

# GRAVE GIRL by Dan Padavona

## EXCERPT

Only one road led to the scenic lookout above Lucifer Falls, and it was winding and treacherous even during the day. At night, Thomas kept both hands on the wheel and leaned forward, ignoring the crick in his neck. It seemed that he drove through a sea of black. Trees sprang out of nowhere and lurched toward his F-150.

Chelsey held the door handle, her gaze fixed on the road ahead, as though she were driving. She yelped, and Thomas slammed his brakes when a shadow darted in front of the truck. The deer bounded through the brush and disappeared.

“Slow down, Thomas.”

“If I go any slower, I might as well put the truck in neutral. It’s impossible to see.”

She tightened her seatbelt. The truck jounced over a rut. Thomas pulled the wheel when the sloping terrain swept him toward a hundred-foot drop off. The brights did little to drive back the night, and to make matters worse, a fine mist curled along the ground. He hoped it didn’t expand into a full-fledged fog. The road was challenging to traverse as it was.

Darren’s blue Silverado popped out of the darkness. Beside the ranger’s truck, the shoulder opened to a lookout. An iron rail prevented sightseers from plunging off the cliff. The falls roared beyond the rail, and water droplets formed on the sheriff’s windshield. Darren climbed out of the cab and waved a hand over his head. Raven was there too, and by the way she cupped her elbows with her hands, she’d already succumbed to the cold. The ranger flared a flashlight and illuminated a dirt path that followed the hill down to the stream.

“Tell me what happened,” Thomas said, hopping out of his truck with Chelsey beside him.

“I came out to do my nightly rounds and ensure nobody was on the trail. As I passed the falls and walked along the stream, I found the body in the weeds. I wouldn’t have seen him were it not for the bugs. Fresh body, no death scent.”

“That means the killer dumped the body recently. You didn’t spot anyone in the woods?”

“No, but I heard a motor pass the lookout just after sunset. Thought nothing of it. If I’d acted sooner . . .”