

*The Last Wanderer is a novel of a professor alone in the northern Canadian wilderness when the world comes apart. Two years later, he returns to the United States to find ruin and few still alive.*

*Traveling the interstates in a semi-tractor trailer, he finds some people alive who all die. Retreating north, he dies with a surprising conclusion.*

## **The Last Wanderer**

by Ronald W. Hull

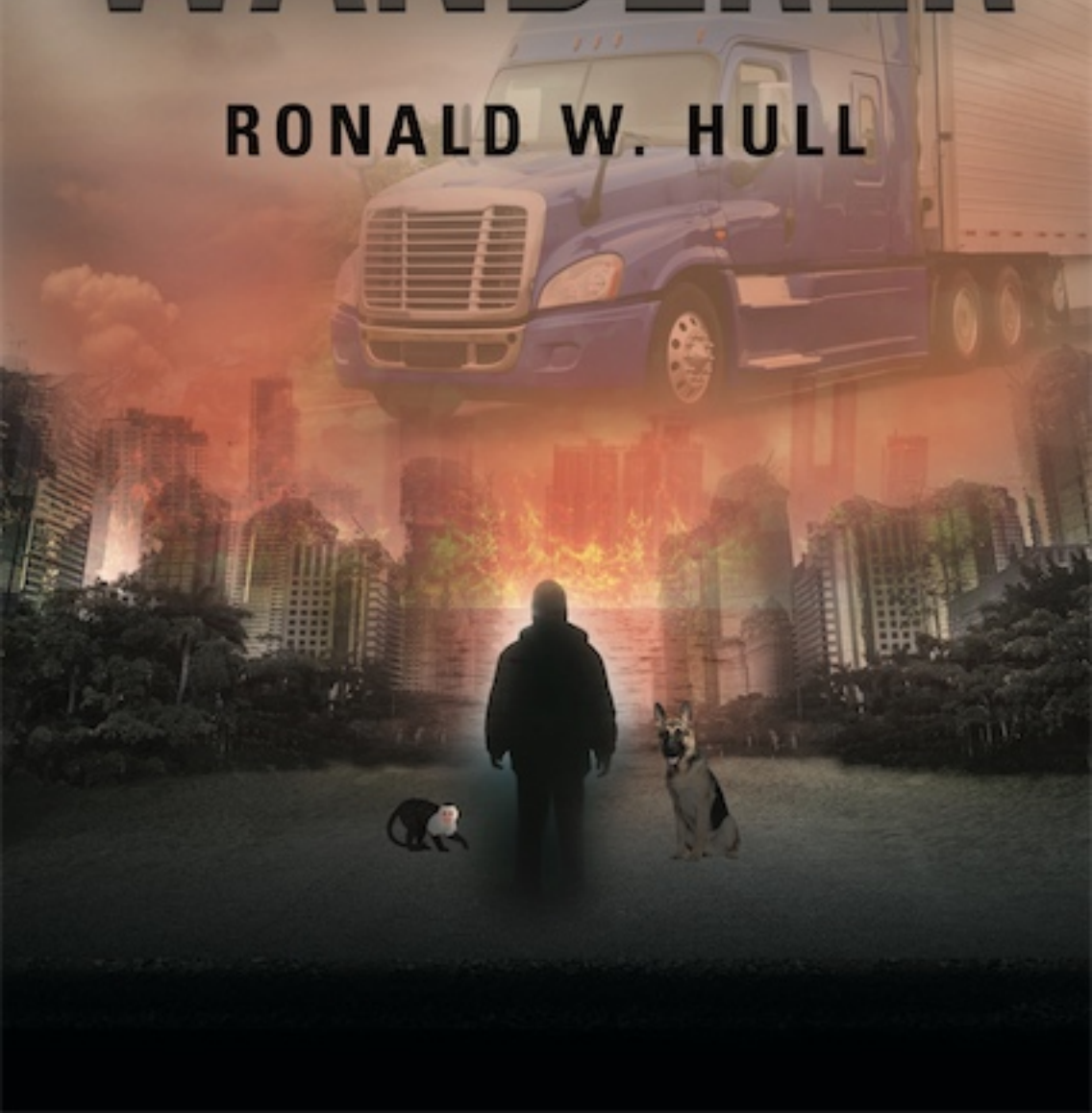
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# THE LAST WANDERER

RONALD W. HULL



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# Table of Contents

Prologue.....	11
1 - How We Got Here.....	13
2 - The Stage Is Set.....	16
3 - In Happy Isolation the World Turns Sour.....	19
4 - My Rush Home Begins.....	26
5 - Terror Comes to Turtle Lake.....	30
6 - Rescue Thwarted, Delayed and Failed.....	36
7 - Long Lonely Slog South.....	42
8 - You Can't Go Home.....	48
9 - Road Danger and a New Ride.....	52
10 - Strange Things Spell Danger.....	57
11 - Little America.....	61
12 - Survivor.....	63
13 - War No More.....	68
14 - Trouble on the Road.....	73
15 - End of the Road for One.....	78
16 - Girding for Winter in Paradise.....	83
17 - Winter in Paradise.....	89
18 - Desert Dessert.....	92
19 - Exotic Surprise.....	96
20 - Ghastly Revelation.....	100
21 - Alligator Alley Cannibals.....	103
22 - Water, Water, Everywhere.....	107
23 - Realization.....	111
24 - Genesis Discovered.....	115

25 - Genesis Conceived.....	121
26 - Genesis Replanting.....	127
27 - Genesis Unfolding.....	132
28 - Yellowstone and Beyond.....	136
29 - Hot Springs Surprises.....	140
30 - Quandary Settled.....	145
31 - Winter Comes Down Hard.....	149
32 - Healing Lisa.....	155
33 - Getting Milk.....	160
34 - Genesis Lost.....	162
35 - Leaving Loss Behind.....	169
36 - Horror Revealed in the East.....	173
37 - Telltale Tracks.....	179
38 - Wide Open Spaces Traces.....	182
39 - Failed Contact.....	186
40 - Land of Milk and Plenty.....	189
41 - Big Tree Bear and Wino Heaven.....	193
42 - Fire, Feral and Flood.....	199
43 - The New Normal.....	205
44 - Return to Hot Springs.....	210
45 - Monkey Business.....	216
46 - Tragic Tracks.....	222
47 - End of the Line.....	228
48 - Finding Companionship in Disillusionment.....	232
49 - Stocking Up for Winter.....	237
50 - Land of Plenty of Danger.....	242
51 - The Heartland.....	248

*The Last Wanderer: Last Man on Earth*

52 - New Hope Found.....	252
53 - New Hope Revealed.....	259
54 - New Hope Lost.....	265
55 - Retreat.....	271
56 - Planning for the Inevitable .....	274
57 - Life at Fort Hood .....	278
58 - The Push North into Tragedy .....	281
59 - Total Breakdown in Dangerous Country.....	285
60 - Treacherous Waters.....	289
61 - Conquering Superior and Beyond .....	294
62 - Wilderness Challenge.....	298
63 - Hudson Bay Surprises .....	303
64 - Smooth Sailing with a Bad Eye.....	308
65 - Making Home My Home.....	312
66 - The Long Haul.....	316
Epilogue.....	321
About the Author .....	323

# 1

## How We Got Here

What if, like in the movie, *I Am Legend*, you were the last one...

**L**ast man left? Well, I guess I may well be. Haven't seen anyone else for a long time. And time is something I'm losing track of with all the years running together, piling up, perhaps twenty, twenty-five, since this all began to happen; since the world came apart.

Everyone could see it coming, but no one could stop it because we all were on a course that we couldn't control or change—inertia, I guess. It all started when we passed seven billion people. Now that's a number I never could comprehend. Somehow, we conquered death, disease, and even, war, and still ran off the track because we multiplied like rabbits with no control—*nobody watched the pen*.

And then, we were full of ourselves, thinking that we could all live better if we just did more and got rich. I guess I would define getting rich as having more than you needed for basic living. Well, once we got it, we didn't stop until we had more. And more. And more. And we didn't just do this for ourselves but for everybody else. Pretty soon, everybody on earth was wanting more, doing more and having more than they absolutely needed.

Problem was, our Earth only had so much of a good thing to give us. Oh, with technology, we could manipulate the environment to give us more of something we wanted like gold, oil, or exotic food from halfway around the world at our fingertips. But, everything has its price and its limits. All the while we were stuffing our faces and adding to our inventories of junk, our mother Earth was being ripped apart and reorganized to meet our ever-growing desires. Progress.

But it was all a house of cards we had been stacking since the very beginning of farming, settlements and the population increase that resulted. As the stack of cards got higher and more unstable, we just kept bolstering it up and adding more until it reached a breaking point—one of many weak points along the way—that burst. After the house of cards started to

collapse, it fell against other houses, creating a domino effect that just kept getting worse.

There were people all over the planet trying to save animals, birds, and even insects that were rapidly disappearing after evolving over millions of years. At the same time, we were cutting down the forests, mining the arid areas and mountains, and stripping the seas of fish. We were polluting the air, land, and water—the very air we needed to breathe, the land we needed for food and water to quench our thirst.

And there had always been people on the edge that we ignored by the billions, living in poverty to the point where their lives were very short and with little purpose except to reproduce or spread disease. When it started, while billions around the earth were gradually working their way out of poverty to a lifestyle of riches, this group on this margin, this ignored group that was always there, but too primitive to have any say in things, began to grow.

Gradually, the weather changed. Increasingly, there were long periods of drought, followed by flooding, and stronger storms, including tornadoes, hurricanes and the like. Constant foraging for wood denuded large areas of land where all the trees had been cut down from once virgin forest. Drought, disease and forest fires made these areas into deserts where the wind blew all the topsoil away. The resulting erosion and open pit mining replaced the good topsoil with toxic elements that followed the rivers and streams to the sea. Wind spread toxic dust everywhere.

Human waste and debris also followed every river to the sea. Eventually, the sea became clogged with poisonous chemicals, toxic elements, and debris that threatened the sea's very ability to produce life or food. In the meantime, fishing and whaling removed large quantities of desirable, and undesirable, fish and other animals from the sea. The sea couldn't replenish itself. The land couldn't replenish itself. The handwriting was on the wall.

I am writing this with paper and pen that I found lying here, in my oasis for many years. There were days when I wrote avidly with electronic words that spanned the globe. But those days are gone because there is no electricity to power the grid or to charge the batteries of the most sophisticated devices that man could create—useless and corroded now without that power of electricity. All that writing is lost and part of the distant past of my life. For it is too long ago for me to even remember what I wrote about except for those crucial days racing to find Julie that I remember so well. Otherwise, it must've been unimportant or I would have



*The Last Wanderer: Last Man on Earth*

remembered it. Or would I? What is important now is survival. If I don't survive, then nothing will be left except the words I write on this paper. And I'm not sure that this will last either, although I will try to put it in a safe place until something or someone comes along to read it.

## The Stage Is Set

**S**o why am I special? Why am I here? Frankly, I don't know. All I know is that I was resourceful enough, and, more importantly, lucky enough, to still be here. For I have seen things and done things that you would not believe—nor would I—had I not seen them and done them. That's why I'm writing this as witness to what I saw and did, not what happened to others. That I don't know. I'll let you know what happened to me and all those around me. Those precious family and friends that are long gone. Where do I begin to tell you? Where do I begin? I guess I'll begin when it started to unravel.

There had always been wealthy and there had always been poor. Wealth was primarily the result of good luck or strength, or both. Poverty was a result of bad luck, lack of strength, ignorance, or resolve. The wealthy provided progress, shelter, and security in trade for hard labor by the poor. This system worked from prehistory through history until the end of the industrial age when the information age took hold and it became more what you knew that gave wealth than what you possessed. In other words, wealth was not defined as what you owned, but rather a sum in electronic currency that could be spent anywhere in the world to get whatever you wanted. Since this manipulation of money resulted in no real productivity and forced more and more people into poverty where they could not grow, gather or earn enough to live, we were finally at a point of crisis.

A few generous, very rich, offered to help the masses come out of poverty, but that backfired because when provided with more food and better health, these poor populations continued to grow exponentially, further stressing resources until there was a tipping point where no amount of charity could stem the tide of growing poor humanity. As in all nature, the die off began. The first place it struck was Africa. While diseases like AIDS and malaria had been held off and even made to retreat, the growing population and overcrowding brought back smallpox, diphtheria, whooping cough, tuberculosis, bubonic plague and other diseases, all mutated into more virulent strains that spread at lightning speed and devastated whole

tribes, villages, towns, and cities. In the countryside, the droughts and over cutting of trees for making charcoal reduced the ability of the wild to produce enough food and shelter for its animals and their hunters, while over-farming had weakened and poisoned the soil, making each crop less productive each year.

The three swords of famine, pestilence, and war hacked the very life out of the African population, one machete at a time. Before long, the only rule on the entire continent was the rule of force. Millions were dying and they were left to die. The strong and the wealthy held out in their enclaves, but without the poor working people, there was no source for their prosperity and power. Those that escaped to whatever other places would have them, found themselves trapped in ghettos of other refugees still in poverty and still struggling to survive, even in some of the richest countries in the world.

The tremendous imbalance between the starving and dying from the insulated rich affected the economies of every country in the world. Of course, some countries were better off than others, especially if they had natural resources, lower population, and the ability to sustain. Still, even these countries were intertwined in a global network of corporations, banking, alliances, trade and other activities creating a giant web—a giant domino game if you will—with some dominoes further from others and less likely to be knocked over. I lived in what was called the United States of America. Our country was not one of those places that were insulated and self-sustaining. We had a tremendous dependence on goods produced in other countries. We had a tremendous dependence on energy supplied from other countries. And we had an inability to stop the hungry masses from entering the country and seeking the American dream.

I was one of those who could trace my lineage back to the 1600s; an immigrant that was also one of the poor starving that came at that time to what seemed like an endless, empty continent. Endless and empty no more. There came a point where the United States of America could no longer take in immigrants generously as it always had done before. But still they came. There was no stopping them. They called it the Golden Door, and they opened it.

The flow of goods and services in the United States was made possible by cheap gasoline and fuel oil. When the sources of these fuels began to dry up and the commodity exchanges hoarded them for profit, the price of gasoline and fuel oil skyrocketed. Everything that was produced in the country depended upon these fuels. Everything increased in price until the

United States was experiencing shortages and inflation not seen since World War II. No matter how far or how deep the oil companies drilled, they came up drier and drier until even everyone's food budget began to take a lion's share of income. And speaking of drier and drier, clean water had run out in much of the country as the price of water was already skyrocketing, compounding the problem of food production, dependent on irrigation. Globally, the weather became quite unpredictable, leading to large areas of the Southwest, Midwest, and Southeastern United States in a drought that continued to get worse, punctuated with regular hurricanes of great destruction and outbreaks of tornadoes whenever thunderstorms erupted. Much of the Midwest turned into a dust bowl that hadn't been seen since the 1930s.

But everyone knows that, so there's no use dwelling on it. I was insulated anyway. As a young professor of chemistry at the University of Minnesota, I was able to pay my bills and dream, unlike most of the population at the time. Taking a lead from a professor of mine in my undergraduate days, I decided to spend the summer in the Canadian wilderness, alone. That professor, several years before, had gone into the wilderness every year with a student until he found out that students no longer appreciated the wilderness and found that having a student with him only dragged down his joy of being there. The peace and solitude alone outweighed their miserable company. By the time I was his student, he shared his adventures with us, but did not offer to take me, his best student, with him on his last journey. I still remember well, all these years since, the fact that he never returned that fall to resume classes. I had scheduled an advanced undergraduate chemistry class with him, but he never showed up to teach the class, and as far as I know, no one ever found his body.

## In Happy Isolation the World Turns Sour

**A**s my classes wound down that spring I busied myself with preparations for the trip. I had to take enough to sustain me for three months while traveling light by kayak. I planned very carefully where I would go and arranged for being flown in, flown out, and, if necessary, being rescued before the first classes began in the fall. Once I had gathered up all my provisions and gear, I said goodbye to my parents in Mankato and to my sister in Stillwater, and a few friends, telling them I'd be out of touch for the summer, "Don't call, email or text," and flew out into my great adventure.

I had a serious romance that lasted three years, but she left me for a nuclear submariner, so that was partly the reason for me wanting to get away into the wilderness to clear my mind of her memory and not be reminded every time I smelled her presence in my small apartment. While I was no stranger to camping in the wilderness, having done it all my life, I was by no means a survivalist. I just wanted adventure and planned to "live off the land" as much as possible to conserve my provisions. I never intended for them to last beyond August that year. *Little did I know. So, little did I know.*

After flying to Thompson, Manitoba, I chartered a small plane with pontoons and an experienced bush pilot to fly me to the headwaters of a river in the boreal forest at the very edge of the tundra. I had mapped out a course that would take me down river from there to a point, 50 miles west of Hudson Bay, to a fishing and hunting lodge where I would be picked up on or about August 15.

Thanks to my G6 satellite smart phone, I had excellent digital filming capability, GPS, and even face time with my parents and sister, at least until my batteries failed. I had two ways of keeping that from happening. A one square foot foldable solar charger and a hand crank charger. Two very useful, if not essential, devices. I also carried matches and a cigarette lighter for starting fires quickly.

The trip to the drop-off point went without a hitch, and, late on a brilliantly sunny afternoon, I was dropped on a small lake surrounded by

stunted evergreens, with a small stream pouring out that would become my river of escape. Seeing a moose grazing near the edge of the lake was what I came here for. Eagles perched around the lake, opportunistically feeding.

It was the 15th of May, and the air still had the frosty breath of winter on it. Ice still edged parts of the shore. I settled into a campsite on the lake, and immediately began catching fish—lake trout and arctic grayling. By nightfall, which came quickly, I had a roaring fire, a tasty meal of fish and a pleasant, if somewhat, chilly by morning, sleep. The next morning, I set off downriver in my kayak.

The two major obstacles to my journey were bears and mosquitoes. I had prepared for both. For the bears I had a pistol, a Rossi 357 Magnum stub nose with a box of fifty shells. The gun was a bit heavy for my taste, but I needed it for my safety. I always kept the gun loaded and holstered to my hip, because you never knew in heavy brush when you would come upon a bear and how the bear would react if surprised.

As for the mosquitoes, I had gloves and a hat with mosquito netting, as well as mosquito netting for my bedroll. I did not have a tent, only a tarp to keep the rain off. Careful placement of mosquito netting kept them off me, although sometimes they drove me crazy in the night with their buzzing just outside the netting. It wasn't until about May 20th that I ran into the mosquito hatch. It wasn't bad during the day when I was paddling downstream with the kayak and the movement kept the mosquitoes from attacking. Unfortunately, if I stopped to fish, eat or pee, they attacked immediately. Some days there were clouds of them in the air, and they would brush against me as I floated along with the rapidly moving stream. Until I got a smoky fire going, they harassed me at every camp.

But I'm not writing about the trip. While the trip was eventful, it was what was happening in the rest of the world that is important and I must get down on paper before I forget or I'm gone. Every evening on the journey, after I had eaten, and tucked myself warmly in my sleeping bag, I would take out my smart phone and do Face Time. First, with my parents to let them know I was still alive, and then, with my sister. I say, "still alive," because my parents thought my trip was foolhardy and very dangerous. That's why I called them every evening to let them know that I had not befallen some calamity that would kill me before I could be rescued. These chats were very short and consisted of basically, "Hello," "How are you?" And "I am fine. No problems. Love, Goodbye." And they did not tell me what was really going on—I guess they were too afraid to. I had to rely on my sister, Julie, for that.

It began at my second day's camp. On a relatively high bank for that very flat land. I chose the spot early because it started to rain and by the time I'd eaten some leftover fish from the day before, it was pouring and I was glad I was tucked in my sleeping bag under the tarp in a natural shelter of evergreens that kept most of the water off my tarp. After informing my parents that I was alive, I called up Julie. Immediately, she looked and sounded distressed. When I asked her what happened? She said, "The Stock Market crashed."

I knew that the Stock Market was in trouble because of all the indicators before I left. I had saved my money for the trip, so the only money I had in the stock market was in my small retirement account at the University. "So, what's so bad about that?" I asked.

"There are runs on many banks. People are taking their money out. Several banks have failed already. I got gas on the way home from work, and the prices jumped 50 cents over the last time I bought gas. I also stopped at the grocery store and everything was marked up 10% or more. When I asked at the checkout counter, the clerk told me that the chain was raising prices because they were afraid they would fail if they didn't. Their wholesale prices were steadily increasing and shortages were beginning to appear."

"That was happening before I left."

"It's because of the drought. They are saying that almost all the crops in Texas have failed this year. Over 50% of the corn crop is already gone, and the wheat crop is nearly devastated as well. This follows all those years of drought in California. The drought has reached all the way to the Boundary Waters north of here. They say that wildlife in some areas is threatened by stagnant water in lakes that have never been so low."

"I knew that." I wasn't quite connecting the dots—*denying*.

"Water supplies for drinking in some areas of Texas and New Mexico have dried up completely and the lowest groundwater levels ever seen threaten much of the Midwest water supply. We still have artesian water here in Stillwater. But some communities don't already because their aquifer wells have dried up. The St. Croix River is so low that it is barely flowing. Fish are dying in the shallows for lack of oxygen. The crows and eagles are having a field day on all these dead fish." There was a strain in her voice that was telling in spite of her forced smile.

"There is no shortage of fish here. I catch a 2 to 3 pounder every time I cast with artificial bait. Makes it easy to get a meal. The streams are full and flowing and the lakes are full of life. I'm seeing moose, ducks and

geese, beaver and otter, eagle and osprey, and bear, at a distance. So far it's wonderful, even though it's raining right now, and it hasn't been too cold. I'll check in with you tomorrow night, okay?"

"Okay. Goodbye. I love you." The tremor in her voice was obvious. Julie was scared.

I tried not to think about it, but each day when I called, my parents put up a good front, and didn't say anything or said that everything was fine. Okay. Nothing to worry about. But with Julie it was different. Each day brought a new problem worse than the last. There was a complete economic collapse that neither the President nor the Congress could do anything about. The economic collapse traveled around the world like lightning and affected every business. The resulting chaos led to widespread looting, as everyone seemed to try to gather up as much survival supplies as they could manage. Not only were store shelves empty in many stores, trucks were being held up on the highway, and warehouses were being broken into and all their goods taken.

Most states had called out the National Guard, but many of the volunteer soldiers were not showing up, saying they had to protect their families. People were openly carrying guns in the street and they were being used more and more for robbery and protection from robbery. Things were rapidly devolving and nothing seemed to be able to stop it. It was both dreadful and amazing to see how quickly civilization broke down when people were in distress.

In a way, I was glad I was in the wilderness and out of it all. Just watching on CNN on my smart phone or pad was enough. I'm sure there were many others like me, but so many lived in the cities, and the cities were becoming hellish places to live. The countryside also became difficult because of roaming gangs of young rebels who took advantage of the situation to play out their own form of guerrilla warfare.

Within two weeks, I came upon taller trees and more hilly terrain. It was a welcome change. It was also welcoming to find a 30 inch northern hitting my lure instead of the grayling. It was windy and cool. A front had come through. When it was windy there were no mosquitoes and few biting flies. The deer flies were worse than the mosquitoes in the daytime. Around noon I had stopped at this beautiful little place to fish and recharge my equipment with the solar panel.

I still had the Internet and the news wasn't good. It seems that no one, neither Julie, nor the Internet news, could tell me, what had compromised the power grid, putting most of the United States without power. The result



was catastrophic. It was only June 1st, and already dry conditions and high temperatures had caused countless wildfires.

Without electricity, it only took about five days for the reports of death to start rolling in. Over 95% of the population was in peril for lack of drinkable water, gasoline for their vehicles, and food. They started dying by the thousands. Every night when I called my parents, living with a home generator for electricity, they tried to remain upbeat, but I could hear desperation in their voices.

Four or five days later, I don't remember exactly, when I called, there was no answer. My telephone's satellite was still working, but I had no idea if they were still at home or had tried to seek shelter elsewhere. They both had cell phones and the fact that I couldn't reach them scared the hell out of me. I was in the middle of nowhere and could do nothing. It was frustrating. I was helpless.

When the power went out, Julie was living in a rented house. That night when I called her, she was very frightened. *"Are you okay, Julie?"*

"I'm scared. The folks have a generator and I should go to see them, but they're not answering and I'm afraid I'll get stopped by roadblocks or bandits trying to drive there. Frankly, I don't know what to do!" She started crying on the phone. It was obvious she wasn't prepared for what was happening.

"Okay, okay... Calm down. Together, let's think of something. Remember when we used to go camping? Gather up all the camping gear you can locate, and any food and supplies that you can put in the car, and tomorrow, before first light, drive on up to Uncle Frank Wilson's cabin on Turtle Lake. You know he would like your company and he has been subsisting there for so long that he can keep the both of you alive until I get there. I know he's got a generator that he rarely uses and a well that can be hand pumped for water."

"Thank you. Bless you. In my confusion I haven't thought of Uncle Frank. I sure hope he's all right. I'll leave before dawn and take the back roads. I should still have plenty of gasoline in my tank after I get there."

"Take all the food you can, and if you can find food along the way. Stores won't have electricity and may be selling perishables. Buy as much as you can because you'll need it. Everything else, Uncle Frank can provide. Do you have a gun?"

"I never told you, but I took pistol training about five years ago and have a small pistol that I've been keeping in my purse ever since things

started to get bad around here. I'll keep that by my side and loaded in the car in case I run into anything on the road.”

“Okay, we have a plan. If you run into trouble and can still call, please do, any time of the day or night and I'll try to help you if I can. Take care and stay safe. I'll be coming for you. Look for me sometime in the fall. In the meantime, let's keep up these conversations until the bastards turn off the satellite. Have to close now. Save your battery. Bye, I love you.” It seemed strange. I'd never said that before to her.

“I will. Bye, I love you, too.”

About seven thirty the next morning, just as I was about to leave camp, the phone rang. A shudder ran down my back. She's in trouble, I thought. An excited Julie came on the line.

“I made it! I made it! I'm at the cabin now. Like you told me, I got up around 4 am, got everything packed and left about 5 am. The streets were so dark without streetlights it was very eerie, but I know the roads well and everything was quiet for about a half-hour until I was on 70 headed east when a car pulled out behind me and began following.

“I got so scared. I ran down the window, picked up the pistol at my side, reached over my shoulder out the window and fired a shot at the car behind. Almost lost control of the car after I did it, hitting the shoulder of the road before pulling back on, but the car behind me stopped following and I pulled onto a side road and hid in a driveway for a while.

“And then, I got the shakes—*really bad*. Fifteen minutes later, I regained my composure and slowly idled with my headlights off to 70 again. I couldn't see lights in either direction, so I eased out on the highway again. I only passed a couple of cars before I took the county road into Indianhead Country. When I got to the county line there was a roadblock with two sleepy deputies, just about dawn. They told me they weren't letting anyone into the county because so many gangs were coming out of the Twin Cities and robbing and looting people. That night they had already arrested two carloads and had turned away several other cars.

“When I told them where I was going, they let me through and told me to 'Take care.' Everybody in the county knew Uncle Wilson. A half hour ago at The Corners, the owners of the little store there were dragging out and selling all their perishables, so I bought some frozen meat, cheese, milk, and a bag of flour. Got a case of beer for Uncle Frank. They were glad to take my money because they knew if bad guys came they would be looted or robbed and could do nothing about it. Uncle Frank is here, do you want to see him?” Frank's beard and ruddy cheeks came into view.

“Hi Uncle Frank. How are you?”

A gruff voice answered, somewhat hesitantly. “I’m fine. This electricity stuff don’t bother me much. Storms knock out electricity all the time. Sure was surprised to see Julie, but I’m glad she’s here. Will keep me company. Looks like the world is going to hell. When did you say you were going to get here? Sure hope your folks are all right. They should be here, too.”

“I’m worried about my folks, too. Lost contact with them. I’ll try to get there in the fall. You take care of my little sister, okay?”

“You bet I will. I’ll take care of Julie for you. That’s for darn sure.” With that, Uncle Frank Wilson hung up. He wasn’t much for talking over phones.

Frank Wilson, my Mom’s older brother, was a small-town mechanic who spent most of his limited free time at his little cabin deep in the woods on a remote area of Turtle Lake. A bachelor, Frank liked it like that, and, set back from the water, his place was hard to find at the end of nearly 5 miles of fire trail through heavy timber. And, it was far enough from the lake with only a little wooden dock and boathouse to give away that there was even a cabin there. It was an ideal hideout and I was glad for that.

## My Rush Home Begins

**M**y trip had changed. There was urgency now. And there was a long way to go. I continued on my trek downriver until, about July 1st, I came upon a third problem I hadn't counted on—a canyon with waterfalls and dangerous rapids. Oh, I would have conquered them all with an empty kayak of sturdy construction without any supplies, but I didn't dare damage the light kayak I had. To repair it would be too difficult with the few patching tools I had. To lose my equipment and supplies would be even worse.

So, I decided to portage around the canyon. There was a steep, rugged trail—mostly an animal track—around the high side, so I took that track with my pack. It took me a day to get to the other side of the canyon, and then another day to backtrack to where I left the kayak. I then broke down the kayak and carried it and the remaining gear on the trail again on the third day.

I arrived back where I left my pack, high in a tree about sundown, to a lot of activity—grunting and growling—as I came down the steep, rocky trail carrying a very heavy load. A mother black bear and three cubs had discovered my pack and seemed determined to get it. I carefully put down my load, grabbed my paddle, and began running down the trail waving the paddle and yelling at the top of my lungs. The cubs, two of which were already in the tree, fell out and ran after their mother, and the whole kit and caboodle took off down river. I was glad that I had chased them off so easily, but leery of staying the night there. I had no choice though, so I made camp up against a big rock wall and built a fire, hoping that would keep the mother bear away until morning. By the time I climbed the tree to retrieve the pack, it was dark and I had to fumble around to get ready to go to sleep with the pack tucked in behind me. I grabbed some cold food out of the pack and ate it. And then, I stumbled around in the dark, gathering up firewood so that I could build a perimeter of fire to protect me.

It took me a long time to get to sleep, worrying about the mother bear. But I was exhausted from the three days of hiking with heavy loads and eventually fell asleep. Just before dawn, something woke me and I noticed

that the fires had all burned out and the mother bear was about 15 feet away shuffling about trying to figure out what I was with her nose in the air checking me out. I doubt if she had ever seen a human before I yelled at her the night before. I yelled and waved my arms again, and she bolted, ran back a few steps, and then turned and came back, more curious than ever. I could see her cubs with her in the background and I was very scared.

I pulled out the 357 Magnum and aimed it about a foot above her head and pulled the trigger. The recoil snapped my hand back and the butt gave me a bloody nose forgetting that it's a two hand gun. Not the best position for firing from lying down. But as the report of the pistol echoed up and down the canyon and the bullet passed her ear, she bolted again, downriver, with her cubs in fast pursuit. I wasted no time getting out of camp that morning and didn't stop paddling until around lunchtime to have anything to eat. I made camp early that evening, assured that I was miles from her ability to smell me again.

It had been three days of struggle without contacting Julie. As soon as I had something to eat and a fire to last until morning, I called her. The reception was bad but we got through to each other. She looked very worried as her face kept breaking up on the screen.

"I'm sorry, Julie. I haven't called because I had to portage around a canyon and it took me three days—late every day. And then, I ran into a bear with three cubs yesterday and she bothered me no end until I left early this morning without breakfast. I'm downriver about 30 miles, so she shouldn't bother me tonight. How have you and Frank been?"

"We're okay. We've been working like crazy trying to make sure that this place is secure and that we have plenty of food for the long haul. We've got a huge garden and plan to can as much food as we can before winter. Uncle Frank is busy digging a bigger root cellar and also one that we can hide in if someone comes. No word from the folks. While I worry about you when you disappear for three days, I'm really worried about them. I sure hope they're somewhere safe. I know they'd come here if they could. I'm afraid they're lost. The news is so bad. Hard to even look at what's going on in the news.

"Here I am with a garden that I only have to water twice a week or so with pails from the lake and occasional rain. We're lucky. The drought has reached the entire Midwest way up into Canada. Every time we catch the news there are more fires and it seems like the entire Midwest is burning along with the Southwest and much of the West. If this keeps up, and there's no indication that it won't, we are going to have a dust bowl greater

than the one in the mid-1930s. Every once in a while, we smell smoke from fires out West. By August, we may be as dry as it is there. It's scary, but I feel good being here with Uncle Frank. He is so relaxed and calm and it calms me down too."

"It's best to stay as calm as possible and prepare for the worst. I'm glad that Uncle Frank is digging you a hide out. Do you have a dog to warn you?"

"No. Frank's old terrier died last year and he just didn't have the heart to get another one. We've haven't been to town since I got here, so there's little chance we can find a dog unless we can get one at The Corners or from one of the area farmers. We talked to a few of them, and everyone is scared like us. Trying to come up with some kind of early warning system when they come. And we know they'll come." She sighed.

"The news is full of stories of marauding bands of men raping and killing and taking everything from people before they kill them. Uncle Frank has found a place to hide my car that is about a quarter-mile from the cabin here and deep in the woods. He has also hidden his truck. Frank has also taken the batteries and gasoline—buried nearby—out so that no one can drive them if they find them. We are keeping the batteries charged."

"Do you still have electricity?"

"Yes, off and on. We try to charge up all our devices when the power is on, and so far, we haven't lost any frozen meat. But it looks like, very soon, we will. In the meantime, our windmill and solar panels are working quite well until they'll get vandalized by somebody."

"I'll be there as soon as I can, Julie. I'm making very good time on the river. I tried to call my bush pilot, but got no answer. I'm afraid I may have to paddle all the way there. Bye for now. Love."

"Bye. I love you." Julie's picture, that had been popping in and out all session, disappeared from the screen entirely. I felt lonely. It was the first time I felt lonely on the trip, but it wouldn't be the last.

With an urgency I hadn't planned for the trip, I moved down river. As I planned, I lived off the land. I found duck eggs for breakfast. Blueberries were plentiful and easy to harvest. I ground-up cattail root and let it dry to make a kind of flour. Fish continued to be plentiful, allowing me to catch a three-meal size northern with a single cast of an artificial lure. I saw more bear, both black and grizzly, but gave them a wide berth and protected my camp each night from their nosy inquiries. I saw moose, deer, lynx, wolverine, fox, beaver, squirrels and many other animals and birds by the banks of the river. I saved my bullets for a greater need and caught ducks,

rabbits and squirrels in traps and snares to avoid having to continually eat fish. It was amazing how bountiful the boreal forest was. Every time I ate, I thought about those starving in the States. But I didn't dwell on it. Too morbid to think about—starving to death. Fighting to get food.

There were periods where there were rapids and periods where the river was quite calm. I was amazed how large the river got so far north. So far, I hadn't seen anyone and didn't think anyone ever came this way. It was hard for me to believe that there were untouched places like this where no one ever went except by bush plane, canoe or kayak.

My kayak, made of canvas, strengthened with dope, held up quite well, and I only had to make minor patches after running some pretty rough rapids with sharp rocks. If I had a fiberglass kayak, all the sharp rocks would have destroyed it. My mentor, the professor, I told you about, had warned me about aluminum canoes and fiberglass kayaks. Old systems, proven over centuries, were often better for long journeys like this. Amid all this abundance, I tread lightly. I was sharpening my survival skills. Finding new things to eat like forest mushrooms, inner bark, watercress, devils club fiddleheads, miner's lettuce, dandelion greens and nuts from pinecones. Pinenuts were something I hadn't tried before, but were plentiful and tasty to eat. The Internet was a big help in determining what was edible and what was not.

## Terror Comes to Turtle Lake

**B**y July, it got rather hot, and sometimes, I slept with only the mosquito netting over me. This was the time when the horse flies and deer flies were at their worst. It seems like I swatted thousands of them as their burning stingers dug for my blood. Much worse than mosquitoes.

Each time I called Julie, things got more urgent. There was no Fourth of July celebration that year for anyone. Fires had burned over half the forest in the country and smoke was everywhere, combined with dust from the dried-up soil where the crops had failed—most of the Midwestern crops failed, dried out and burned. Town after town burned, driving their occupants onto the roads, seeking shelter wherever they could. Little was found. Those that had shelter were reluctant to open it to the multitudes looking.

California was producing crops, but water was getting scarce there, like before, and the price of gasoline and bio diesel was too great to ship most of the crops out of the state. Unknown territory where, more and more, law was breaking down and trucks were hijacked. The cities were breaking down. With no electricity, water, or food, city dwellers were abandoning the cities in masse. As a result, unless a city dweller had cash and a destination in the country, he/she would have to join a group of anarchists to survive. Without being in an armed militia for protection, the city was hell. The second amendment was in full use as people sought to protect themselves and their loved ones with lethal force.

Julie reported that the smoke was so bad sometimes that it burned their eyes and throats, and made breathing hard. I smelled it, too, from time to time. There was a general pall in the sky from smoke that had reached the stratosphere and encircled the globe. I didn't know it at the time, but, as a result, the next three years would be much colder, before the real heat set in from all the carbon dioxide in the air and methane released from the tundra as the permafrost melted.

Julie also reported that Frank and she had been busy putting moss and fern cover over every root cellar and hideaway that they had so that they



would not be discovered by marauding gangs—something they had learned from locals—that gangs were now in the area.

I figured by the end of July I would reach the point where I would be flown out, Little Pine Lake. Located just off the river I was on that continued on to Hudson Bay. But I was anxious and didn't want to wait any longer to head home. While I was enjoying my sojourn, Julie and my parents were constantly on my mind and I just had to get there, no matter what. Over the next two days, I called my charter plane service over and over and only got a message, “We are out of the office, but leave a message and we will call you back as soon as we can.” As I got no call backs, I became more anxious and begin to think I wouldn't hear from them again. Thoughts of being stranded so far north haunted me.

I needed to go south and the charts that I had from my GPS stored on my smart phone indicated that I would have to do a lot of portaging to go south and pick up the Boundary Waters into Minnesota to the St. Croix River and Indianhead country. If I had to go south myself, it was that or risk Hudson Bay. The next time I called Julie, I broke the news.

“Hi, Julie. I hope everything is okay there. I've got good news and bad news. Do you want to hear it?”

A frightened voice came on the line. “Oh, am so glad you called. Uncle Frank and I have been hiding here in the woods all day. It's too confining in that hideout hole, so we are out in the woods, about a mile from the cabin, hoping they won't come this way. Luckily, we heard them coming a long time before they got to the cabin and we both headed out with backpacks to this hole we dug that we crawled into for about an hour until we came out here in the brush.

Mosquitoes are biting me right now and it's not pleasant. Every once in a while we can hear them shooting and whooping it up, so we won't go back until they have left. I sure hope we have something left to go back to. I heard they burn places like ours just in spite. Luckily, we have caches all over and a couple of tents we can live in until we build something back if they burn everything down. Most of our stuff is buried and grown over so they can't find it. Now all I have to do is make sure they don't find us. Still, I'm scared...”

“I'm sure glad that you have Uncle Frank to help you.” Frank stuck his head in the picture. His hair and beard were now pure white and unrulier than ever. I addressed him. Thank you so much, Uncle Frank, for protecting Julie from the awful things that are happening.”

Uncle Frank's gruff voice was very clear. "Well, it's the best I can do. I ain't sure whether I'm doing enough, though. From what I hear, those bastards can be really mean and take away everything you have... kill ya. I'm going to make sure they don't get a chance to rape your sister. We'll be hidin' like groundhogs if they come this way. And we both got rifles and pistols to let them know that we mean business if they try to take us. In the meantime, we'll hide and will do them no harm unless they try to harm us." Frank's taut face disappeared from the screen and was replaced by Julie's worry lined one.

"I'm going to sign off now. Don't want them to hear us or run down my battery. I will text you if we get in trouble and I can't call. I sure as hell hope we've got something left of the cabin after they leave. It's getting dark so it looks like we may have to spend the night out here. I'll call you tomorrow because I don't want my phone to ring if they're anywhere near. I love you. Bye."

"I love you too, Julie. Put your phone on vibrate so that it won't make a sound. Will also look for text messages from you. And Uncle Frank. Take care of my sister for me. Bye now." I tried to look and sound normal but knew I didn't.

I must've covered 40 miles the next day, every minute worrying about them, paddling hard with the current. Finally, after I made camp and ate a squirrel that I had snared overnight in my previous camp, I couldn't wait any longer and made a call even though Julie had told me not to.

A strained voice came on the line I knew as Julie's. Her phone was set to automatically lock out anyone who tried to use it except her. "Hello, I'm so glad you called. We have been too busy to call you back and I just started to relax and try to get to bed just now. They left sometime last night. We snuck back to the cabin and knew what we'd find, because we saw it burning in the night. For some reason they didn't burn the boathouse, but they took the boat. We still have the canoe that we hid in the woods and most of our supplies, furnishings and equipment—all buried. That's what we've been doing all day. Digging up stuff that we had buried so that we can get this place back in order and build a cabin by winter. This time, we will build further from the water and the road and leave the burned-out cabin for anyone else to find, thinking no one lives here anymore." She sounded exhausted.

"Okay, that's a relief. At least you've minimized your loss and have a plan that will do you well in the future. You really don't know how many more marauders there are out there. I just had a tasty squirrel and cattail

root dinner with mushrooms and made at least 20 miles today with all the portages around rough water and rocks. I figure that I'll be at my turning south point in about five days. I still don't know if I can make all the portages and the 500 miles yet to go to reach you by fall." We said our goodbyes and I worried I wouldn't get there in time.

I figured about right, and, in four days on July 30, I reached my take-out point just off the river and the trail to Little Pine Lake. The lake was deserted, except for a well-stocked lodge and cabins where the bush pilot brought people and guides to go fishing on the lake or hunting the property, privately owned by the outfitting company. As was a tradition in the North Country, a note on the door said, "Welcome to this sanctuary. You may use it if you wish, but leave it better than you found it." Like finding a diamond in the rough.

I immediately planned to spend a couple of days recuperating from the strenuous run I had just made and restock. Somehow, I knew no one would come to my aid. All of my calls and messages hadn't been answered. More and more when I called, I got, "This circuit is no longer in service" or a fast busy signal indicating a problem with the circuit. While the satellite, with its solar panels, continued to relay calls, its earthly designations, including cell phones, were rapidly disappearing. I hoped that wouldn't happen to Julie's phone. Unfortunately, I was wrong. And I have been wrong many times since.

I took a hot shower. I made hot meals on the propane stove, much of the lodge was powered by windmills and solar panels. I luxuriated in a wonderful bed and hot shower. I tried to contact the outside world through the Internet. Many websites were no longer available. The only news that could be found was CNN and it was all bad. The exodus from the cities of the United States had an immediate and dramatic effect.

Millions died trying to find food and water from heat exhaustion, dehydration, starvation, and smoke and dust inhalation. Thousands died from gunshots as those that had protected their stores from those that had not. Even those that were survivalists and had stores of food and water found themselves driven out by fires, smoke, dust and marauders. At one point, it seemed the entire country was burning. Once these fires got into the cities, they burned without stopping for days or months and gave off toxic clouds of smoke from all the chemicals and plastics that were incinerated in the buildings. Some of the cities burned so hot they created firestorms reaching over 100 miles an hour. The hot breath of death, if not from the sun, was everywhere from the forests to the cities.

It was no better in Europe or South America where the rain forests were on fire, having experienced drought for the first time. In Central America, millions walked northward, only to find nothing to eat or drink in the United States after they crossed what used to be the Rio Grande and was now nothing more than a dry caked mud riverbed. When the rains did come, they were muddy deluges that caused floods and mudslides. Hurricanes devastated coastlines throughout the world in the tropics and dumped torrential rains on the temperate zones, only to turn to drought again after the floodwaters receded and the mud rapidly dried.

Each day that I called Julie, it got worse. “Hi, I don't know where to begin. They keep coming back and now we hear gunfire in the distance all the time. We are making our cooking fire on the ashes of the cabin so that it will look like no one is here. At noon today, we had to interrupt our lunch, quickly put out the fire, and run to our hideout again because they came.

Fortunately, they make so much noise we can hear them at least a half mile away. It doesn't look like we have any chance of rebuilding until they're all gone. I don't know if this is the same group that came the other night or not. From all the gunfire, there may be several groups fighting each other. We try not to be seen from the water, because there are boats on the lake all the time and we believe that they are marauders, too. When I first came there were only fishermen on the lake. I'm really scared now that they will find us or we will get too exhausted trying to hide all the time. How are we going to prepare for winter if they keep harassing us like this?” I could hear her sobbing in the background.

“Julie... Julie... You know I love you and would be there to protect you if I could. Please get your wits about you and deal with this as best you can. You've got the right strategy. You just have to wait them out. After they've got all they want or need, they'll leave... Or kill each other off. You have stores they don't know about and can't find. You'll just have to outlast them. That's all.”

“Okay... It just gets too much, that's all. I need to sleep now... too tired. Bye.”

“Bye... Sweet dreams. I'll call tomorrow...” I was really worried and anxious. I wanted to get on the plane and fly there—*now!* So far, they had escaped detection, but I didn't know how long before something terrible would happen. I started to cry. It wasn't long before something did.

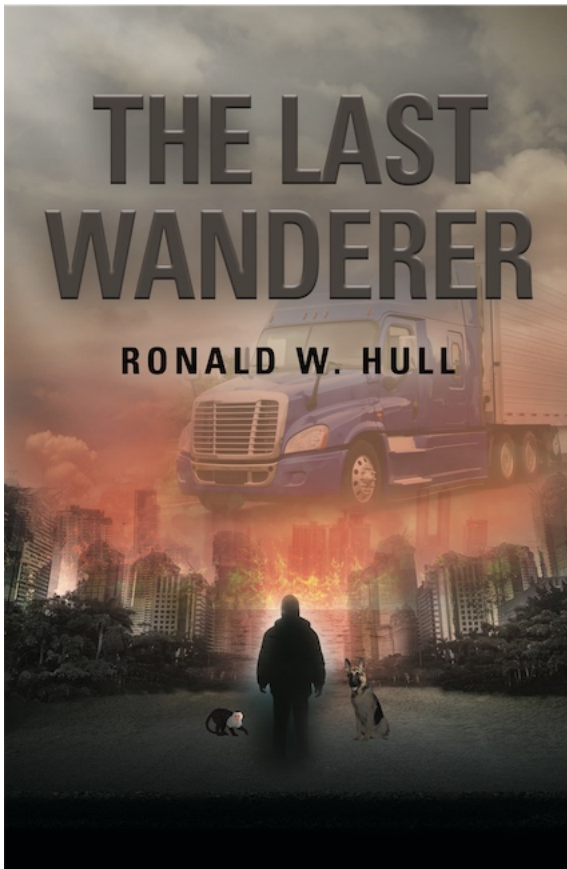
The next day, around noon, I finished up my morning chores around the lodge and was contemplating how I might get to Julie and Frank faster before winter, when my phone rang. It was Julie, and she was hysterical.

“*Oh my God... They've done it!* They're setting fires and the woods are all so dry, so tinder dry, that the fires are everywhere and the smoke is getting almost unbearable here. We may have to leave soon because a wall of fire is about a half-mile away and coming our way. The only thing we can think of is packing some stuff in the canoe and getting out on the lake and covering our faces with wet cloth to block the smoke.” She was crying loudly, clearly panicked.

“Now, now... Try to think. Try to think of everything before the fire gets there. Loading the canoe is a good idea, try to stay near the shore so that you won't be seen out on the lake or they may try to come and attack you there. Let Uncle Frank help you. I know he knows what to do. Call me anytime. I haven't left here yet. I'm stocking up on food for my trip south. Take care and beware. Keep your guns handy and surprise them if you have to. Kill them before they kill you. Don't give them any opportunity. Remember... *call me.*”

“I will... I will...” Julie hung up without saying goodbye.

I was so frustrated and powerless that I wanted to smash the phone. But I contained myself, knowing I would need the phone, if only to hear more of their plight.



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