

## **WASTING THE DAWN: Chapter 1 of 20**

Author: David Hurwitz

© 1995-2000 Mr Rowbear Productions

*This chapter may not be reprinted in, except for the purpose of review, with out the express written permission of Mr Rowbear Productions.*

Randall Springfield awoke in the sand. He did not open his eyes. He knew better than to do that. Sensation drifted gradually back. The dry pressure all around him. The tickle of sand in the cracks and crevices of his skin. Grains between his fingers and toes. In the creases of his knees. Pressing almost into his breathless lips and nostrils. Caking to the corners of his sightless eyes. His body felt warm but not hot. Early evening, he decided.

He thrust an arm upward, away from his chest. It had taken him a moment to remember how to move, and a moment longer to make his arm obey. Wind stirred the hairs on his outstretched limb. The sand fell away, running down his skin in an arid stream. He thrust out his other arm, then lowered them both to the surface of the sand, palms downward. Slowly, the muscles in his back and legs spasming into life, Randall Springfield sat up.

Sand ran off his body, pouring off his chest, leaking reluctantly from his hair. Eyes still closed, Randall gathered his feet under him and stood. Once he felt sure of his balance he scrubbed his hands roughly through his hair. It felt longer than when he had buried himself, nearly to the shoulder. Sand pelted his chest and back, stung his face. Soon his head and hands were relatively clean. Very slowly, very carefully, he opened his eyes. Sand got in them anyway. He resisted the urge to rub at them, letting tears clear his vision.

The ruins were just as he remembered them, nothing changed. Brick walls the color of sand, big chinks showing. Sunlight slanting through the remains of a wooden roof that seemed just a little too low. Deep sand covered the floor, with a man-shaped depression in the middle. The light seemed to be fading.

Randall crouched in a corner of the room and dug up his pack. A good deal of sand had gotten into it, but no scorpions or other desert creatures. He straightened, stretching his arms towards the gaps in the roof. Six weeks, he thought. Maybe more. Next he scraped vigorously at his body, hard nails taking off layers of dead skin along with the sand. After fifteen minutes he felt almost clean, though there were a couple places he could not reach. He shook out his clothes and put them on. He would have to take a shower at the first hotel. There was no getting around it.

Swinging his long brown coat up over his shoulder, he walked slowly into the front room. A red sun sinking below distant mountains glared at him through the hollow doorway. The peaks themselves cast long shadows over the canyon below. Randall coughed at the taste of sand, and only then remembered to restart his lungs. The last time he slept he had

forgotten for two whole days, only noticing when he tried to speak to someone.

Looking around the room, Randall saw the remains of a fire and a large number of crushed beer cans stacked in an irregular pyramid. Rose must be around somewhere, he thought. Very few people ever visited the Dolomite mine, let alone spent the night in the old ridge-fort above. The place was dull, even as historical sights went, and nearly three hours drive from genuine civilization. It was a good place to hide, to sleep and heal.

He walked outside, shrugging into his coat, up the path along the edge of the ridge. The ground looked nearly level, but Randall could feel the grade in the backs of his legs. Soon he could look down on the gaping roof of the fort below. He reached the ridge-top, smiling as he caught sight of the rock chair. Long ago, some clever miner had built himself a seat of adobe bricks and discarded stones hauled out of the shaft. It was big, more of a couch really. Fist size pieces of quartz glinted in the armrests. Thumbnail cactus sprouted from the unmortared chinks. Randall dusted the seat with the tail of his coat and sat. The most amazing thing about the rock chair, so far as he was concerned, was that it somehow managed to be comfortable. And the view from the ridge-top was truly vast.

The setting sun lanced over the mountains and across the canyon, burning fierce and red before its death below the peaks. In that last burst of light, the land below took on the aspect of an alien sea. The dunes became frozen swells of strange water, white as wind-cut bone. Scrub and cacti seemed to be aquatic plants, stilled momentarily in their dance with the tides. Small animals poked their heads above the surface, then disappeared through holes in the petrified waves. Randall had not set foot in the sea in decades. The view, the contrast, pleased him.

Just as the sun vanished from sight, Randall spotted Rose approaching the ridge-fort. He sported his old leather jacket and a new beard. He held a grocery bag under one arm. Greetings, Renfield! Randall called. How nice to see you again. Rose made a show of shading his eyes and scanning the ridge-top. Then he gave a little laugh and stomped the rest of the way up the hill.

Reaching the plateau, he set the bag down with metallic thud and draped himself over one arm of the rock chair. You would wake up an hour after I decide to go into town for supplies. You're timing has always been shit. He smiled, and reached down into the bag. Beer?

Randall accepted a can and popped the lid. I should really stop drinking alcohol. Brain cells take forever to grow back, and I've only got so many of them. I just might run out some day. He took a long drink, then made a face. Jesus, didn't they have a refrigerator?

Small though Ocotillo is, they do have most of the major appliances. Rose drained his can in one continuous series of swallows, crushed it, then popped another. I, however, am short on cash as usual. His lopsided grin seemed to make the new beard bristle. And if it's true what you said about brain cells, I'll be starting in the red.

All in due time, my boy. All in due time. Randall arched his back. Several of his vertebrae cracked audibly. I'm still not used to this shit myself sometimes, and I've been at it for years.

They drank in silence for a while. The sky deepened from blue to black. Stars hung in great unwinking clusters. A sliver moon glowed just above the horizon, turning the valley shadowless and grey. Rose polished off another can, then cleared his throat. So, did you find her?

Randall sighed. No. He leaned back in the chair, hands behind his head. You hear about that little town in Texas where they kept pulling people out of the river with their heads cut off?

Rose rummaged through his bag, coming up with a strip of beef jerky. Yeah, it's been pretty big news.

Well that used to be one of Mothers bad habits. I thought it might be her, so I went to check it out. Turned out to be just some psycho asshole collecting human skulls.

I heard they found the guy with his throat cut. Bled to death in his breakfast nook. Cops figured it must have been some vigilante thing, or maybe just an extreme suicide. They're not investigating too hard, I guess. He ripped off a piece of beef jerky with his teeth and chewed it vigorously. You telling me you did that?

Randall shrugged. I didn't want anybody else getting a hold of him.

What do you mean? Rose squinted at him curiously, his fuzzy brown eyebrows bunching.

Randall turned away from the view to look his friend in the face. There are some of my. . . relations. . . that get their kicks by recruiting killers, psychotics, bad-ass criminals. You don't want to run into one of these boys. Immortality tends to erode the conscience anyway. Just imagine if you never had one to begin with.

Rose nodded slowly. Sounds nasty. He extended a strip of salted flesh. Beef jerky?

Thank you, no. Randall stood and walked slowly along the cliffs edge. You been here long?

Sliding down from the chair arm, Rose stretched himself out full length and stared up at the stars. His boots dangled over the far end of the stone seat. Not long. A couple of weeks. When you didn't show up in Vegas, I figured I'd find you here. It's probably just as well.

Randall turned abruptly. Why's that? He looked down at the sprawled figure, frowning in irritation.

Well, said Rose, Let's just say I'm wanted in Nevada now, too. He flinched at the expression on Randall's face, only partly visible in the fading light. He sat up quickly.

What was it this time? Another drugstore? Seen from the chair, Randall's eyes were pits of shadow lengthening into sharp spikes of darkness below his cheekbones. His tangled hair stirred in the wind.

Rose took a sip of beer, then looked away. Seven Eleven, actually. Before Randall could say anything he continued. I know, I know. It was

stupid. But what else could I do? I had no money. I needed food and a drink, not to mention gas. And you hadn't showed. He shrugged helplessly.

Bending down, Randall gripped the other mans shoulders, digging his nails into the hard leather. My dear Renfield, you know how much I hate it when you deliberately do something that impairs your usefulness. Once we find her I'll give you everything I promised, but until then you have to help me. So please, please, think before you do these things. He rose, turned away, and gazed out into the darkening gulf below. I'm sorry, Rose said quietly. He inched up until he was sitting on the back of the rock chair, boots resting on the seat.

It's all right. Randall's voice seemed to float up out of the canyon. I have business here in California anyway. And there's some people Id like you to meet.

Swell. Rose pulled another beer from his bag. Here's to it. He drained the can, crushed it, and stuffed it back in the sack. So, he asked lightly, do I qualify as a badass criminal?

You're going to make a beautiful immortal. Randall still faced away, standing on the very edge of the cliff. He hardly seemed to move at all, even when he spoke. You're just crazy enough to survive.

Rose let that sink in, chin resting in his hands. After a while he ventured a new subject. What delayed you, anyway? You still haven't told me.

Randall stood motionless, feeling the pull of the wind. He suppressed the fleeting desire to leap off the ridge-top into blackness and space. His skin still itched with sand. Shaking himself, he began to pace along the ridge once more. I had to walk out of Texas. Nobody was picking up hitchhikers and I didn't dare steal a car, what with all the cops on the highway. I traveled at night, straight as I could out of the state, through fields and ranches and waste. You wouldn't believe how big that fucking state really is. You just don't see it driving.

Anyway, one night I hop this fence, walk across what looks like a dead farm. There are plow furrows, but nothings in them. The soil looks dried and cracked. I pass pretty close to this beat up shack and as I walk by a light comes on. There are no windows, but it shines out between the boards. A door opens and this bent old man levels a shotgun at me, barrels resting across one arm. He spits a wad of tobacco into the dirt. Doesn't say anything. I just keep walking, not even looking at him, not going any faster or slower than before. Without a word the old fucker shot me in the back.

Rose whistled in the darkness. That's Texas for you.

Indeed. Randall found another beer and popped it open. I stood up pretty quick, blood coming out these big blast holes in my chest. You should have seen that bastard jump! He turned dead fucking white and ran backwards into the shack, slammed the door. I pounded on the walls for a bit, but the blood loss started to hit me and I staggered off. I dropped just short of another fence, had to sit for while.

You can probably imagine the rest. I dragged along by night, never getting very far. Finally I made it to set of railroad tracks. I jumped the next cattle car that came along. Scared the shit out of a couple of winos. They actually leapt off in the middle of the wasteland. Took the train through Arizona, dropped off when I recognized the territory. Hiked the rest of the way here.

Rose belched tremendously, the sound echoing faintly off the distant mountains. Does shit like this happen to you a lot?

Only when I'm in a hurry. Randall downed the remainder of his beer and tossed the can back into the sack. I'd like to start out at dawn, if you don't mind. He stood, scratching his sandy scalp. Why don't you get some sleep? I need to find food.

A disgusting practice, Rose muttered, gathering loose beer cans and stuffing them into his bag. Chewing on live animals. Revolting.

Randall laughed. You're going to have to get used to the idea sooner or later.

Are you sure you wouldn't rather have some nice beef jerky? He pulled some out of the sack and waved it tantalizingly in Randall's direction. This is teriyaki flavor, yum.

Thanks all the same. Randall began to descend the ridge. See you in the morning, Renfield, he called over his shoulder.

\* \* \*

At dawn Randall kicked Rose awake. The man groaned in his sleeping bag. Beer, he mumbled, must have beer. He began to inch forward like a large worm.

I think you've had enough for now, said Randall. I'd like to get up into LA today, maybe even as far as Santa Barbara. Rose thrashed around on the sandy floor, knocking over his can pyramid. Would you like some help getting out of there?

Rose rolled over onto his back, his shaggy hair and bearded face protruding from the top of his bag. Please. He smiled winningly, then peered curiously down the length of his cocooned body. I seem to be having some trouble locating the zipper.

Kneeling down in the sand, Randall quickly unzipped the bag. Thank you. Rose sprung to his feet, still fully clothed except for his boots and jacket. Now if you'll excuse me. . . He hurried out of the fort and up the ridge in his socks. Randall followed him outside and leaned against the adobe wall, watching curiously. At the top of the ridge Rose unbuttoned his fly and urinated off the edge of the cliff for a full four minutes. The stream of liquid scattered and gleamed in the sunlit air.

Rose returned slowly, more mindful of the rocks and burrs in his path. All better now, he said, and began jamming on his boots. My bikes at the bottom of the ridge. I've got enough gas to get to Ocotillo, but well need to fill up there. He dug into his crumpled grocery bag, removing a box of Pop-Tarts. You want breakfast?

Randall did not reply. He merely shrugged into his pack and slung his coat over one shoulder. Clean up your shit and well go.

They descended the ridge in silence. The only sounds came from the faint breeze and the rustling of unseen animals. Even now the heat had begun to build. Randall noticed himself sweating, squinting against the glare of sun on sand. Warmth radiated from the ground, making his boots uncomfortable. He glanced over at Rose, but the other man did not seem to feel the temperature. Randall kept walking.

At the bottom of the ridge sat Rose's motorcycle, a giant horseshoe lock through the back wheel. Rose had rebuilt it from Army surplus, and it looked it. Every piece of metal in it was either dull black or a dark, ugly green. Even the pipes, forks, and fenders, parts that would normally be chrome, consisted of the same dead metal. The seat was patched with peeling layers of electrical tape. A thin film of brown dirt coated the bike. Only the gauges looked clean and new. Two helmets sat side by side on the gas tank.

You brought me a hard hat? Randall picked one up and turned it over in his hands.

Why not? said Rose, removing the lock. You may be immortal, but you still wouldn't want to smear your precious brain cells all over the highway, not when you've got places to go and people to see. Can't object to that, I guess. Randall shoved the helmet down onto his head. Ouch, shit! He yanked it off again quickly.

You better take out your earring out first. Rose pulled his own helmet on and straddled the bike.

Thanks for the warning. Randall removed the tiny hoop, dropped it into one of his pockets, then replaced the helmet. Foam padding surrounded him on all sides, reducing his vision to a narrow swath. Much better. Sweat dripped down his neck as he clambered onto the back of the motorcycle. This thing must turn into a furnace on the road.

What? Rose jump-started the bike and the engine coughed into life, vibrating the entire frame. The jackhammer sound of the glass-packed pipes bounced off the ridgeline and echoed through the wide valley. Never mind! Randall yelled as they began to move.

They cruised slowly along a dry arroyo sluiced out of the soil by some long ago flash flood. Rose maneuvered nimbly around the larger rocks and ruts. They passed tall ocotillo, lank arms groping futilely in their dusty wake. A roadrunner darted across their path, a blur of legs and brown feathers. Randall recalled the one he had caught in the night. Very stringy, almost no blood.

The arroyo leveled out into a winding track, carved into the waste by jeep wheels. Soon the black ribbon of the highway came into view on the horizon, partially screened by a hedge of dry brush. Randall thought it looked ridiculous, running through the desert sands like the solidified extrusion of some ancient breed of monster snail, a fragile bridge that natural forces would shatter and grind and one day consume completely.

As they drew closer he saw that the shoulders of the asphalt strip had already begun to crumble away and sink into the dust.

They topped the short rise leading to the road. Once the twin wheels hit the tarmac, the ride became much smoother. Rose shifted into high gear and the landscape began to blur. Roadside rocks and scrub flew by in brown haze while straight ahead the road remained unchanging. Randall concentrated on the double yellow line, watched it shrink and vanish in the distance. Reflectors flew towards them, accelerating suddenly before they disappeared. He closed his eyes, surrendering to the forward motion.

\* \* \*

Ocotillo is one of those communities that spring up around a strategically located gas station, squatting at the confluence of Interstate-eight and the state highway that leads into the Anza Borrego desert preserve. Its main street runs perpendicular to the larger freeway, passing under a low bridge. The only structure south of the overpass is a family diner with parking spaces for semi rigs. North lies the filling station with its adjacent general store, the office of the sheriff and coroner, and the trailer containing the public library. The Ocotillo Bible Church sits across the street from the Lazy Lizard Saloon. Residential streets branch off at regular intervals, named for gunslingers and precious gemstones. A few weathered homes huddle on lots that seem small compared to the vast emptiness surrounding them. Cactus gardens help conceal the satellite dishes.

Rose pulled up beside a rusty gas pump and killed the engine. The two men pulled off their helmets. Randall shook out his damp hair then scratched furiously at his scalp, growling between clenched teeth. You all right? asked Rose. You seemed mighty quiet back there. Bits of his own brown hair stuck plastered to his forehead, but he seemed as cheerful as ever.

I must have fallen into a road trance. Randall peeled off his coat and slung it over the seat. This sand is driving me nuts. Well stop in San Diego, get a room so I can clean up. He stifled the urge to scratch any further and dug through his pack instead, coming up with a large wad of money sealed in a water-proof container. Pay first, right?

Rose nodded. Yeah. And would you look at these prices? Is America that hard up for fossil fuels, I ask you?

When you're the only gas station in a seventy-mile radius you can pretty much afford to gouge. Randall unscrewed the lid of the container and pulled out a few bills at random. Want any food? Are you buying? Rose smiled sweetly, an expression that was effectively ruined by his curly beard. Id just as soon you didn't rip the place off.

In that case I'll have bag of Doritos, a cold Coke, and a giant pickle. Rose waved him in the direction of the general store. Go on, go on. Just ask at the counter, they'll know what you mean.

The inside of the store was air-conditioned. Randall savored the temperature drop, although it gave him an instant headache. He left a

ten with the old man at the counter, then wandered slowly down the aisles. The place seemed entirely devoted to snack food and alcohol. One tiny shelf held both cat litter and tampons, horribly over-priced. He found Roses chips and soda, plus a bottle of beer for himself. Back at the register, Randall studied the old man as he rang up the sale. He wore a plaid flannel shirt that looked as if it had once been a blanket. Blue veins stood out from his hands and neck. A battered cap sat on his head that might have once advertised something. His face looked etched by the wind. Rose burst through the door at a brisk walk, calling Urination break! as he swept towards the back of the store.

Uh, those are with the gas, said Randall. The old man frowned, warping the lines of his face, and began poking at the register again. Randall yielded to temptation and scratched his scalp.

Shortly, Rose sidled up and leaned against the counter. So, he asked, glancing from one man to the other, did you get my giant pickle? He stared pointedly at the counter. I don't see a giant pickle. What's the matter Randall, too embarrassed to ask this fellow for a really big pickle?

Randall rolled his eyes, looked pleadingly at the old man. He wants a giant pickle.

They sat at a concrete table outside, Randall drinking his beer while Rose ate his pickle in tremendous bites. The heat felt brutal after the cool of the store. You didn't happen to see the bathroom? asked Rose. No, I think all the fluid in my body was sweated out of me. Randall took a long pull of beer. Why do you ask?

They have the most amazing condom dispenser in there. It's got everything, things I never heard of even. Swedish dusters. Black Mambas. What the hell is a Black Mamba? Is it supposed to be self-evident, cause its not. He popped open his soda, shotgunned it, then lobbed the can into a wastebasket. I'm sure I have no concept.

And why? asked Rose, stuffing chips into his mouth. Why? No one in a town this small could be that hip and happening. And who the hell would drive all the way out here to fuck? He stared at Randall, hands raised in a classic gesture of confusion.

Maybe they want to prevent inbreeding. Randall downed the last of his beer and stood up. You ready to go?

I suppose. Rose pitched the remains of his meal in the general direction of the trash can. San Diego, you said?

Yeah. The inside of Randall's coat was damp, the helmet slick with sweat. I want to clean up at the first civilized motel we come to.

Rose started up the bike. Try not to blank out back there. This scenery gets pretty hypnotic.

Hey, you're the one driving. Randall gripped his friend around the waist, took his boots off the ground.

True enough. They pulled out of the station and onto the road.

\* \* \*

Opening the door rang a bell which summoned a hugely fat woman from some back room. She lumbered up to the counter, cracking the knuckles of surprisingly delicate hands. Just the two of you boys? She looked beyond them, out the glass door. You come in on that motorcycle?

Yeah, said Randall in a tired voice. He dropped his pack and fished out his container of waded bills. Pulling a few out, he stepped up to the counter. Two beds, one night. And I need a room with a bath.

They've all got showers, the woman replied. She talked as though she were chewing on something tough and unpleasant.

That'll do, said Randall. How much?

Twenty-seven fifty. Randall passed her a pair of bills. She made change, then presented him with the register. He scribbled a random assortment of loops and curls, ending in M.D. She handed him the key. Room two forty, stairs are by the pool. Randall turned to leave. There's no cooking allowed in the rooms, and no animals neither. And no loud noise after ten thirty.

Ironwork stairs clung to the back of the building near a battered Pepsi machine. Drowned insects and dead leaves floated in the pool. It was only a little past noon and there was nobody around. They climbed the stairs and found their room. It smelled of old cigarette smoke and weak disinfectant, but the beds were made and the sheets looked clean. Why did you get a bed? asked Rose. You don't sleep, at least not like a person.

So I would have some place to sit, said Randall, tossing his pack onto one of the beds. Rose looked quickly about. There was no other furniture. Randall peeled off his T-shirt, then sat down and pulled off his boots. Dirt crusted his grey socks, falling onto the carpet in crumbling flakes. Should we try and find a laundry or should I just burn these?

I don't think that would improve the smell in here any. Rose sat down on his bed, back against the wall, boots still on. Randall took off the socks and then began to pace up and down the narrow swath of carpet between the beds and the far wall. What are you doing? asked Rose.

Getting ready to take a shower. Randall stomped back and forth, fists clenching and unclenching.

So what's the big deal? Rose leaned forward inquisitively. Did you suffer some childhood trauma involving bath water? Mommy didn't scald you, did she?

Water burns, said Randall. I told you that.

Oh, come off it. I saw you knock back a Heineken just this morning, and that's not exactly a hundred percent alcohol you know. Rose glanced at his boots as if just noticing them, shrugged, and left them on.

That's different. Diluted water doesn't count for some reason. Running water hurts the most. Rivers, rain, that sort of thing. Even a jacuzzi with

the jets going'll do it. Volume is factor too. I stuck a toe in the Atlantic once and nearly burnt it off.

Rose frowned. Then why don't you wash up in the pool? I mean really, that's about as stagnant as you can get.

You misunderstand. Running water is the worst, but still water stings pretty nasty too. At least in the shower I'm not liable to drown. Randall yanked open the bathroom door. Okay, enough screwing around. He turned on the light and shut the door behind him.

Good luck! Rose called from the other room.

Randall dropped his jeans and boxers, then stepped into the narrow stall. The tile felt like ice under his feet. He unwrapped a piece of motel soap and clutched it in one hand. Putting his other hand on the Cold faucet, he took a couple of deep breaths in and out. With a convulsive twist he turned the knob as far as it would go. Nothing happened. The pipes knocked and groaned. Randall stood there with his eyes shut tight, waiting for the spray to hit him. Nothing happened. Just as he opened an eye water shot out of the showerhead full force, searing his face. He choked back a scream, smacking his clenched fist into the tiled wall. The pain poured down his body. He waited for the crawling agony to dull his nerves. Slowly and deliberately, Randall Springfield began to wash.