

An excerpt from

The Faller

By Michael Demaray

CHAPTER ONE

The trees of the U.P. did not, as far as Leif was concerned, grow.

They *crowded*.

They *loomed*.

They ate up every bit of space imaginable as far as the eye could see, with no sign of ceasing no matter how many of their number were cut down.

Maybe God had gathered all the trees and packed them into one place like He had Noah do once with all the animals. All the trees in the world packed into a single forest. *That*, thought Leif, his heavy bark peeler hanging limply against his corduroys, *is the only explanation*.

Sunlight filtered through gaps in the dense canopy. Islands of mottled light danced along the forest floor. The air had warmed considerably since morning. Leif took the chainsaw going quiet as an excuse to remove his gloves from his sweaty hands. *Lunchtime*.

Ernest emerged from his cutting spot. At six foot five, the man carried his orange chainsaw like a toy. If not for his deliberate movement, he might be mistaken for one of the sturdy trees himself.

“There are still so many trees standing with orange ribbons,” Leif announced, “it’s like we never cut any down.”

This late in August, the deerflies and mosquitos swarmed thick as clouds. Leif flapped a glove at the swarm and wondered why the bloodthirsty pests never seemed to harass his father. He laid his gloves on the half-peeled tree.

Ernest set the chainsaw on the ground, eased himself down on a stump, and took off a boot. “When trees are standing, it’s harder to get a sense of how many there really are,” he said. “But you can get more in a small area standing than if they’re laying down, so that’s more’n likely why God designed trees to stand.” He picked at the hole in his sock, through which a grimy big toe protruded, then twisted the fabric until the seam was closed and jammed his boot back on. “You know, in big city morgues, they hang the dead from the ceiling instead of laying ’em down. If you laid ’em down, you’d have to stack ’em, and you don’t wanna do that. You wouldn’t be able to move around ’em or get as many in there. So, they hang bodies from the ceiling with big ice tongs through their ear holes.” With his thumbs stuck in his ears, Ernest stabbed his tongue out the corner of his mouth.

Leif eyed him suspiciously, trying to

determine if his father was fibbing, but Ernest's long bangs and heavy forehead kept his eyes in shadow, so it was hard to tell.

"It's true. I was in the navy with this fella from Chicago whose father was a—whaddyacallit—a mortician, and it's all he ever talked about. Even showed me a Polaroid of bodies hanging in a walk-in cooler. Said they had to do it that way so they could get all the bodies in there."

"Do you still have it?" Leif asked.

"Have what?"

"The picture?"

"He showed it to me, Leif, didn't give it to me."

"Oh. How come their ears don't get torn off?"

"Stick your thumbs in your ear holes and push up." Leif complied with the order. "Feel that bone there? That's your skull. The hooks in the morgue are like them old-time tongs they used to move block ice with. Like those rusty old ones hanging in Grandpa's garage. They grab hold under the bones right there."

"Oh." Leif wished he could have seen the picture. Made sense about the trees, though. Now he couldn't think about trees without imagining dead bodies hanging from their branches. "You ever see a dead body?" Leif blurted. It was the most his father had spoken in weeks, months even, and Leif wanted to draw the conversation out. Not so much for the words or his voice, but just to know his father was

still alive in there. In that shell.

But now Leif had said something really stupid. Of course his father had seen a dead body. They both had. Leif wanted the ground to fall away and the earth to swallow him up so he wouldn't have to burn from the red-hot heat of his own stupidity.

"I mean other than..." Leif said, trying to dig himself out.

Ernest tilted his head, swept his pinecone-colored bangs aside in the gap between his ring and little finger, and peered at Leif. Then he turned away, and just like that, he retreated into himself.

"I'm sorry," Leif said.

Ernest shook his head in an imperceptible way that could have been mistaken for a shudder.

Leif climbed off the tree and made his way over to a white birch to put some distance between them. While relieving himself, a loud crack echoed from deep within the stand. He jumped a little and dribbled on his work boots. "Shit." There were creatures in these woods he heard but never saw. Like Ernest, they made noises as they moved about and were too huge to sneak up on you. The crack of distant branches echoed as one of them shouldered its way through the boundless timber.

"The Michigan Bigfoot," Ernest would tease, "hunting for lost Trolls." That's what they called people from downstate because they live below the Mackinac Bridge. "Old Bigfoot knows better than to mess with a Yooper, though," his father would tease. "But if he's dumb enough to we'll take him on

together. You go for his knees with your bark peeler, and I'll go high with the saw." Ernest loved to give Leif the frights, and out there in the middle of nowhere, far from help, every haunting story he told felt too real for Leif's liking.

Working late one evening, they'd heard a woman scream out there. Ernest assured Leif it was only a rabbit getting attacked by an owl. Leif decided to believe him because any other alternative was too scary to ponder. The scream curdled Leif's blood, and he never viewed rabbits the same again. Or owls.

Leif shuddered at the memory on his way back to the prone aspen. There, he sat and pulled a foil-wrapped package from the lunch box. He handed half of a pasty to Ernest, who took it and set it aside. Leif broke off a small piece of crust as deerflies circled the cold, heavy meat and potato pie. Leif glanced at his father, who had taken on the posture of a defeated boxer.

"How long have we been eating pasties for lunch?" Leif asked. "Since January?"

No response from his father.

"Mrs. Johnson's gotta stop bringing us pasties," Leif said, sticking to his script. "I'm hungry as a woodchipper, but I couldn't eat another pasty if it was wrapped in bacon and deep-fried." He was playing it up now, trying to draw his father out so he could spring the surprise on him. He eyed the pasty for a moment, stole a glance at Ernest, and tossed the thing over his shoulder. It crashed down in a

clump of ferns. His father didn't waste food, so Leif almost went over backward when the man didn't scold him. Didn't even acknowledge the offense by preaching about starving kids in Africa.

From the lunchbox, Leif pulled a thick sandwich wrapped in cellophane. His father's favorite: liverwurst and mustard with thick slices of cheddar cheese and white onion. Passing the sandwich to Ernest, Leif said, "Happy birthday."

Ernest acted surprised but put the sandwich aside without so much as unwrapping it. He just sat there, staring at the ground or the chainsaw or nothing at all.

Leif was stung. Dottie Johnson had picked up the ingredients on her weekly shopping run, and Leif had to hide them in the back of the refrigerator. But what bothered him most, what got him, was that his father rarely turned down a liverwurst sandwich.

Shaking up a cigarette from a near-empty pack, Ernest plucked it with his mouth and lit it. Cigarettes were the only indication Ernest had any needs left in him. And even then, he smoked without desire. He filled his lungs, picked up the chainsaw, and headed in the direction from which he had come. After a few steps, he turned back to Leif. "Gotta pick up the pace. We've got less than a month to meet obligations. And we still gotta load that tree I cut for firewood."

"What are you gonna do after we're done here?"

"You don't need to worry about that."

“Maybe Uncle Garrett will hire you back?”

“He’s not coming to the rescue, Leif. He’d lose face.” Ernest continued into the woods.

Leif put his father’s sandwich back in the lunch box. It’d probably end up being Leif’s dinner, since his father hadn’t been food shopping in forever. The onion would have to come off, though—it ruined the sandwich even more than the liverwurst.

Straddling the limbless tree, Leif worked the blade along the valley Ernest had scored through the bark, stopping occasionally to slap at deerflies. The slight curve of the blade was designed to hug the white flesh. When demonstrating how to use the tool, Ernest had made it look easy. The man’s forearms resembled snakes wrestling in a burlap sack as he pried away long swaths of bark. He would stop mid-motion and eye Leif, eyebrows arched to add emphasis to a particular move or technique.

After three months of peeling, Leif still didn’t have the hang of it. His hands weren’t leather-tough like Ernest’s, and he wasn’t built for this type of work. It wasn’t his fault he was small for his age. Maybe size skipped a generation? When Leif had asked his father if he was undersized at twelve, his father said yes but he always ate his liver and green beans and look at him now. Leif figured it was bunk but he had nothing to lose. So he doused liver with loads of ketchup and washed it down with gulps of milk. Still he wasn’t getting any bigger or stronger. Though he wouldn’t complain about it. His father

had been dealing with enough disappointment, and Leif didn't want to give him any extra grief. Which is why he'd stopped tagging along with Todd Lundgren, who lived for chucking rocks at passing cars and setting fires around town. Todd was nothing but trouble, and Leif was headed in that direction if he didn't knock it off. He didn't want to go to jail. His father had been arrested a few times, for fighting mostly, and Leif didn't want the same to happen to him.

Ernest tended to run into things instead of going around. That's how Leif's mom had put it. Ernest had a strong sense of right and wrong and was easily set off by even the smallest injustice. Instead of turning away when he saw someone mistreated, he would insert himself in an effort to balance the scales. He couldn't tolerate bullies, especially the fancy kind from downstate who like to come to the U.P. with their fancy snowmobiles and fancy fishing poles. Treating their guides and waitresses like servants, like their fancy clothes and money were some type of armor they could hide behind. Leif's mom had said Ernest wasn't scared of stitches or cops. "And I'd rather be with someone noble who ends up in jail or the grave than a coward."

But none of that explained why Ernest had beat up Uncle Garrett.

Leif hadn't done anything terrible yet, as Todd was the one with all the bad ideas and insisted on getting his hands dirty. Sure, he wanted friends other

than Todd, but there weren't many options in a one-stoplight town. So lately, he'd spent weekends building stilts or forts by himself. And on weekdays, he worked in the woods, far away from trouble. He had his eye on a bike, and his father even offered to pay him to keep his motivation up. "This is not a chore," his father had said, "it's a job. I'm paying so you'll appreciate the difference. Might even earn enough for that bike you been drooling over." Leif knew his father wanted to keep an eye on him. But that was okay—the man needed looking after too.

And by the end of summer, in time for his thirteenth birthday, he would have something to show for all the early mornings and blisters and poison ivy: a brand-new lemon-yellow Raleigh ten-speed. A nicer bike than any of Todd's. Finally, Todd would have to burn with envy for once. Todd. The white-haired, animal-torturing thirteen-year-old pyromaniac who lived around the corner from Leif. The baby-fat kid who didn't know how to share.

Leif fought the blade through a fibrous patch of bark at the base of a branch. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed embers flare in the shadows. Smoking and leaning against a tree, Ernest was watching him work. He was probably thinking, *why are you so slow? You're just too damn weak and slow.*

Leif picked up the pace. Grandpa's bolo tie slopped around on his neck, beating against his chest as he fought the tool through the stubborn patch. The tool jumped and sliced into his index finger between knuckle and joint, blade skimming

bone. Leif winced, dropped the tool, and grabbed the wound, waiting for the pain to rush in. Ernest was there when Leif opened his eyes. Grabbing Leif by the wrist to have a look, he squinted through smoke from the protruding cigarette.

Ernest led Leif to the truck with a burly hand on his shoulder, as if Leif were too injured to find his way. As they walked, Leif held his arm out like a perch for a bird. Blood streamed down his arm and into his shirtsleeve.

“Why didn’tcha have your gloves on?”

Leif was too busy wincing and watching the blood drip from his hand to answer.

The quarter panels on the ancient Ford resembled scabs ready to fall off. The truck had been collecting rust and dents so long, it was difficult to tell what color it used to be. You had to inspect the door frame to know for sure. Maroon. Carnival red, according to Grandpa. The color of blood mixed with motor oil. But his father wouldn’t dream of getting rid of the truck. “Radio works like new,” he had said. “You don’t throw a perfectly good radio in the dump just ’cause it’s attached to an old truck. And old things are less complicated, so you can fix ’em yourself with a wrench and a screwdriver. Don’t need a bunch of special tools that only do one thing. If you can’t fix something with a few tools, you got no business owning it.”

Ernest opened the passenger door, a thick slab of waxy cardboard covering the window, and hoisted Leif on the seat so his legs dangled out.

Then he pulled an oily brown paper bag from the glove box. “The worst aid kit,” Leif muttered. It’s what his mom had coined it. From the bag, Ernest plucked a roll of silver tape and a few strips of white cloth torn from an old t-shirt.

Leif pushed the tip of his tongue into the sharp edge of his broken front tooth, trying not to cry.

Reaching across Leif, the man pulled a small bottle of whiskey from under the driver’s seat. After uncapping it, he took Leif’s wrist, so his hand jutted outside the truck. “This is gonna bite a little,” he warned.

Panic sparked in Leif’s chest. But before it could spread, Ernest poured a good amount of the amber liquid over the wound. It burned like a blowtorch. Leif tried to yank his arm back, but Ernest held it in a vice until the whiskey stopped dripping.

“Gonna lose that broken tooth soon,” Ernest said. “It’s turning black.” After securing a strip of cloth around Leif’s hand and finger with duct tape, Ernest stood and stretched his back, then flicked the long ash from his cigarette. “Hold the bark spud like I taught ya’. And don’t take your left hand off the neck when you’re forcing the blade through those knots,” he said. “Right hand on the T-bar, left hand around the neck. Do it like that, and you just might keep all your fingers. Don’t wanna end up like Grandpa.” Leif grimaced, thinking of the giant band saw that had taken three of his grandfather’s fingers

when he worked at the town sawmill. But if Leif had to lose a few fingers to keep his father talking, he could live with it.

Ernest stubbed out his old cigarette and replaced it with a new one, lifting the lighter to the tip. The flame flickered in lingering suspense for a moment, as though the man was thinking of saying something first. He planted an ample paw on Leif's head, and Leif felt the calloused thumb and pinky against the tips of his ears. "You're getting faster at peeling," Ernest said. "I'm having trouble keeping ahead of you, buddy-boy."

Leif smiled up at him. His father was exaggerating, of course, but Leif was let back in from the cold.

Ernest tousled Leif's hair before walking away.

Leif sat there for a moment, remembering how his father would paw through his hair searching for ticks. He hadn't done that in months, and Leif realized how much he missed the attention.

Back at the half-peeled tree, Leif heard the saw sputter and come alive, then drop into a higher key as it cut into hardwood.

Holding the tool like his father instructed, Leif worked the steel blade under the bark. His grandfather's bolo tie swung from his neck. He liked the weight and the rhythm of it while he worked, like the pendulum of an old clock ticking off the seconds, counting down the day. His body settled into a groove, his mind into the lullaby hum of the

saw. He was in the middle of a daydream that had him riding around town, reveling at the envy on Todd's face as he blew past in a blur of chrome and yellow steel, when a snarl came from the deep woods. Or was that the chainsaw? Leif knew every sound a chainsaw could make, knew them like the individual keys on a piano. This sound was new. Alien.

The hair on his neck crackled, and he held his breath as he cocked his ear toward the place his father was working. For a moment, the wind stopped rankling leaves and the clouds stopped moving in front of the sun and birds fell silent like fans in a stadium during that split-second between pitch and a swing. Everything stopped except the throaty idle of the chainsaw.

Leif's heart picked up the pace as he climbed over the tree and started in the direction of the saw, trying to spot his father through the dense trees. Finally, he could see a flash of red handkerchief from Ernest's back pocket.

Ernest stood in a small clearing, swaying like a pine tree in a gale, his back to Leif as he faced the deep woods. The man clutched the handle of the idling saw in his right hand. The tip of the blade plunged straight down into the earth next to his boot. His left hand held something too, but Leif couldn't make out what the thing was. Was that blood that strung from the man's fingers? Leif angled around, keeping close to the trees that bordered the clearing. As he closed the angle and

came face to face with his father, a voice in his head began to plead, *don't look, don't look, don't look*. But he was already gawking at the confusing mess. And his head was shaking in time with the voice until the voice caught like slack from a towrope. He steadied himself against a tree, like a toddler clutching its mother's leg. Clutching on to yesterday. Clutching on to a few minutes ago, to any other time before *this*.

Ernest teetered like a drunk. Something had mauled his face and neck. Motorboat sprays of blood pulsed from the long wound. Leif spun around, expecting a bear or something worse to rush him, but there was nothing there. He turned his attention back to his father and slammed his eyes shut, dismissing the sight. Praying when he opened them, the scene would be different. He would be back in his room, in bed. But when he opened his eyes, Leif found himself in the middle of something enormous and urgent that was beyond his control. For a brief second, he couldn't tell where he ended and the air around him began. The urge to hide or run was overwhelming, but his body didn't belong to him at that moment. It belonged to his terror.

Ernest's lips trembled as he tried to speak. The smoldering cigarette bobbed on his chin, glued there in blood. Leif couldn't make out what the man was saying through the din of the saw and the violent thudding in his ears. Clutching a low branch and turning an ear, Leif eased closer to the man, as if to the edge of a cliff.

“Leif,” his father sputtered. The man made an effort to wipe the frothy blood from his mouth with the back of a hand. “Leif.”

Leif shook his head. “Wha—?” The word got stuck in his dry throat. He cleared it. “I’m gonna go get the worst aid kit.” His voice came out hollow. The words were thrown back at him, as if rejected by the forest. He didn’t even feel his own mouth move.

Ernest shook his head, eyes pleading. Leif couldn’t remember his father ever gazing at him like that, as if there were nothing else in the world worth considering and never would be again. It was the same attention he gave to sharpening the saw or tying his fishing flies, or the way he used to look at Leif’s mom sometimes. Then, like a baby figuring out how its body worked, his father made his way to the ground, moving in a way Leif had never seen before. A foreign tilt of his head. An odd hitch in posture, unpredictable arm movements. Suddenly, Leif didn’t know him at all.

Blood coursed from the wound in his neck, cascaded over the jagged flesh and flowed into his loose shirt collar. Sitting there with his legs out in front of him and his shoulders caved in, Ernest cocked his face to Leif.

The urge to turn away nearly overpowered Leif, but he wasn’t going to make that mistake again. Leif forced himself to hold his father’s gaze, to see past the gore and drained white flesh, and what he found there, behind the fear, was an apology.

In a final sticky sputter that launched the

cigarette, the man said, “Leif...me.”

Leif turned and bolted into the woods, fumbling headlong in idiotic lumber, heart slamming. Roots grabbed his foot and yanked him to the ground. The world became a dull cacophony of the scent of dirt and leaf rot and the scrape of moss against his cheek. Then he was up, knees high like running through tires. Branches lashed his forearms and face. After fifty yards, he stopped, lungs wheezing, and turned to find his father melting into the foliage.

The chainsaw idled.

Gasping, he watched for a while, tonguing his broken tooth and circling his dry spot. While willing his father to sit up, a wave of nausea flipped his stomach, and a surge of bile filled his throat. His insides heaved as though shot from a cannon, and he retched on a clump of wildflowers. Wiping his chin on his shoulder, he fumbled his way back to the spot where his father lay. A Raleigh 100 smoldered in the gap between them. Leif stepped forward to stomp it out, relieved to be able to do something helpful. But instead, he bent and picked it up. He tried to hold the bloody stub the way his father did, like the older boys at school, but it looked odd between his fingers. With a boot heel, he stomped a divot in the earth, dropped the butt in, and covered it.

He sat on a spongy, moss-covered log near the body. The chainsaw droned. Trees leaned in like gapers at a disaster. Rocking back and forth while hugging his chest, he said, “It’s okay.” Then, in a

whisper, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

It took forever for the woods to start up again. The chatter of birds and rustle of leaves. The repetitive knocking of a woodpecker. He watched an army of black ants march along a rotted log, loaded down with forest crumbs, working away like nothing bad had happened. A star blinks out in the universe, and no one seems to notice or care.