

# Chapter 1

The road was a black ribbon twisting its way up to the blue sky. Either side of it was a rugged expanse of stunted heather with large irregular scars of burning. Climbing its way up the ribbon was a mean-looking, metallic silver car of German manufacture. Its high-performance engine kept up an easy eighty miles per hour against the one in five gradient.

It could have been a movie shoot for a car ad, except that there was no helicopter with a camera crew flying alongside.

The driver was Malcolm McLeod, a thirty-three-year-old web designer on his way to see a business associate. Not that there was any need for a meeting because everything could be done online, but Malcolm loved to show off his new car. And besides, making at least a few business trips in it would help setting the costs against tax.

Malcolm specialized in building fake websites. In his own words he created sites that “help users finding or buying things online.” Malcolm’s websites look like what you are looking for, and can take you to what you are looking for. And while you look for the right link, you see ads that make money for Malcolm. A more sophisticated version charges you money for something you could have gotten cheaper or for free somewhere else if you had only known. Let the buyer beware!

Most of the sites that Malcolm designed were fakes for popular porn sites, because that is where the majority of clicks are made on the World Wide Web. Government services and booking sites for travel and accommodation were also good business. To Malcolm it made no difference where the traffic came from. A good site was one that made

money and came up tops in Google. He found it was easy money once he had learned the tricks, and everything he did was perfectly legal. Malcolm was following the ethic of any successful entrepreneur in the 21st century: make sure you get paid the most for doing the least, and grab what's up for grabs before somebody else does.

Malcolm's mother did not approve of the way her son made his living. She seemed to think that money was only ever well-earned if you worked yourself into an early grave for it. His father, on the other hand, who had worked himself into an early grave for very little money, had never complained about Malcolm's career when still alive.

On this day when Malcolm was putting his new car through its paces, the weather was as fine as it ever gets in the North of Scotland. The only white in the blue sky was from the condensation trails of a few jets flying at high altitude. In the low, yellow sunlight of late autumn, even the bleakness of the grouse moor had a certain grace; the scars of burning softened by long shadows.

Inside the car, a loud "beep!" jarred Malcolm from his contemplation. A number on the dashboard display started flashing. Four degrees Celsius—again! One of the features of this car was the warning-beep when the outside temperature dropped below four degrees. In the minds of the car's designers, who probably lived in warmer climates, four degrees must have seemed almost as cold as freezing. It is good to be warned early of the danger of an icy road, except that in Scotland the temperature hovers around four degrees for much of the time.

"Damned temperature sensor!" Malcolm thought.

He had driven this road many times. He knew it could be a tricky road when the temperature really was around freezing. Water would leach out of the peaty banks on the high side of the road and freeze on contact with the colder tarmac, covering random sections of it in sheets of wet, ultra-slippery ice.

Malcolm considered himself a good driver. He did not need some nanny sensor interrupting his enjoyment of driving a great car on this drivers' dream of a road in fine weather. He made a mental note to get a mechanic to switch the damned thing off next time the car would be in the garage.

Reaching for the control stalk beside the steering wheel, he turned up the volume of the sound system. Using the car's high-speed internet link, the music streamed directly from one of Malcolm's playlists on a file-sharing site. It was a trance-mix with a catchy tune and a satisfying, pulsating bass; thump-thump-thump-thump...

The highest point of the road came in sight, with the ski center lying deserted and snowless despite being just a week away from Christmas. Malcolm noticed a large wind turbine on the edge of the car park which had not been there the last time. Its three rotor blades stood idle against the blue sky as nature held its breath. After the summit the road took a huge dip and a spectacular panorama opened out of distant mountains and wide green valleys with meandering rivers. This was Malcolm's favorite bit: he slipped the calf-leather gearstick into fifth and took his foot off the throttle. Accelerated by gravity alone, the car reached well over a hundred miles per hour at the lowest point before climbing again rapidly. Fourth gear and foot to the floor now, nice throaty roar from the engine, and then over the hump at a good eighty miles per hour for that exhilarating roller coaster feeling. Tires firmly on the ground again, brake hard before the first bend, and then twist and turn through the hairpins all the way down; carefully but still fast enough to make the tires squeal a bit for effect.

The last time he had done this, his girlfriend Amanda had been in the car with him. She had been suitably scared and that had made him feel good.

Amanda had come as an unexpected bonus with a contract about the use of some copyrighted material about a year and a half

ago. Fed up with being a porn star, she had jumped ship from the media company she worked for. Of course she was free to work—or hook up—with whoever she wanted, but Malcolm had still ended up paying ten grand to her former boss so there would be no loss of face.

Those ten grand had been well worth it from his point of view: Amanda was a Celtic beauty with blue-grey wide-set eyes, lush coal-black hair that she kept shoulder-length with a straight-cut fringe. She had a well-proportioned figure somewhat to the stocky side of the Cosmo ideal and therefore bang-on to the Scottish ideal. Their relationship was nice and simple: she was attracted to an easygoing, fun-loving ginger-haired hunk like Malcolm with loads of money and a nice car. And in return for the expensive presents and the luxury holidays, he just liked—in his own words on the Facebook page—“out-of-this-world sex with a stunning-looking girl nice and often.”

Amanda was an only child. Her father was from Glasgow and her mother from the Highlands. Both her parents worked all over Scotland in countryside-management jobs. Unmarried, they sort of lived together between fall-outs resulting from flings and affairs on both sides. When Amanda went to university, they separated for good and ended up living with different partners.

Amanda hit the labor market at the same time as the credit crunch. Unable to find a job at first, she worked for an adult media company until she met Malcolm and decided it was time to move on.

Malcolm was still enjoying his drive, which was less challenging now but still good fun. After crossing the same twisting river over narrow stone bridges three times, the road began to climb again. He kept up a fast pace despite it narrowing to single-track with passing places. There were no other vehicles, no buildings of any kind, not another living soul anywhere.

Strange as it may seem because there is no scientific explanation for it, at this point Malcolm got a distinct feeling of being watched. He

glanced in his mirrors and then over his shoulder. But all around him was nothing but the emptiness and desolation of the grouse moor. He shrugged off the feeling and concentrated on driving. Was he imagining it, or was there something different about the way the car handled? There seemed to be an almost imperceptible sluggishness in the steering. And when he tapped the brake before the next bend, there seemed to be an ever-so-slight delay. Nothing dangerous; it was probably still a good bit more responsive than the average car. But this machine had cost four times as much as the average car and Malcolm was a perfectionist when it came to the cars he drove. In this case the whole thing was fly-by-wire using the same technology as modern fighter jets. Malcolm guessed the problem was most likely to do with the software that controlled every aspect of the car and the driving experience. Not his software and not his problem though. The car was under warranty and this was for the garage to fix. And while at it, they could do something about that low temperature warning that had just beeped again.

Not existing in dimensions that we can see and feel, God looked upon the world from an all-seeing perspective. Capable of knowing the doings of billions of souls and making decisions about their fates all at the same time, a tiny fraction of God's attention had suddenly focused on a small, moving spot in a remote area in the North of Scotland.

Malcolm met with his business associate. They talked websites and money over a nice lunch in an expensive restaurant with heavy silver tableware and pretty waitresses in black and white frilly mini-skirts. Afterwards he drove home by the same road. The car handled as normal again and he began to think he had been imagining things earlier on.

Amanda welcomed him home, looking as stunning as ever in the designer slinky blue dress that he had bought her the week before.

She said supper was pizza quattro stagioni, and while kissing him on the lips she reached down to his zip to serve up the antipasti. Later they sat snuggled together on Malcolm's king-size white leather sofa, wrapped in king-size white towels. With the open and empty pizza box balanced on their knees, they sipped red wine while watching the 10 o'clock news.

Another car bomb in Baghdad, 30 killed. Parts of England without electricity again, after a storm that in Scotland would hardly be called a breeze. A flash flood somewhere in Wales; reporter shown standing in water halfway up his Wellington boots. The United Nations Climate Conference ending in deadlock. British Government getting tougher on the poor and on foreigners. Inflation officially below three percent and pigs reported flying over Westminster. Next, the stubborn, pale face of Bob Grumpy filled the screen. "Bob Grumpy" was the alias of an unemployed London office worker who had overnight become a national celebrity by going on a hunger strike over the latest cutbacks in the social security system. With sunken cheeks and bloodshot eyes he looked worse than ever.

Amanda watched the news as intently as if there was anything new about it. But in truth it was not the content she was interested in, but the easy and chatty style of presentation by a kilted beefcake lifted straight from a Scots porridge oats box.

Malcolm asked, "So how was your day; heard anything from Scotia-TV yet?"

"Fine, I got an e-mail. They want me to come to Glasgow for an interview next Tuesday."

"Congratulations. I suppose you'd better start practicing your Inverness accent for the interview!"

"Aye, sure enough!" she replied with a grin.

Scotia was one of a new generation of online-only TV stations. Malcolm had already made several fake sites that fed on this new internet traffic.

Scotia's content was aimed at the more discerning Scottish viewer. It offered a mix of news, music, drama, and documentaries, much of it homegrown with a distinct Scottish accent and a bit of moral high-ground. Scotia's low advert-content made it quite watchable. This was thanks to generous help from the Scottish government in the form of grants to promote Scottish culture.

Malcolm had mixed feelings about Amanda applying for the job. His male ego liked the idea of her being dependent on him. Her going out to work also meant she would be spending less time with him. On the other hand, Amanda was not just a pretty face. She had a wide range of interests that included dress design, ceilidh dancing, and a fascination for anything to do with exotic teas.

And despite his bravado to his friends on Facebook about their relationship, he knew that she needed space and independent pursuits to be happy.

With a university degree in modern history, plus media experience (of a kind), plus a pretty face, plus a gentle and distinct Scottish accent, she did seem to tick all the boxes for the job of newsreader and presenter with Scotia TV.

Although Malcolm did not like the prospect of seeing less of her, he also kind of liked the idea of watching his Amanda all dolled up reading the evening news to the whole country.

The next Tuesday morning at 9:30 it seemed as dark as the middle of the night when Malcolm drove Amanda to the railway station for her train to Glasgow. Rain swept across the road in sheets as they crept in a long traffic queue towards the city center. Luckily they had allowed plenty of time.

The train left with Amanda on board, and Malcolm watched its taillights disappear into the murky half-light between the red and green signals past the end of the platform.

Despite having a car of her own, she always insisted on taking the train when going “down south”. Malcolm thought this was because she was a woman and therefore unable to navigate and park in a big place like Glasgow. She just left him thinking that. In truth she just preferred a snooze and some reading on the train over three hours of staring at a boring road.