

Fortune Favours the Warned

Jenny Young

First Place

This was the first Crime Story I picked up from the entries received, and from the moment I started reading I was hooked. Your story had all the elements of a great crime novel. I loved how you were able to bring the story together without losing me as the reader. You offered me suspense and excitement and drama. It was perfect. I remembered thinking, "Boy, the other stories are going to have to be very good to beat this", and I was right. While a few came close, none of them could match the curiosity your short story was able to bring out. I would, however, have liked a more "rounded-off" ending to the ordeal. Maybe a little action with the arrest or a little more thought put into the events of the following morning, but that is just my personal preference. Congratulations on being the **winner** for March, it is indeed well deserved! This was an excellent piece of writing.

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By

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1990 words

It was supposed to be a celebration. Andy Walters loosened his tie a fraction and unbuttoned his top button. The press conference had been a formal occasion. He was much more comfortable in jeans and a lab coat. He eyed the neatly wrapped chop sticks suspiciously. Chinese would not have been his choice.

Across the table, Raymond Redner, his technician, was engaging Penny, the Herald reporter, in flirtatious small talk. He had invited her to join the celebration. Andy sipped his coke. He glanced to the head of the table where Professor Marcus was enjoying a deep red glass of Port. It didn't look like the formalities were due to start in the next five minutes. He probably had time to take a quick break.

The bathroom was deserted except for an elderly Chinese man with a mop of grey hair that many would envy. He bowed to Andy.

"You, Doctor Walters?" he asked. Andy nodded. "You make oil companies go poof?" He clapped one hand downwards into his other palm.

“Not for a long time,” said Andy. He adjusted his wire rimmed glasses. “It will take a while before our new technology will come into production.”

The man came closer and leaned towards Andy. “I have message...”

At that moment a younger Chinese man rushed in. “Come, come,” he said, “you are needed in the kitchen.” He hustled the old man out of the door.

Andy’s eyes opened in surprise. They were an odd lot, these Chinese. He wiped his sweaty brow with a paper towel and washed his hands.

They were waiting for him. As he sat down, Professor Marcus stood up and tapped his glass with a spoon.

“I want to propose a toast,” he said, raising his glass high, “to Doctor Andy Walters, soon to be the most famous scientist to come out of Wits University.”

Raymond and Penny joined him.

“To Andy,” said Penny. She smiled at him.

“To the team!” said Raymond.

Andy rose. “To the team.” He raised his glass of coke.

They all sat down. Penny leaned across the table towards Andy. “Doctor Walters, at the press conference you said that the ordinary man in the street will be able to make fuel for his car from his grass clippings and autumn leaves by using your enzyme.” She dimpled at him. “Is that really true?”

“Certainly,” said Andy. He noticed Raymond was glaring at him. Well, why shouldn’t he enjoy the attention of a pretty woman. He took a cylindrical plastic vial out of his pocket. “All he, or she for that matter, needs...” he smiled, “is a teaspoon of this enzyme, a bucket full of grass clippings and some water.” He replaced the vial.

Professor Marcus joined in with his easy charm. “No more queueing at the petrol station, hey, no more heavy transport costs. Even air travel will come down. It will herald a whole new way of life. Best thing for mankind since the silicon chip.” He laughed and rubbed his hands together.

“I did most of the work, you know,” said Raymond. He put his hand on Penny’s shoulder. “What are you going to eat?”

Professor Marcus waved a silk suited arm to the waiter and everybody looked at the menu.

Andy didn’t try to reclaim the limelight. He was not good at social occasions. He tried the chop sticks but after five minutes of battling, he gave up and used the spoon provided.

The professor had generously invited the three people at the table next to theirs to join them. A lot of wine was ordered and consumed. The noise level increased as the professor

entertained the guests with stories of Andy's discovery and some of the failed experiments. Andy felt more and more like a vegetarian at a carvery.

Finally, dessert arrived. Andy didn't order anything but the elderly Chinese gentleman brought him a fortune cookie on a small white plate. "Compliments of house," he said and bowed.

Andy broke open the fortune cookie and unrolled the little scroll. "Your life is in danger. Say nothing to anyone. You must leave the city immediately and never return. Repeat: say nothing to anybody. It would put their life in danger too."

Andy looked around for the old man but there was no sign of him. He put his cell phone to his ear and walked to the door. Nobody noticed. He walked out into the city lights and the 500 metres to his grey Volkswagen Polo.

He hadn't driven more than a block when he had to stop at a red robot. A bright light flashed behind him and he heard a deafening "boom!" A red Mazda screeched from behind him and whizzed past on the wrong side of the road, going right through the red robot. He thought the number plate was the chemical symbol for zinc oxide but his brain unscrambled it to ZN 02 SS GP.

Andy looked back. The Chinese restaurant was in flames. As he watched, part of the roof caved in. He felt his whole body shake like a vibrating cell phone in slow motion. He tried to think calmly. On either side of the street, people fizzed out of restaurants and began running. In both directions.

The light changed. Andy felt adrenalin surge. He accelerated. The fortune cookie had been no joke. He headed towards the person he trusted the most in the world, his big brother, Matt.

It was after midnight when Andy got to the small plot along the Vaal river just outside Orkney. Matt lived a very secluded life. He had no address and even Google Maps had no idea that his slice of land existed. Where Andy had gone into chemical engineering, Matt had gone into computer programming and was probably the best hacker in the country. He was employed by the army but there was no record of that either.

Andy hid his car in the disused barn outside the caravan park and opened the recessed secret door to access the communication system. Matt didn't look like he'd been asleep. His hair looked dishevelled but that was pretty normal.

"Matt, I'm in trouble," said Andy. His hand still shook. "I need your help."

Later, dressed in his brother's tracksuit with his hands around a large cup of coffee, Andy told Matt the story.

“Are you sure that’s what the old gentleman said, ‘You make oil companies go poof?’”
Matt leaned forward.

“Quite sure,” said Andy. He took another sip of coffee and noticed that his knuckles were white. He relaxed his fingers consciously.

Matt was holding his head in both hands, tugging at his auburn hair. “Did your team ever stop to think what your invention might mean to oil companies?” he asked, “that they might see it as a threat to their very existence?” “Hell’s bells, Man, you scientists are so naive!” He banged on his armrest in frustration.

“Did you publish the actual chemical formula of your enzyme? Would other scientists be able to duplicate it from what is in your paper?” Matt’s blue eyes bored into Andy.

“Not really.” Andy sounded uncertain. He adjusted his glasses. “The Professor wanted to patent it. The paper is more about how we tested the enzyme. We called it ‘*Compound X*’. The results were really amazing, you know.” A thin smile crossed his narrow face for a second.

“Does anybody besides you know the formula?”

“Well, Raymond, my technician, did a lot of the runs with me. I think he could replicate it...” Andy stopped mid-sentence, his eyes wide. He felt sick. “Raymond might be dead.”

Matt looked at his brother levelly. “You could be dead. This is a serious matter.” He straightened his shoulders as if he was ready to go into action. “We have to contact the police and maybe even the FBI. Meanwhile we need to keep you safe.” His jaw tightened grimly. “It is obvious that somebody, maybe somebody with a link to the oil industry, wants you dead and hopes that the knowledge of your ‘*Compound X*’ will disappear.” He put his beefy hand on his brother’s bony shoulder. “You are going to send an e mail to *Scientific American* and any scientists you know in your own field and tell them exactly how to make buckets of *Compound X*. Is your laptop with you?”

Andy nodded. “But what about our patent? The professor will be furious.”

“The Professor might not even be alive.” Matt was brutal. “You have to decide whether you want to be rich or live. If *Compound X* is common property, there would be no point in killing another gangly scientist.”

“Let’s get going. I am going to try to find the owner of that Mazda.”

For the next hour, only the sounds of computer keys clacking and the occasional mechanical beep could be heard. Andy sat at the dining room table while Matt sat at his desk, surrounded by three computers. He broke the silence first. “Bingo! The car belongs to a car rent-

al agency.” He settled more comfortably in his chair. “Now I just need to go into their records and we’ll have a name. How are you doing?”

“Just checking before I push send.” Andy’s palms were sweaty. He was about to give away his last five years work.

Matt gave a low whistle. “This is bigger than I thought,” he said. That rental car was paid for from a bank account linked to Isis.”

Andy gave a start, knocking his coffee cup onto the floor. As he bent to retrieve it, something whizzed over his head.

“Down!” shouted Matt. He dropped to the ground and started slithering towards the kitchen door. “You must have been followed. Otherwise they put a tracking device on your car.”

Andy hit the floor. Then he remembered. He reached up and felt for the mouse. He was going to have to risk it. If they shot him, at least his invention would be safe. He took a deep breath. He felt sweat prickle on his brow. He popped his head up long enough only to position the mouse and click send. Another bullet whizzed past his head and hit the wall with a thud. Andy flopped. Matt pulled him along by the leg. They made it to the kitchen.

“Quick,” whispered Matt, “into the pantry. There is a secure area behind it.” He lifted the baked beans and the whole back shelf moved noiselessly aside. They stepped into a small room with a flight of steps going down. “I’ve activated the support team,” said Matt. He led the way down the white tiled stairs. “The snipers should show up in about five minutes.”

“Wow,” said Andy. “I didn’t know you had all this.” He looked at his brother with a new respect. At the bottom of the stairs was a whole apartment, a little kitchenette, bathroom and shower, a bedroom with bunk beds and a large desk with another three computers.

“My job is a very dangerous one,” said Matt. “This is not the first time I’ve bunkered down. The army looks after its own, you know.”

By morning it was on all the news channels.

“A major Isis cell was cracked wide open last night when special forces killed four terrorists in the Vaal area. Two of the men were identified as having been seen leaving the Chinese restaurant, Lotus Flower, minutes before the bomb detonated which killed seven people. The body of Doctor Andrew Walters, the inventor of the grass cutting petrol kit, has not been found. There are rumours that he might have escaped as scientists from around the world received e mails purporting to have come from him late last night.”

“I’d better go out there and show myself,” said Andy, tucking into the last scone that Matt had produced from somewhere.

“You’d better,” said Matt. “Just keep me out of it, will you.”