



THE BECKER TEST

a short story

by

ANDREW D. DOAN

The Becker Test

by Andrew D. Doan

Kim sat at the kitchen table, drops of water falling from her hair, and wondered if she'd have the nerve to kill someone when the time came. Rain pummeled the window above the sink as the ceiling light cast her shadow, oblong and dingy, across the yellowed linoleum.

She heard the jingle of keys and ran to pull open the door before Dylan turned the deadbolt.

There he was, dripping with a smile. "Hey, Babe! I was hoping to get here before you so I could surprise you with . . ." He crouched down and picked up a bouquet of bright wildflowers. ". . . these!"

"Oh—thank you." She pecked him lightly on the cheek, then brought the bouquet to the table. Dylan still stood in the doorway.

"Seems like you could get a *little* excited about the flowers . . . or me."

"Sorry. It was a rough day. This stupid rain isn't helping anything."

"What about yesterday? And the day before that? The last few weeks?"

She gripped the fabric straps of the grocery-filled shopping bags on the tabletop. "What are you talking about?"

"I feel like I've lost you to some . . . brainwash or something. You keep canceling. And you're distracted whenever we talk." He finally crossed the threshold and closed the door behind him.

"I just got home. I'm soaked, and I'm tired. That's all." She sat in the nearest chair and lowered one of the grocery bags to the floor beside her.

"You're . . . different lately. Jumpy. On pins and needles all the time." He sat across from her. "It was the guy on the call, wasn't it?"

She didn't answer.

"I know that sometimes . . ." He tried to word it carefully. ". . . sometimes you let things overwhelm you and—"

"And . . . what?"

"Kim, I love you, and I'm not trying to be unkind at all. But I have to say—I think you've allowed this Genetica thing to get into your head way too much. You're losing sight of who you really are."

Kim stood up and walked to the sink, where she grabbed a tall glass from the drying rack and filled it with tap water. He stared at the curls cascading down her back as she drank the entire glass. "Crimes

of confidence and crimes of coercion,” he heard her say under her breath.

Turning around, she lifted the grocery bag from the floor back onto the table. Then she pulled out a carton of eggs, a loaf of bread, and a rigid black case the size of a hardcover novel.

“What’s that?” Dylan asked.

Kim set the case on the table and clicked open the latch, lifting the lid and letting it hit the table with a smack.

Packed tightly into the foam padding was a handgun with a silver barrel and a rubber grip.

3 WEEKS EARLIER

. . . *Connecting* . . .

. . . *Connecting* . . .

. . . *Thank you for your patience as we connect the video call. Your profile specialist will be with you shortly . . .*

. . . *Connecting* . . .

Kim stared at her laptop on the kitchen table, waiting for the consultation to begin. She clicked on one of the open adjacent tabs.

Kim and Dylan’s Wedding Registry

#KylanIt

#OurAdventureBegins

#HappilyEverAfter

She scrolled through the registry items they’d selected until she heard a trill of wind chimes from the laptop’s speakers.

“Hello?” she called out, switching to the original tab.

“Hi! Kim?”

“Yes, it’s me.”

She could see the face of a young man with slick dark hair and glossy whitened teeth on the screen. He wore a light-green polo shirt, and Kim could make out the letters of a small logo on the left side of his chest.

GENETICA

“Good morning, Kim. My name is Brian. How’s your day going so far?”

She felt self-conscious chatting with this handsome, smiling stranger through her computer screen.

“Oh, it’s been pretty good, I guess. A little stressful.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Brian spoke clearly, with buoyant energy.

“It’s the good kind of stress.” She beamed. “I’m getting married in 64 days. I’ve spent the morning working on wedding details.”

“Well, congratulations to you!” He nearly shouted with joy.

“Thanks.”

“I’m sure you’ve got plenty more details to get to, so I’ll keep things nice and concise. Sound good?”

She nodded.

Brian’s tone changed just enough to indicate that he was moving beyond small talk to the business at hand.

“I want to begin by thanking you for choosing Genetica. There are a number of companies out there that offer similar services, but I believe we do the best. I hope you’ll agree.”

Kim smiled politely.

“I also want to thank you for agreeing to submit your profile to our Extended Research Program. The more samples we obtain, the more incredible breakthroughs we’ll achieve. Your contribution brings us one step closer to our goals for the future.”

“You’re welcome.” Kim hoped she didn’t sound as awkward as she felt.

Brian eyes shifted to the right as he looked at a document on his computer screen. “Now, there are a couple of legal hoops we need to jump through before we get to the good stuff. First, I need to let you know that this call is being recorded for quality control and training purposes. Second, I need to ask you—do you agree to allow me to open your profile on my screen, look through the contents, and discuss them with you on this call?”

“You mean, you haven’t looked at it yet?”

“No. We use a modified double-blind system here at Genetica. This means that the person who compiled your genetic data into a profile doesn’t know who you are. To them, you were just a number on a screen. On the other side, I had no involvement in the compilation or interpretation of your data. I don’t know what’s in your profile until you give me permission to open it.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Do you agree to allow me to open your profile on my screen, look through the contents, and discuss them with you on this call?”

Kim nodded.

“I’m sorry, but I’m required to get a verbal response from you.”

“Oh! Sorry. Yes, I agree to let you look at my profile.”

“Great! One last thing here. I need to let you know that several aspects of our work in the ERP—”

“The what?” All this legalese was making her increasingly nervous.

“The Extended Research Program.”

“Oh. Of course.” She wished he couldn’t see her blush.

“Several aspects of our work in the ERP are relatively new in the field of genetic research. This doesn’t mean that anything you hear today is unreliable or unscientific. It simply means that you are part of cutting-edge research. As we achieve new breakthroughs our interpretation of your profile will grow and improve. It’s an exciting process, and we’re thrilled to have you as a part of it!”

“Sounds good to me.”

“All right! Let’s open this up and take a look, shall we?”

Kim held in her breath as a document appeared on her screen. It looked to her like a tax form or loan application.

“Okay,” said Brian, “you should see a copy of your profile.”

“I do.”

“Perfect! The first section is about your ethnicity. You should’ve already received an email with an attachment outlining the basics.”

“Yes, I got it last night.”

“Great! Any surprises?”

“Not really. I’ve been doing a lot of ancestry research for a couple of years and putting together my family tree, so most of it was stuff I already knew.”

“Fantastic. Now, the second section is where things really start to get fun. This is what we call our High Achievement Indicators and References section. This series of tests is based on the hypothesis that everyone is destined to be a high achiever in some way or another. Although not everyone is going to be a premier athlete or surgeon, we at Genetica believe that everyone has something great inside of them. Literally. As our motto says, ‘Amazing discoveries are in your fingertips.’”

“Cool.”

Brian paused to scan through her profile on his screen. “So . . . it looks like you have the genetic markers most often associated with high achievement in organizational and spatial tasks. Many people with these same markers have excelled as architects, interior designers, event planners, and even film directors.”

“That’s really interesting because I started my freshman year with an interior design major. I mean, I ended up changing it to finance, but still . . .”

“Keep in mind that these genetic markers merely indicate a potential predisposition toward certain skill sets. Those skills can be successfully deployed in any number of career fields. Let’s move on to the section on health and wellness. The good news is that your profile has very few flags on it.”

“Flags?”

“That’s the term we use for genetic indicators of potential health problems. You have a small number, and they are not associated with any major health issues.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” She had been scrolling as he talked. “What’s the Becker Test? That sounds interesting.”

Brian’s pleasant demeanor faded slightly. “I think you may have skipped ahead of me.”

“Oh! I’m sorry. I was just scrolling a bit.”

“I suppose we can jump ahead to that section.”

“No, please! I didn’t mean to interrupt your presentation. I tend to be impatient.” She forced a chuckle. “Where’s the genetic marker for that?”

Brian’s smile returned as he recovered his equilibrium. “Kim, it’s absolutely fine. Please don’t feel badly. This is *your* profile. We can talk through any part at any time. This is all about you, not me or some presentation.”

“Okay, but I was just peeking ahead.” She was still flustered.

“The Becker Test is one of our newest and most ambitious research endeavors. We’ve only been working on it for about ten months now. The test is named after Dr. Herman Becker, a geneticist who has spent his entire career working in the field of crime prevention and victim empowerment.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Yes. Very important stuff. His latest branch of research focuses specifically on what we refer to as crimes of confidence and crimes of coercion. Crimes of confidence are instances where someone manipulates a person’s trust to gain an advantage or inflict

harm. Examples of this are things like financial scams, fraud, and identity theft. The term *crimes of coercion* refers to more aggressive actions designed to gain advantage or inflict harm, such as kidnapping, assault, ransom demands, and domestic abuse. Dr. Becker's theory is that there are certain genetic markers associated with this type of criminal event—"

"Wait, are you saying my genes will force me to become a criminal?"

"No, you're misunderstanding. The Becker Test identifies those who are more likely to be the victims of such crimes."

Kim felt as though he'd reached through the computer screen and punched her in the stomach. A weight pressed down on her. Brian's voice, drifting from the laptop's speakers, became a rhythmic drone as she tried to keep from slumping to the linoleum below.

"So what did you do?"

Dylan and Kim were sitting in her living room that evening—Kim curled up in the recliner and Dylan perched on the edge of the couch.

"I tried to act like nothing was wrong, but I felt so light-headed and edgy. I think he could tell I was upset because he started saying it was only a test and not a fail-proof method of predicting the future."

"Hmph! A little late to bring that up."

"I really tried to hear what he was saying, but I eventually had to cut off the call. I was about to throw up." Kim stared past Dylan, hugging her knees to her chest.

He reached over and rubbed her shoulder. "Babe, I'm so sorry. What an awful thing to hear. I didn't even know you'd ordered one of those testing kits."

"I thought it would be fun. It seemed like it would add to the family tree stuff I've been doing."

"Well, I'm pretty pissed about how they handled the whole thing. It's one thing to tell a person they're likely to have kids with brown eyes. It's another thing to tell them they're a potential target of violence. What business do they have even testing for things like that?"

"I gave them permission, Dylan. I signed up for the Extended Research Program."

“Yes, but you didn’t know you were signing up for that particular test, did you?”

“No . . . not specifically . . . but I didn’t read all the legal stuff they had on there before I clicked *Agree*.”

“Of course not. Nobody reads those. They make them so freaking long and complicated on purpose. It’s all just a big scam.”

“A scam. Yeah. And I fell for it.”

Dylan scrambled. “Oh! I’m sorry. I wasn’t meaning it like that.”

“I know.” Kim rested her head on her knees. “What should I do?”

“What do you mean?”

“About my genetic profile. The report?”

“You delete the stupid thing and forget all about it!”

“I can’t just forget about it! It’s not like I can un-hear what the guy said to me.”

Dylan moved to sit on the arm of the recliner, wrapping Kim’s shoulders in his grip. “I know you’re upset about this—you have good reason to be—but I want you to know something. After you texted me, I went online to see what I could find about this Becker guy and his stupid test.”

Kim looked up at him. “What did you find?”

“I’m not gonna say *crackpot scientist* ’cause the guy has done a lot of good work, but he’s definitely got some strange theories too. Especially over the last decade, he’s received a lot of criticism for his methods and conclusions. The bottom line is—I don’t think this genetic test they’re using is by any means a sure thing. There are plenty of articles out there that call its credibility into question so I don’t think you have anything to worry about, okay?” He smiled at her.

“It was right about my major.”

“What?”

“My genetic profile says I have a predisposition for interior design. That was my major my freshman year.”

“So?”

“So . . . if the testing was right about that, it might be right about the other stuff too. I might have a predisposition to be a victim.”

He pulled her closer to his side. “No! No! That’s just not true, Kim. I refuse to believe that. You’re a smart, strong, confident woman. You’re beautiful and amazing, and I just won’t accept that you have some stupid gene that makes you a target.” He kissed her forehead. “Okay?”

Kim nodded.

“And there’s something else you’re not considering,” Dylan continued.

“What’s that?”

He stood up and flexed both arms. “You’ve got me! My apartment’s only ten minutes away, and in just a few more weeks we’ll be together all the time! See? You got nothing to worry about.”

Dylan took her hand and gently pulled her out of the chair and into a hug. She could tell he wanted to linger in the embrace, but she stepped back.

“I think I just want to be alone.”

He couldn’t mask his disappointment. “You sure? I can stick around for a while.”

“Nah. I’m very tired, and I have an early morning tomorrow. Mom and I are supposed to meet with the florist.”

“You sure?”

Kim nodded.

In the doorway she kissed him goodbye and watched him walk down the hall. At the top of the stairwell, he turned back toward her and smiled.

“Everything’s gonna be just fine, okay? Forget that stupid test.”

She smiled faintly and waved, “Good night! Love you.”

Kim closed the door, locked the doorknob, and turned the deadbolt with a flick of her wrist. She turned around with her back against the wood and slid slowly to the floor.

Then she thrust her fist against her mouth and burst into muffled sobs.

The moment she left her lobby, she noticed with a jolt of nerves that a man in a red shirt had begun to walk in the same direction as she was going.

Most days, she left home early enough to stop for coffee or a muffin on the five-block walk to work. Occasionally, she detoured to sit for a few minutes on a park bench and breathe in the morning. Today, she hurried to the office. Each jostle from the other pedestrians crowding the sidewalk felt electrified.

Her phone buzzed in her purse.

“Hello?”

“Hi, honey, it’s Mom.”

“What’s up?”

“Nice to hear from you too! We need to talk about wedding cakes.”

Kim ignored the sarcasm. “Do we have to right now?”

Her mother sighed. “I guess not, Kim, but we’re getting down to the wire with this caterer. You have to make some final decisions soon or we could lose the deposit.”

Kim threw a glance over her shoulder. The man in the red shirt continued to follow her.

Kim’s mom rambled on. “I’m not sure what’s gotten into you lately, but I wish you’d figure it out. This isn’t my wedding to plan, you know.”

“I know.”

At an intersection, she paused. A right turn would take her two blocks on to her office building. Instead, she went straight.

“Now, I was thinking the marble cake was a good choice, but the vanilla with raspberry filling was very tasty. Which one did you like?”

“Yes, it was.”

“Which one, Kim?”

She didn’t want to keep looking behind her, but she couldn’t resist the urge. When she spotted him, he looked down at the sidewalk.

“Um . . . either one is fine.”

“That’s not helpful. Which one do you like more?”

Kim crossed the next street to go up one more block before circling around to her office building from the opposite direction.

“I . . . I’m not sure. I’ll have to think about . . .”

“Kim? Are you still there?”

Once out of the street, she looked back. The red shirt was crossing over to the opposite block.

He was leaving her alone.

“Kim? Hello?”

She tried to control her breathing and the nauseous tickle in her throat as she raced down the last block.

“Mom. Can I call you later?”

“I guess so. Call me when you can.”

Inside the lobby, Kim moved past the elevators to the restrooms and burst into the nearest empty stall, slumping to the floor in front of the toilet.

A few minutes later, she leaned her head back against the stall door and fished her phone out of her purse.

“Hi, Lana, it’s Kim. Listen, I’m not feeling well at all. I think I might be fighting some sort of flu bug or something. I just don’t think it would be good for me to come into the office today . . .”

“What is that?” Dylan asked, staring at the black case.

“It’s a Glock 19 compact 9mm handgun.” Kim said it as if she was reciting facts for a test.

“No. I mean—” Dylan was flustered. “Why do you have it?”

“Protection.”

“How’d you get it?”

“I bought it. Legally.”

“Of course, Kim. I know you’d never break the law.”

“I might.”

The chill in her voice set him off. “Come on! What the heck is happening here?” His chair scraped the floor as he stood up.

“I don’t know what to make of this—you! This is—” He ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head.

“Just say what you’re trying to say, Dylan.”

“This isn’t us!” he yelled. “It’s not who we are.”

She sat in her chair, hands resting on either side of the weapon. She didn’t look up at him.

“Is it?” he asked.

Kim shrugged, but Dylan pressed the issue. “I don’t think it is. Remember that long conversation we had at lunch during our senior year? With Tonya and Jake?”

“Right after the Clarksville shooting.”

“Yeah. They both kept coming back to rights and freedoms, but we saw it differently—both of us. I think it was the first time we took a stand on something together. Even in high school, you were confident

in your ideas. Thoughtful. I loved that. It's how I knew I wanted to be with you forever." He sat down again and took her by the hands.

She relaxed her fingers in his grip, letting them rest lightly against his palms. "You want the gun for protection, but have you really thought through what that means? A gun will only protect you if you're willing to use it, Kim."

"I know."

"Do you really? It's not like in the movies. That time my dad killed someone in the line of duty . . . I've never seen him so emotional. It was really bad."

"You've told me about it."

"I was only eight. I still remember it. I look back now and think that he went through some sort of PTSD or something."

"He probably did." Every word from her sounded detached. "Hard to forget something like that."

"My point is, running out and buying a handgun might not be the best way to handle this situation."

"Then what is the best way to handle the situation?"

He felt unnerved by her calculated responses.

"I think we both need to keep this genetic profile stuff in context. It's educated guessing, not prophecy."

"When he told me about my test result it was like . . ." She couldn't find the words.

"I know. It was awful. Horrible. Suddenly you're thinking of yourself as just a number. A statistic in some guy's research."

"It's more than just research. He knows what he's talking about."

"He *thinks* he knows what he's talking about, but in the end it's just a theory! He says that eight out of ten crime victims have this genetic marker, but he doesn't *know* that it has anything to do with the crime. He thinks it does, but he doesn't know it. He's just guessing."

"Maybe."

"Okay then. Maybe he's wrong. Don't you see? That's my whole point." He leaned forward in his chair, his face just a few inches from hers. "Just because it happened to those eight out of ten doesn't mean it will happen to you."

"What if it already has?"

"What do you mean?"

Kim pulled her hands out of his and placed them in her lap. “Dylan. It’s already happened to me.”

Dylan searched her eyes in confusion. Kim stared down at the gun case.

“In high school. I was assaulted . . . sexually.” Her own words seemed to disgust her. “Raped. I was raped.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It was the night of homecoming our sophomore year. After the football game. Remember, I worked the concession booth?” Dylan nodded. “I stayed late to clean up while everyone else went to parties. Hannah Goswick was on duty to help me, but she was just dying to get over to Jeremy’s place. He had some big thing going at his house.”

“Jeremy Hill?”

“Yeah. She begged me to cover for her, and I said I would. She left. It happened right as I was finishing up—” Her face was pallid. “It was just after 10:30.”

In the silence, anger simmered in Dylan’s chest. “Who?”

Kim answered without hesitation. “Tanner.”

“McClosky?” Kim nodded. “Why was he even around? He should’ve been out partying with everyone else.”

“I don’t know. He was there.”

“Coach Williams wasn’t around? Or Mr. Harris?”

“Dylan, it happened. I don’t know where everyone was. I don’t know why Tanner was there. I don’t know! It just . . . happened.”

“Who else knows?”

Kim tapped a finger on her chest bone, then pointed at Dylan.

“And Tanner.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

“You never . . . why didn’t you . . .”

“It was Tanner McClosky. That’s why.”

“Do you know where he is now?”

“Last I heard he had moved out West.” She leaned forward and looked him over cautiously. “Why?”

“I don’t know. I’m—shocked. Trying to sort all of this out.”

Her hands pulled the black case toward her and clicked it shut.

“Are you going to keep the gun?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I don’t think you should.” He spoke firmly. “I think it’s a mistake. Misguided. It’s not who you really are.”

“Why are you hanging my whole identity on this one thing?”

“I could ask you the same question.” He blurted it out sharply, and Kim’s eyes watered up. “I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have said that.”

“But you did, Dylan.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“You think I’m overreacting. Just making an emotional decision without thinking it through.”

“I’m just trying to say that there might be some better ways to handle—”

She shrugged. “I think you should go.” Her voice was soft and somber.

“Please don’t do that, Kim. I’m not trying to be a jerk. I’m playing catchup here. And I don’t know what the right thing is.”

“Yeah. That feeling kinda sucks, huh?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know. But I think I need some space right now.”

“You sure?”

“I want to be alone, Dylan. I’ll call you tomorrow. I promise.”

They hugged stiffly and uncertainly. Dylan closed the apartment door softly, leaving Kim at the table. Next to the gun case was the wildflower bouquet. A few droplets of water still glistened on its petals as the rain pounded the window.

Dylan

Today 2:34am

You awake?

...

Yes. You?

Can’t sleep.

Me neither.

...

Can we FaceTime?

...

Sure.

Kim tapped the green button on her screen and Dylan's face appeared, bleary eyed and pale. She propped herself up with some pillows against the headboard and pulled her legs toward her chest. She used one hand to balance the phone on her knees.

Dylan spoke first. "Are you okay?"

Kim shrugged.

"I'm sorry for the things I said earlier. I didn't handle it well. Please forgive me."

Her reply was instant, almost reflexive. "I do."

She could tell he was searching her eyes on his smartphone screen, trying to determine what she was thinking. "I love you, Kim, and I just want to be sure—"

"I'm keeping it," she said firmly. "At least . . . for now."

She watched him mull it over.

"Okay."

Kim exhaled sharply and leaned further back into her pillows.

"I love you, Dylan."

"I love you too."

"Can you stay on for a while? I haven't been able to fall asleep."

"Sure."

She plugged a charging cable into her phone, then nestled into the blankets and laid the phone a few inches from her head. The glow from the screen cast elongated shadows on the walls and ceiling until the sun rose the next morning.