

Feathers and Steel - William, Year 6, NSW

Charlie Stone relaxed into his old rocking chair, watching cows graze in the fields as ducks squawked and waddled across the fields of Georgia. You could see the neighbours pottering around their barn house, smiling and waving to him and his ducks. Charlie did not mind them, and they seemed nice enough. He had outsmarted spies, hackers, and caught the occasional assassin, but nothing prepared him for persistent stubbornness of the Mallard duck. It was Charlie's dream to become a professional duck herder, something he was just beginning to master before he was recruited by the government all those years ago.

Just as the sun had begun to set, Charlie decided to go inside for a quiet night, but as he got up, he heard a ring from his tattered jeans pocket. As he pulled out his phone, he spotted who was calling him.

"Oh no," he quietly muttered to himself. "No, no, no, no, no."

The name was Bryan Mendall, his former boss. Charlie picked up, regretting it the second he did. *No turning back*, he thought to himself.

"Hello," he said in his most casual voice, not wanting to sound annoyed or happy. Or eager.

"Hi Charlie," he replied. Charlie expected him to say something else, perhaps about when his final superannuation would appear in his bank account, but he said nothing. Charlie didn't know what to say so there was awkward silence, but after a few seconds Bryan cut to the chase. "Enough chit chat, I know you only retired yesterday afternoon, but I want you to track down a petty car thief in the town of Freetown. Don't worry, it's an easy one, and I wouldn't have asked you except we're three good men down at the moment."

Charlie sighed, quickly realising that it might be his last chance to boost his retirement funds to help his herding ambitions. "But after this, I want my superannuation and a year's supply of duck feed. Non-negotiable."

"Fine, but you need to arrive at Freetown by midday tomorrow and meet Chief Nora Hill at the town's police station."

"Just remember my duck feed," Charlie reminded him, and went inside to hop straight in his bed and go to sleep, not sure he believed his final job would be "an easy one."

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The morning came too soon. After hours of driving, he arrived at Freetown, and it was not at all what he was expecting. It was 11:26 am and there was not a single person on the street.

Charlie found the large police station easily enough as it was positioned in the dead centre of town. He parked and slowly walked inside. The police station, just like the town, was deserted. He kept on walking to the end of the corridor where he could see a light on. There was a lady sitting at the desk on a computer typing vigorously. She did not seem to notice Charlie coming in. She wore a police uniform with a police cap.

“Ummm hi,” spoke Charlie. The lady jumped, surprised by a visitor as if it wasn’t a common thing.

“Chief Nora Hill, and please don’t interrupt me again as I’ve lost my streak in typing club.”

“Okayyyyyy, I was sent here to meet you about a thief,” Charlie explained. “Bryan Mendall from the agency asked me to come and help out with a small car matter.” This was about to be the smallest case of his career, Charlie thought to himself.

“Well yes, there has been a thief terrorising town, stealing cars and scaring off citizens and visitors alike, but I am so close to finding out who is behind this.”

“Does anyone still live here?” he asked curiously.

“Yes, but they are all too scared to come outside because of all the thefts, so they sit indoors all day which, frankly, seems very boring to me,” she said. “We keep hearing stories about a huge crane and the largest metal magnet they’ve ever seen.”

“How odd,” Charlie replied. “Do we have any evidence of who the culprit might be and when they steal the cars? I’d like to get as much info as I can to wrap this case up.”

“Apart from the missing cars and some very far-fetched eyewitness accounts, we do not have any evidence as our criminal is very sleek. I am fairly certain that the thief steals the cars in the dead of night, so our best chance is to meet out at the service station on Miller Street just before midnight,” she replied. Charlie knew that this was their best shot at catching the crook, so he agreed to it.

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Wow, Charlie thought to himself. The city looks even more deserted now at midnight than daytime.

As he arrived, he saw the Chief standing inside the gas station looking through magazines. As soon as she saw Charlie she threw down the magazine and started walking to Charlie quickly. “I’ve set up surveillance and secured the perimeter, our best chance of catching the thief is to sit tight.”

Just as they began flicking through the magazines Chief Nora had chosen for them, a low humming sound began to vibrate through the soles of Charlie's shoes. Then a monster rose from behind the service station. A huge, industrial crane on hidden tracks, dragging a massive electromagnet!

The magnet swung out, and *wham!* A nearby car was ripped off the ground and slammed into the magnet's belly, like a toy snatched by a greedy child. Charlie and Chief Nora watched in disbelief as the crane manoeuvred the car towards an old junkyard behind the service station and lowered it into an enormous underground pit disguised by the car and truck wrecks on the surface.

Once they had realised what they were looking at, Chief Nora whispered, "This is a multi-million dollar chop shop. Way out of our league."

Quietly sneaking closer, they began to realise that the piles of crushed cars in the pit weren't old bombs. They were new electric self-driving cars. Specifically, they all had the cool, silver logo of Calypsa Cars, the outrageously successful company, which was the brainchild of tech billionaire, Victor Lanning. Only the cars weren't as successful as once thought, and all of their software was very recently found to have a glitch which made them navigate and veer into lakes, rivers and even the sea.

Suddenly, it all fit into place for Charlie. If a thousand Calypsa cars malfunctioned and crashed into the nearest body of water, then the company would collapse overnight and humiliate Victor Lanning in a way he couldn't take. So, he came up with a plan to steal and crush the cars to make it look like they were being stolen by thieves. This was clever, but devious.

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Much to Charlie's and Chief Nora's surprise, Victor Lanning admitted to being the mastermind behind the criminal operation, however this was only after the two officers used some controversial interrogation methods on the magnetic crane driver. Unbelievably, Victor himself was later found to be sitting in a small cubicle in the same service station that Charlie and Chief Nora had met at earlier in the evening, holding a remote control which he was using to activate the crushing machine in the pit they found.

Not such a mastermind after all, Charlie thought as he watched the once great billionaire being shoved into the back of a police car.

After all the paperwork had been finished up, Charlie farewelled Freetown and made his way straight back to his small but perfect farm, even more excited for his next adventure than he was two long days ago. He sat down as the sun was setting as his ducks splashed wildly in the pond. His phone buzzed in his tattered denim pocket. He ignored it. He had more important things to herd.