

# August 21

*When you hear hoof beats, think horses, not zebras.*

-- Age-old medical school admonition

# One

**HE SET** out after breakfast on what would be his last day on earth.

He was an old man, but like many men of his generation with his wealth and station, he refused to think of himself that way. Deep in his heart, he honestly entertained the possibility he would never break down and perhaps live forever as those less driven and less successful around him dropped away.

In fact, he'd recently taken to riding a horse over vast stretches of his landholdings when the weather was good. He rode a leggy black Tennessee walker; sixteen and a half hands in height, tall enough that he called for a mounting block in order to climb into the saddle. The horse seemed to glide over the sagebrush flats and wooded Rocky Mountain juniper dotted foothills like a ghost, as if the gelding strode on a cushion of air. The gait spared his knees and lower back and it allowed him to appreciate

the ranch itself without constantly being interrupted by stabs of pain that were a byproduct of six and a half decades of not sitting a horse.

Riding got him closer to the land, which, like the horse, was *his*. He owned the sandy and chalky soil itself and the thousands of Black Angus that ate the same grass as herds of buffalo had once grazed. He owned the water that flowed through it and the minerals beneath it and the air that coursed over it. The very air.

Although he was a man who'd always owned big things -- homes, boats, aircraft, cars, buildings, large and small corporations, race horses, oil wells, and for a while a small island off the coast of North Carolina -- he loved this land most of all because unlike everything else in his life except his woman it would not submit to him. Therefore, he didn't hold it in contempt.

So he rode over his ranch and beheld it and talked to it out loud, saying, "*How about if we compromise and agree that for the time being we own each other?*"

**AS THE OLD** man rode he wore a 40X beaver silver-belly short-brimmed Stetson, a long-sleeved yoked shirt with snap buttons, relaxed-fit Wranglers, and cowboy boots. He wasn't stupid and he always packed a cell phone and a

satellite phone for those locations on his ranch where there was no signal. Just in case.

He'd asked one of his employees, an Ecuadoran named José Maria, to go to town and buy him an iPod and load it up with a playlist he'd entitled "Ranch Music." It consisted largely of film scores. Cuts from Ennio Morricone like "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly," "Theme From Fistful of Dollars," "*L'estasi dell'oro* (The Ecstasy of Gold)," "*La resa dei conti* (For A Few Dollars More), Elmer Bernstein's "The Magnificent Seven Theme," "Journey," "Calvera's Return," and Jerome Moross' "Theme From The Big Country." Big, wonderful, rousing, swelling, sweeping, *triumphalist* music from another era. It was music that simply wasn't made anymore. The pieces were about tough (but fair) men under big skies on horseback, their women waiting for them at home, and bad guys – usually Mexicans – to be vanquished.

In fact, they'd vanquished some Mexicans of their own off the ranch in the last two months, the result of a surreptitious phone call to ICE placed by his wife. Although the Mexican ranch hands worked hard and were great stockmen, she could document how many times they'd refused to show her respect. She blamed their ingrained macho culture. So the immigration folks rounded them up and

shipped them away. Their jobs had recently been filled by Ecuadorans like Jose Maria who were not as accomplished with cattle but were more deferential to his wife.

**HE THREADED** his horse up through gnarled bell-shaped stands juniper. The trees were heavy with clusters of green buds and the scent within the stand was sweet and heavy and it reminded him of a gin martini. His horse spooked rabbits that shot out from bunches of tall grass like squeezed grapefruit seeds, and he pushed a small herd of mule deer out ahead of him. It had warmed to the mid-seventies and as the temperature raised so did the insect hum from the ankle-high grass. He hummed, too, along with the "Theme From The Big Country." He tried to remember the movie itself – Gregory Peck or William Holden? -- but that was beyond his recollection. He made a note to himself to ask Jose Maria to order it from Netflix.

He paused the iPod and stuffed the ear buds and cord into his breast pocket as he urged his horse up the gentle slope. The thrumming of insects gave way to the watery sound of wind in the tops of the trees. The transition from an earth sound to the sounds of the sky thrilled him every time, but not nearly as much as what he knew he'd see when he crested the hill.

**CLAMPING HIS STETSON** tight on his head with his free right hand as he cleared the timber, the old man urged his horse to step lively to the top. Now the only sound was the full-throated Class Five wind but there was something folded inside it, almost on another auditory level that was high-pitched, rhythmic, and purposeful. He had once heard Jose Maria describe the sound as similar to a mallard drake in flight along the surface of a river: a furious beating of wings punctuated by high-pitched but breathy *squeak-squeak-squeak* that meant the bird was getting closer.

From the crown of the hill, he looked down at the sagebrush prairie that stretched out as far as his eyes could see until it bumped up against the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming. And it was all his.

From the gray and gold of the prairie floor, across 5,000 acres, on a high ridge, sprung a hundred wind turbines in various stages of construction where just a year ago there had been nothing but wind-sculpted rock poking out of the surface like dry land coral. A fresh network of straight-line dirt roads connected them all. The finished turbines – and there were only ten of them operational – climbed 250 feet into the sky. He loved the fact that each tower was a hundred feet higher than the

Statue of Liberty! And they were lined up tall and white and perfect in a straight line along the hump-backed spine of a ridge in the basin. All ten working turbines had blades attached. The blades spun, slicing through the Wyoming sky, making that unique whistling sound that was ... the sound of money.

And he thought: *Ninety more to go.*

Behind the row of turbines were another row of towers only, and another, then seven more rows of ten each in different stages of construction. The rows were miles apart from each other but he was far enough away on the top of the hill to see the whole of it, from the gaping drill-holes at the rear where the hundreds of tons of concrete would be poured into the ground to the bolted foundations of the towers and finally to the turbines and blades that would be built on top. They reminded him of perfectly white shoots of grass in various stages of growth, sprouting from the dirt straight into the sky.

The blades on the completed turbines had a diameter of forty-four meters or one hundred forty-four feet each. They would spin at close to one hundred miles per hour. Semi-trucks had delivered huge stacks of the blades and they lay on the sagebrush surface like long white whale bones left by ships.

He was so far away from his wind farm that the construction equipment, the pickups and cranes and earth-moving equipment, looked like miniatures.

That first line of almost-completed turbines stood like soldiers, *his* soldiers, facing straight into the teeth of the wind. They spun with defiance and strength, transforming the wind that had denuded the basin of humans and homesteads more than a hundred years ago into power and wealth.

And he waved his hat and whooped at the sheer massive scale of it.

Meeting the supplier-slash-general-contractor for the project the year before had been a spectacular stroke of luck, one of many in his life. Here was a man, a desperate man, with a dream and connections and most of all a line on a supply of turbines at a time when the manufacturers couldn't turn out enough of them. This desperate man appeared at the right place and right time and had been literally days away from ruin. And the old man stumbled upon him and seized the opportunity, as he'd seized opportunities before, while those around him dithered and stuttered and consulted their attorneys, chief financial officers, and legislators. That chance meeting and the opportunity that came because of it had saved the old man

millions of dollars a turbine, or \$100 million total. The old man had gone with his gut and made the deal and here in front of him was the result of his unerring instinct.

Funny thing was, the old man thought, it wasn't the wind farm that would really make him the big money. For that, he would look toward eastward toward Washington D.C. That was the epicenter of the breached dam that was sending cash flooding across west the country like waves from a tsunami.

**WHEN HE** heard a rumble of a vehicle motor he instinctively swept his eyes over the wind farm for the source of the noise, but he quickly decided he was too far away to discern individual sounds.

Since there weren't any cows to move or fences to fix behind him he doubted it was Jose Maria or his fellow Ecuadorans coming out his way. He turned in the saddle and squinted back down the hill he had come, but could see nothing.

The old man clicked his tongue and turned his horse back down the hill. As he rode down through the junipers the harsh winds from on top began to mute although they didn't quell into silence. They never would.

Again, he heard a motor coming and he rode right toward it.

When he emerged from the heavy-scented timber he smiled when he recognized the vehicle and the driver. The four-wheel drive was on an ancient two-track coming his direction. He could hear the grinding of the motor as well as the spiny high-pitched scraping of sagebrush from beneath the undercarriage. Twin plumes of dust from the tires were snatched away by the wind.

He waved when he was a hundred feet from the vehicle, and was still waving when the driver braked and got out holding a rifle.

"Oh, come on," the old man said, but suddenly he could see everything in absolute gut-wrenching clarity.

The first bullet hit him square in the chest with the impact of a hitter swinging for the upper deck. Shattered his iPod.