kids, mostly white but also Asian and Hispanic, at Imperial College targeted her and dismissed her as a try-hard, only increasing her determination to succeed and prove herself. Anaya simply accepted her place in society. She was a self-proclaimed geek who wore her nerdiness like a badge of honor and didn't do much to break out of the stereotype. She dreamt of one day making a significant contribution to genetics, of doing something that mattered, even if it meant enduring a bit of ridicule on the way.

Together, Kimberly and her students worked tirelessly on a project that used CRISPR technology to modify the DNA of patients to cure genetic diseases, possibly even life-threatening conditions. The device they were developing needed live testing, so they used a sample that would link a user's DNA with that of a subject.

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One afternoon, Dr. Kimberly Wells decided it was time to do a live demonstration of CRISPR's power for her students. She planned to modify a batch of human skin cells in vitro, visibly altering their pigmentation by switching DNA from one person to another. Searching for a volunteer, her gaze landed on Anaya, the timid student who lingered at the back of the group, watching with interest. Her darker skin tone would make the change even more visible.

"Anaya, would you like to help us out here?" Kimberly asked with a warm smile, encouraging the shy yet brilliant girl to step forward. Anaya hesitated, glancing nervously at her classmates, but nodded, barely meeting Kimberly's eye. She allowed Kimberly to take a small DNA sample, and they placed it in the device.

"Watch carefully," Kimberly instructed, her voice full of excitement as she guided Anaya through each step. "We'll be replacing my DNA with yours—see here? It should alter the pigmentation of these skin cells I have grown from a small sample of my own skin and show us just how fast DNA can overwrite traits, like skin color." As they initiated the modification, the batch of skin cells quickly darkened, taking on a rich brown hue. Anaya's eyes widened in wonder, as she watched her DNA override Kimberly's cells.

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"See that? Quite powerful, isn't it?" Kimberly said with a hint of pride, turning to her student. "Have a try!"

Encouraged, Anaya tried her hand, stepping up to the device. All the other students were staring at her with a mix of amusement and envy, and her nerves got the best of her. She fumbled with the controls, and suddenly, the machine emitted a small burst of energy, directing its focus on them both instead of the contained sample. Kimberly reacted first, switching off the power button. Startled, they jumped back as the machine powered down. Anaya's face paled, and she looked up at Kimberly, horrified. "I'm so sorry, Dr. Wells! I didn't mean to—". Some of the other students erupted in a laughter. Kimberly brushed it off, offering a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Anaya. Lab accidents happen all the time. Besides, the good news is it could be much worse." She gave the girl's shoulder a comforting squeeze. "Fortunately, we were working with some in vitro cells, not with our own DNA!"

Anaya was extremely mortified but grateful for Kimberly's kindness. They had no idea that the machine had, indeed, altered their DNA. The professor tried to hide her concerns but that was a serious lack of safety measures. Hopefully, nobody would report her for her misconduct. After all, the responsibility was hers.

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Kimberly drove home after the demonstration, feeling a little off. When her husband, Alex, saw her, he was taken aback. He looked her over, raising an eyebrow. "Wow, trying out a new look, are we?" he asked, clearly amused. "I'm not complaining, but that's...unexpected."

Kimberly blinked, her confusion growing. "What do you mean?"

"Okay, I get it. This is because I never notice your haircuts, right?" Alex said with a chuckle. "I mean, you've got a tan—which, given the week we've had, I'm guessing you got from a salon. And the brown contacts! They're very convincing, actually."

Kimberly forced a laugh, even as a gnawing worry took root. "Oh, yes! Just thought I'd surprise you." She swallowed hard, trying to keep her voice steady. "Let me, uh, freshen up my makeup." She rushed to the bathroom, her mind racing. *No. No way. This couldn't be happening.* She closed the door and stared into the mirror. Her blue eyes were now a light brown. And her skin looked different too, she couldn't deny the warm brown tone spreading across her cheeks and arms. Anaya's genes were starting to show.

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Meanwhile, across town, Anaya lay on her bed, her stomach churning with worry. Ever since she'd left the lab, she'd felt off. Her skin seemed unnaturally pale, probably from the big scare, she thought. But it wouldn't go away. She stared at the ceiling, replaying the disastrous lab demonstration in her mind. She'd made a fool of herself, fumbled in front of everyone. Maybe she should cancel her plans, save herself the embarrassment, and sleep off the shame. A tear rolled down her cheek.

Her phone buzzed with a message from a friend: *"Can't wait to see you tonight! Party starts at 8!"* She hesitated, caught between happiness at the invitation and her urge to hide. It was rare for her to be invited to a party though.

Still feeling unsettled, she dragged herself to the bathroom to check her reflection before getting dressed. Staring back at her was a girl she barely recognized, her skin was far lighter than usual, just a bit tanned rather than brown. Her wide brown eyes were gone, replaced by exotic blue-green ones, and her cheekbones and jawline had taken on a more delicate shape. She looked mixed or even fully white. "Oh no!" Anaya whispered, her heart pounding. "I have Professor Wells's DNA! I'm... I'm turning into a younger version of her!"

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Anaya checked prof. Wells's website looking for her phone number and dialed it. After a few rings, she heard Kimberly's voice, professional as usual. "I'm sorry, I'm a bit busy right now" "Professor Wells, it's me, Anaya! Something terrible is happening! I think the device..." "Anaya! Are you noticing pigmentation changes too?" "Yes..." the girl replied, almost in tears. "I'm so sorry, Professor, I messed everything up and now you must have my complexion..." Anaya, don't mention it," Kimberly said firmly. "I was in charge. Now, where do you live? I need to come by and check on you."

Kimberly hung up and turned to her husband, clearly amused by her "new look." She muttered something about an emergency at the university before rushing out the door. As she drove, the changes progressed, her skin darkening to a deep brown hue and her hair turning black. Arriving at Anaya's building, she found the door to her flat slightly ajar and stepped inside. "Anaya?" she called, her voice echoing in the small space, sounding a little off. Anaya was hiding in the bathroom, unable to bring herself to face the professor. She felt guilty, afraid of what Kimberly would say, and terrified of how she now looked. When the two women finally came face-to-face, they froze. The South Asian woman sitting on the sofa looked like a stranger, only Kimberly's signature outfit made it possible to recognize her.

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"Professor Wells?" - she asked, her voice altered too. "Anaya?"

Kimberly's heart skipped as she realized how much her student had changed too. Her eyes were a light blue, her skin porcelain with a faint blush, her hair blonde, and her face softened and reshaped. "Oh my God, Anaya," Kimberly said, swallowing hard. "You're... you're white."

"How are you feeling?" The now brown-skinned professor reached out instinctively, touching Anaya's forehead, checking for any sign of fever or distress. Anaya looked away, her face flushing in embarrassment. "I feel fine now," Anaya replied, biting her lip. "But I'm... I'm so sorry, Professor. I didn't mean for this to happen. I feel terrible. I gave you my dark skin, and I stole yours I'm... fair and beautiful."

"That's irrelevant, Anaya," she said, dismissing her student's concerns. "The most important thing is that you're healthy and stable. We're lucky the change was quick enough to avoid major issues while our cells were in the middle of rewriting themselves." She paused. "The problem is that I did something really wrong and I might be radiated by the University. But that's also secondary." "Professor Wells, you should never pay for this! It was my mistake, not yours. You can't take the blame for me."

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Kimberly held up a hand, silencing her gently. "Anaya, listen to me. As your professor, I'm responsible. You only did what I asked. I'll deal with the university". Both women fell silent, the weight of their shared responsibility pressing heavily on them.

"So," Anaya began cautiously, "I got your DNA, and you got mine?" "Yes."

"And I look like... you did at my age, and vice versa?" Kimberly sighed. "Yeah, more or less. Our bone structure didn't change, but as far as soft tissue goes, yes." She paused, looking at Anaya with mild concern. "Do you have any medical conditions I should know about?"

"No... I'm healthy, just a bit short-sighted."

"Yeah, I noticed my glasses aren't sufficient anymore."

"Professor Wells, why is my hair blonde? I remember your hair was brown."

"I was blonde at your age," she replied, touching the black strands of her new hair. "It darkened as I got older." - the woman replied, realizing how ironic it was saying that since her hair was now jet black.

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Kimberly went to the bathroom to ring the dean and came back in a few minutes.

"Listen, I explained the situation to him. There are... implications. If word got out that a student at Imperial College was, well, 'whitewashed' as a result of a lab accident, the university's credibility would be irreparably damaged. After Brexit, we've already lost so many international students. If this leaked, we'd be a laughingstock. To avoid that, the university has agreed to offer you a substantial financial settlement on the condition that you don't sue or speak publicly about what happened. Additionally, you'll be issued a new student ID, under the name Ann Rayleigh. You would attend classes as... well, as a new student."

Anaya swallowed, processing the idea of living under a new identity. "Of course," she said quietly. "I'll accept it if it means I can protect you and the university. But... what about you?"

Kimberly looked down for a moment, then met Anaya's gaze. "Professor Kimberly Wells will be officially transferred to the University of Sydney." She smiled slightly, though there was a hint of sadness behind it. "Here, I'll begin a new role as Kutsiya Khan, a British-Bangladeshi geneticist. Not a professor though, just a researcher." "I'm sorry". "It's ok, it's a small price to pay."

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Kimberly had one more person to talk to, her husband. She came back home, looking nothing like herself anymore.

"Babe, I'm back home. There's something I need to tell you though. Please, don't freak out. There's been a lab accident, I'm fine but I... look different, I have the DNA of one of my students. I have been changing all day." - she told him, calling him by phone.

"Wow, ok. So that was no tan and contacts, earlier?"

"No. And I have changed more."

A moment later, she opened the front door, and Alex's jaw dropped. "Holy...! That's... that's insane! You look... fully Indian."

"Bengali," she corrected him, stepping inside. She explained the whole accident, sparing none of the details.

"Is there... any chance the device could swap you back?"

"The apparatus is being declared unsafe and decommissioned. I'm afraid this is it."

"It's alright. I'll support and love you, no matter what."

"Aww, Alex!" She smiled, feeling an unexpected warmth bubble up as he held her close.

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"But we need to be more open and closer now. From now on, please tell me everything, alright?" Alex said gently. Kimberly nodded. "Oh, and one more thing, this new persona you'll be should be different from you. We don't want anyone picking up that my 'new partner' has the same taste and personality as my ex-wife. It'd be too suspicious. And we might start from the looks."

Kimberly sighed "I guess you're right!". "What do you have in mind?"

Kimberly was reluctantly taken by Alex to a trendy beauty parlor she'd never have chosen on her own. She felt uncomfortable but she understood she needed to find a compromise to make her sudden change in looks palatable to her husband. She sat down in a cushy chair, watching her reflection as a young assistant draped a black robe over her shoulders. Meanwhile, Alex was talking to the beautician, a poised Asian woman in her 30s, who nodded at his suggestions, occasionally casting thoughtful glances in Kimberly's direction.

"Nothing too drastic, right?" - she asked the lady, nervous, when she came. She nodded, gently removed Kimberly's glasses, placing them to the side, and began by applying a skincare mask to her new brown skin.

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Kimberly could feel the gentle tugging and combing as the beautician worked on her hair, and she couldn't help but wonder what look they were creating for her. After about fifteen minutes, they removed the mask and began focusing on her face, shaping her brows meticulously, applying a mild skin lightener to bring out the warmth of her complexion, and layering on makeup with precision. The chair was positioned away from the mirror, keeping her new look hidden from view. All she could sense was the softness of her now wavy hair and the subtle scents of makeup and skincare products blending in the air.

Finally, after what felt like ages, the beautician stepped back and smiled, her eyes sparkling with satisfaction. "Alright, you're ready."

When the chair turned, Kimberly found herself staring at a woman she could barely recognize. The woman in the mirror had a luminous complexion with a slightly lighter tone, which made her dark eyes stand out even more. Heavy makeup emphasized her high cheekbones and full lips, lending her an almost Bollywood starlet-like glamor, and her hair was now styled into soft black curls that framed her face with a gentle elegance.

"You look five years younger now," the beautician laughed, clearly pleased with her work. "Why hide yourself away like that? You've got such beautiful features!"

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"I guess you're right... Wow, I do look younger! What was that?"

"Just some skincare and cosmetics, I'll give you a sample of the products we used on you in case you're interested."

"Where are my glasses?" - the brown lady asked, forced to be only one or two feet from the mirror.

The beautician gave her a gentle smile and held out a case. "Why don't you try these contacts instead? They'll complement your new look perfectly." As she placed the lenses in her eyes, Alex returned, holding up a striking red cocktail dress. Kimberly stared at it, feeling a mix of nerves and disbelief. "Why don't you put this on?" he said with a grin, handing her the dress.

Kimberly adjusted the dress, tugging at the fabric nervously, her heart pounding. She caught her reflection, hardly recognizing the woman in the mirror: her warm brown skin, the soft black curls framing her face, and eyes that weren't her own.

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"Wow, are you sure all of this is necessary? The contacts, the makeup and this dress! Isn't it... a bit too much?" she asked, a touch of uncertainty in her voice.

Alex leaned in, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "You're stunning," he said, his voice warm. Alex placed his hands reassuringly on her shoulders. "Kutsiya, don't be shy! We talked about this—you'll be introduced to my parents as my new fiancée. You need to make a good impression! You should dress like a young woman in her 30s, not a middle aged professor!"

"Alright," Kutsiya said, her voice firm. "Let's do this."

That evening, they arrived at the restaurant. Kutsiya felt her pulse quicken as they stepped through the front door, her heels clicking against the polished floor. Meeting Alex's family again—this time as "Kutsiya"—was as nerve-wracking as Kutsiya had imagined, if not more. Her stomach churned; she knew his parents had barely tolerated her when she was Kimberly. His mother had subtly, and sometimes not-so-subtly, encouraged him to end their marriage. Now, looking like a Bollywood actress, she hoped they wouldn't sense even a hint of familiarity.

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The atmosphere was heavy as they entered the restaurant, where his parents waited, eyeing her with quiet curiosity. Alex introduced her, giving them the story they had rehearsed—how things hadn't worked out with Kimberly and how he had found a fresh start with "Kutsiya," a new friend who had quickly become his partner. They exchanged greetings, and as they sat, she could feel their eyes appraising her from head to toe, especially her mother-in-law's. She couldn't help but notice the older woman's faint smile of relief. *Probably glad Kimberly is officially out of her son's life*, Kimberly thought wryly, holding back an eye roll.

"So," Alex's father began, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully, "Alex mentioned you grew up here?" "Yes," she replied, her voice calm and polished, despite her nerves.

"Fourth generation. My great-grandparents moved to Kent from Bangladesh." They looked taken aback. "You sound like you've spent your life reading Austen aloud!" Alex's father remarked, a touch of surprise in his voice. "Much more refined English than most people around here." - Alex's mother commented. "Especially the youngsters" - Alex's father added.

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She allowed herself a small smile. "Thank you, I am British though. I grew up in Kent," she said. "Though, not everyone is able to see past the surface. Some people, still find it hard to treat me as 'one of them'." Alex's mother, who had once barely disguised her distaste for Kimberly, now looked on her with newfound sympathy. "How terrible," she murmured. "It must be exhausting, feeling like you're never fully accepted." "It's... complicated," Kimberly replied, sensing that they wanted a more personal story. She decided to lean into it. "Growing up, I was often seen as too 'white' by my family's community. I don't speak Bengali, and there's this phrase I've heard before—'coconut,' white on the inside, brown on the outside. It's hard to fit in fully anywhere."

Oddly, this family, which had once been so critical of her as Kimberly, was now looking at her with something close to affection. She smirked internally; *they're falling for this*, she thought.

When dinner was served, his parents seemed hesitant. The table was set with ham and a fine bottle of wine, and Kimberly could feel their discomfort, wondering if she would refuse the meal.

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She smiled reassuringly. "No worries, please. I grew up on pork and wine—I don't have any special requirements."

Alex's mother looked relieved, and even a bit impressed. "It's so wonderful that you've embraced the culture here so well, Kutsiya," she said, her voice almost affectionate. Kimberly just nodded, taking a sip of wine, her heart calm now that she knew she had them.

"You seem so nice, Kutsy" Alex's mother said, mispronouncing her new name with an affectionate smile. "I tell you, Alex's ex was such a bore!"

Kimberly felt her face flush. "I heard she was a distinguished professor," she replied carefully, feeling an odd twist of embarrassment.

Alex's mother scoffed. "More like a professional bore!"

Kimberly hid her smile behind her wine glass, thinking, *If only they knew.*

In the car ride home, Kimberly exhaled deeply, her head leaning back against the seat. "That was exhausting," she muttered. "But... I think it went well." Alex glanced over, a proud smile on his face. "You were perfect. They adored you."

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For Anaya—now Anna—the transformation was far from smooth. Though her DNA had changed, the shy, geeky girl she had always been lingered in her demeanor, sticking to her quiet routines and her modest, practical wardrobe.

Anaya's old bullies were amused by the sudden disappearance of the nerd brown girl they used to bully - "They probably didn't renew her visa because she wasn't even that good as a student anyway, haha" - they said.

Looking for a new victim, they noticed the new blonde girl with glasses but they didn't target her as much compared to her old life, she only got the odd "nerd" thrown her way, partially because their leader, a redhead girl named Sheila, was something of a racist and loved bullying students with an immigrant background.

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They decided she would be the perfect replacement for Anaya to do their assignment, since they had no time for boring stuff like that. Anna accepted her old role, glad that they at least weren't picking on her that much anymore.

It wasn't until she noticed subtle changes in how others responded to her that things began to shift for Anna. Her longtime crush, a fellow student of mixed heritage she had admired from afar, suddenly seemed to notice her more.

He'd catch her eye in class, smile in the hallway, start small conversations that left her heart racing. Encouraged by Kutsiya, Anna began to experiment with her look. She swapped her geeky girl outfits for pink sweaters first and more revealing tops and slim-fit jeans later. She added a touch of makeup too. Gradually, her style evolved into something chic yet understated, all while maintaining her focus on academics.

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Months later, her crush invited her to a party. She reached out to Kutsiya for advice.

"Another night out?" Kutsiya teased over the phone. "You're becoming quite the social butterfly."

"Not really" Anna said, nervous and excited. "But... I think I want to show a bit more of the confident side. Not too much."

"Leave it to me," Kutsiya replied. "Come over, and we'll make sure you're ready."

At Kutsiya's flat, Anna found herself in the familiar chair in front of the mirror. Though Anna's natural beauty required little enhancement, Kutsiya showed her how to use makeup to highlight her new features. With a completely different color palette to work with, Anna's limited experience with cosmetics was now irrelevant. Her hair was styled in loose waves that framed her face effortlessly. She slipped into a simple but elegant dress that hugged her figure just enough to feel sophisticated.

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Heads turned, and the buzz of conversation quieted briefly when she walked in. The evening was filled with light-hearted conversation, laughter, and shared stories. Her confidence grew as she realized she could feel comfortable in any setting, her charm shining through in her party attire..

Her crush found her quickly, offering her a drink. They talked, laughed, and at one point, he leaned in closer, looking into her eyes. "You know," he said softly, "you look beautiful without your glasses." Anna's cheeks flushed. She looked down, smiling shyly. "Thank you, I tried contacts for once!" she managed, her heart fluttering.

That night, walking home, she felt a rush of emotions. She couldn't help but smile, thinking of herself as Cinderella—revealing her beauty for a fleeting midnight, only to return to her unassuming life as a diligent student.

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The following day, Anna sat in the university library, tapping away at her laptop. It was a quiet afternoon, and the usual crowd of students shuffled between desks, their heads buried in books. A familiar group of her former tormentors came in, laughing loudly in the quiet library.

"Hey, nerd!" one of them called out, swaggering over to her desk. "Need you to help us with this assignment. You're, like, a genius, right?"

Anna gave them a polite smile, suppressing a laugh. She had always found it amusing how oblivious they were. These were the same students who used to tease and take advantage of her when she was Anaya. Now, they saw her as the university's blonde geeky girl.

One of the girls leaned in, her tone conspiratorial. "You know, there was this Indian girl here before you, Anaya or something. She used to do all our assignments. Total geek."

Anna raised an eyebrow, keeping her expression neutral.

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"Oh? Sounds like she was helpful," she said, fighting back a grin.

"Yeah" another one, the chimed in, shaking their head, "Anyway, she must've dropped out or something. They probably took away her visa, haha! Now we're stuck with you."

Anna chuckled inwardly, enjoying the irony. They had no idea that the "geeky Indian girl" they once bossed around was now sitting in front of them. She relished the thought of continuing this quiet deception, showing them up academically during the day and watching them envy her as the "blonde bombshell".

"Well," she said, sliding their notes back toward them, "I'm happy to help you stay on top of your work."

They laughed, clearly missing the sarcasm in her voice. "That's what we like about you, Anna. You're a good girl. See you later, loser!"

Anna smirked as they walked away, shaking her head. *If only they knew.*