

# OLD WILD MAN TERRY

A Novel

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# CHAPTER ONE

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Erin Burgess's eyes popped open. She lay in the dark, listening. Big Red, their Missouri Fox Trotter stallion, was pawing loudly in the dirt in his corral. The mares and colts were moving about, stamping and blowing. Sugarfoot, her favorite filly, whinnied nervously. Something wasn't right.

Erin considered several possible explanations for the horses' restlessness. She had heard that bands of Chiricahua Apaches wandered northern Mexico and occasionally filtered across the Rio Grande on moonlit nights to steal horses and dash back to their hideaways in the Sierra Madre. *But*, Erin thought, *this is 1912. An Apache raid hadn't been reported in years.*

Another thought flickered in her mind. What if it wasn't a group of people, but rather a single individual? Since moving to west Texas a few years earlier, she'd heard stories about "Old Wild Man Terry," a mysterious black hermit who had settled in a hidden pocket of the Chisos Mountains but who had rarely been reported afterward. Erin dismissed this idea. She was convinced that old-timers repeated the stories about Old Wild Man Terry just to frighten children.

Erin slipped on her shoes and eased into Fred's bedroom, which looked out toward the barn. Fred was her twin brother. Often fraternal twins don't look much alike, but that wasn't the case with Erin and Fred. Both were tall for their thirteen years, slim, and had bright red hair, blue eyes, and a few freckles across the nose. Sometimes it was almost spooky the way they could sense the other's presence without seeing or hearing it. Fred was at the window. He didn't look at Erin before he spoke. "You've been hearing it, too."

Erin joined her brother at the window. From there they could see the Chisos Mountains thirty miles to the south, just north of the Rio Grande and Mexico. The outline of the mountains stood out clearly in the bright Texas moonlight.

The fifteen mares and their colts in the corral adjoining the barn circled and stamped nervously, their ears flicking back and forth. The horses kept their eyes turned toward the southwest. "Could be a cougar," Fred said thoughtfully.

Erin didn't answer. Instead, she went into the front room and lifted her grandfather's old short, double-barreled shotgun from the pegs above the fireplace, checked it to be sure it was loaded, and carried it back to Fred. Their grandfather, who had been a guard on the Butterfield Stagecoaches, had called it his "express gun." Both their grandfather and their father had spent a great deal of time training Erin and Fred in the correct use of guns. "A gun is a tool if used properly but a disaster if used carelessly," she could hear her grandfather repeat. She still missed him terribly, even though it had been more than a year since he'd died.

Erin wished that their father was there. He had stayed the night in Fort Davis, where he had a dental office. Their

mother, who was at the ranch with them, was ill and needed her rest.

Fred and Erin listened at the window a few moments longer. The family couldn't afford to have anything happen to the horses. Doctors had told them that the only chance their mother had to recover from tuberculosis was to live in a dry climate like the one in west Texas, but their father's dental practice in this thinly populated area didn't earn enough to support the family and also pay for the ranch. Money from the sale of the offspring of their horses, as well as the wild mares they hoped to capture, would have to make up the difference. To lose the horses would endanger their mother's survival, Erin feared.

Fred took the gun from Erin and made his way out of the house, with Erin following closely behind. They eased toward the gate by the corral and slipped warily around the enclosure. The horses, usually friendly, paid no attention to them. Erin and Fred's eyes strained for any movement in the dark, even as they hoped not to find anything. Big Red trumpeted angrily into the night and kicked the boards of his gate. The usually calm mares continued to shuffle about their corral, their heads bobbing, feet stamping. The colts and yearlings in the pen whinnied nervously in high-pitched voices.

Erin's eyes moved toward Big Red as he paced in his corral. The stallion looked nothing like the big pet that normally followed her around like a puppy. His eyes were fierce, his nostrils wide. The back of Erin's neck prickled. A glance at Fred told her that he was feeling the same eerie uneasiness.

Suddenly the moonlit night erupted! Brush between the barn and the deep draw burst to life with drumming hooves. Horses rushed full speed toward the corral, neighing and blowing wildly. They split and flowed around Erin and Fred like a river around an island. Some passed so close that Erin could feel their body heat. Dust swirled into the air so that she could see only parts of what was happening. She cringed, her hands clasped to her head, frozen in surprise and fear as the strange horses swirled around her. She had no place to run.

Now she knew what had been making their horses so nervous! The wild horses stormed to the corral and circled it, their heads jerking excitedly. Behind the group, a brown stallion with a jagged white blaze down his face charged by Erin. He snorted and trumpeted with every breath. His big eyes rolled.

Big Red answered the wild stallion's challenge and slammed his body against the gate that separated him from the mares, bugling and snorting. He laid his ears back flat against his head and bared his teeth, ready for battle. Moonlight reflected off of his shiny red coat and shimmered on his blond mane. Erin knew that the gate was made from strong oak timber, but Big Red was a heavily muscled stallion, his blood now fiery with the desire to do battle. She wondered if the gate could hold.

The fox trotter mares raced back and forth across their corral, slamming into the fence on every side. Erin and Fred stood rooted to the ground, stunned by the confusion around them. They knew that even such a sturdy corral couldn't stand up to repeated slams by tons of terrified horseflesh.

Above the other sounds, Erin picked out the terrified cry of Sugarfoot, the six-month-old filly that she had been working with each day. She felt sick as she imagined Sugarfoot getting trampled or crushed in the mash of bodies. High-pitched whinnies coming from the other young fox trotters made her fear that they too were being hurt in the wild crush of bodies inside the corral.

Suddenly Erin became aware of the figure of a woman in the swirling dust. The woman was tall and slender. She had been slim even before becoming ill with tuberculosis; now she was noticeably thin. One look at her red hair left no doubt about the twins' family relation. In all the confusion, Erin hadn't seen her mother rush from the house to the corral.

In her blue silk robe, Beatrice Burgess stood in front of the corral. She waved her arms, alternately trying to drive the wild horses away and get her mares—her “beautiful ladies,” as she called them—back away from the fence. Both groups of horses were so excited that the frail woman might as well not have been there.

Erin held her breath. At any moment she expected to see her mother knocked to the ground and trampled. She wanted to scream at her mother to run to safety but instead found herself rooted, her voice frozen in silence.

Dust hung so heavily in the air that Erin's mother and the horses seemed to float like unreal figures in a bad dream. Hooves pounded. Horses blew and whinnied. Big bodies slammed against corral fences and gates. The noise was almost deafening. Yet Erin could distinguish her mother's voice trying to calm her mares and, more harshly, trying to frighten away the wild horses.

The wild stallion stopped a few feet from Erin. He wasn't as tall as Big Red, but he was probably as heavy. Ugly scars from fights with other stallions showed on his powerful neck, chest, and shoulders, even in all the dust and the dim light. Erin held her breath as the stallion stood staring at her before bolting toward the corral.

The sound of splintering wood rose above the other noises as the corral fence came crashing down beside Erin's mother. The fox trotter mares and yearlings poured through the gap like a multicolored flood of water surging through a broken dam. Erin scrambled away, screaming for her mother and Fred to run, but she couldn't even hear her own voice over the noise.

In a sudden shift, the mass of horses broke toward the brush, a stocky roan mare in the lead. They disappeared as rapidly as they had appeared. Only the wild stallion remained behind. He charged toward the gate that was barely containing Big Red. The two stallions trumpeted their challenge and crashed together, with only the oak timbers of the gate between them. Big Red whirled and kicked toward the wild stallion but hit the heavy boards of the gate instead. Erin could hear wood splintering, but the gate held. The two stallions reared on their back legs, pawed, and bit across the top of the gate. Foam and blood flew.

The smells of dust, horse lather, and blood mingled in Erin's nose. She tried to breathe, but dust choked her, and she coughed violently. Then she saw Fred near the corral. He was pointing the shotgun into the air, and he pulled the trigger. The blast from the right barrel made Erin jump.

Both stallions jerked backward at the sound of the gunshot. The wild stallion whirled and stood for a moment, his eyes wide and his sides heaving. His nostrils flared as he glared at Fred. Erin stood immobile. No more than ten feet separated the wild stallion and her brother.

Fred lowered the shotgun muzzle until it pointed toward the big stallion's chest. Every line in Fred's body stood rigid. In the new silence, the sound of Fred cocking the left hammer of the shotgun was as loud as the pealing of a church bell.

"Get!" he ordered, his voice low but authoritative.

The stallion didn't move.

"Go!" Fred's voice was forceful.

The stallion hesitated another moment, then suddenly turned and disappeared like a flash of light. Big Red slammed into the gate once more as he tried to pursue. Only the smells, burned into Erin's memory like images on a photograph, lingered with the dust.

Erin came out of her frozen state and arrived at the gate at the same time as Jaime, the ranch foreman's fourteen-year-old son. She reached for Big Red's head. "Easy," she urged softly as she tried to calm him. "Easy, now. E-e-a-sy."

Her fingers closed on the leather halter they kept on the stallion. He snatched his head back and jerked her hard into the gate. It felt like her arm had been yanked almost out of socket and her ribs crushed. She stifled a yelp of pain and held stubbornly to the halter. The big stallion stopped pulling her and stood still, quivering with excitement.



Erin blinked her eyes to fight back tears from the pain. For a moment it seemed as if the barn was spinning and tilting at crazy angles.

She became aware of Jaime beside her. He took hold of the other side of Big Red's halter and rubbed the stallion's neck under his mane.

"Eh, *caballo*. Easy," Jaime cooed in a mixture of Spanish and English as he climbed over the gate and dropped to the ground beside the stallion. Big Red quieted, but his eyes still rolled nervously. His ears flicked in one direction, then another as he searched for signs of the other horses.

Erin forced her eyes to search the area around the corrals. *Sugarfoot?* There was no sign of her favorite filly. *She must be okay, though, if she could run away. Gone was better than injured or killed,* she thought. She felt empty at the realization that Sugarfoot wouldn't be there when the sun came up in a few hours.

Erin saw Fred standing where he had faced the wild stallion. The shotgun hung loosely in his hands, pointed toward the ground, apparently forgotten. His eyes were glazed, but he didn't appear to be hurt. After a moment, he opened the shotgun, removed the shells, and dropped them into the pocket of his pajamas. Even in a daze, he followed the lessons of their grandfather.

Julio Cisneros, the ranch foreman, trotted from the draw down which the horses had disappeared. "Gone!" was all he said, short of breath.

Erin became aware of her mother beside her, refastening the belt of her blue robe. The bit of color that Mrs. Burgess had regained in the dry climate seemed gone. She put one

hand on Erin's shoulder and softly stroked Big Red with the other. "What in the world?" she asked breathlessly, as if she didn't understand what had happened.

"*Mesteneros*," Julio offered in Spanish. "Mustangs."

Julio Cisneros was no taller than Erin and Fred but seemed to have boundless energy and good grace. His black hair and dark skin reflected his Yaqui Indian ancestry.

Jaime was a year older than the twins but several inches shorter. Like his father, he was dark in complexion. Also like Julio, he gave an impression of wiry strength, despite his small stature. His size, Erin and Fred had quickly learned, didn't mean that he couldn't work, run, or play them into the ground.

Both Jaime and Julio had proven to have a special touch with horses. It often seemed to Erin that they and the horses communicated with one another in a way that she didn't understand.

"Our horses?" Mrs. Burgess asked.

"Vanished," was all Julio could answer.

Mrs. Burgess's figure seemed to slump. The horses had become her great love in the months since the family had moved from Missouri to west Texas because of her illness. It seemed to Erin that in a few seconds, her mother slipped backward from the energetic figure she had recently become to the disheartened and ill woman she had been when they had lived in Missouri.

"Can we recapture them?" Mrs. Burgess asked hopefully.

Julio looked at Mrs. Burgess as if he didn't want to answer. He gestured, his empty hands closing as if grasping

at the dust that still hung in the air. “Like trying to catch this dust, *señora*.”

“But we will try?” Erin asked Julio, her eyes on her mother.

Julio’s eyes followed Erin’s. He nodded slightly as he answered. “*Si*. We will try. With luck....” His voice trailed off.

“All my beautiful ladies...,” Mrs. Burgess said quietly to herself. She sagged to her knees and coughed harshly.

Erin dropped to her mother’s side. Julio handed Mrs. Burgess a white handkerchief and gently took her arm. Her coughing stopped, but she wheezed audibly as she breathed. After a long moment, she began breathing more normally, and with help from Julio and Erin, she was able to stand.

“At least all of us are safe,” she said.

Julio put his hand under her arm and helped her walk back to the house. On the front porch, he looked at his handkerchief, which Mrs. Burgess had returned, but then quickly put it in his pocket so that Erin would not see the blood that her mother had coughed up.

## CHAPTER TWO

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It seemed to Erin that the doctor was taking an awfully long time. She was grateful that her father had returned from Fort Davis that morning, a day earlier than expected.

Erin, Fred, and their father sat on the wide front porch of their ranch house, waiting for Dr. Henry Currie to complete his examination of Mrs. Burgess. The sun was bright, but the April air was pleasantly cool. In the summer, midday temperatures would soar to one hundred degrees or more, despite the Burgesses's ranch being more than two thousand feet in elevation.

The Burgess ranch was in far west Texas, forty miles north of the Rio Grande where it made a big bend to the south and then another back again to the north. It was a dry, rugged desert where the southern end of the Rocky Mountains popped unexpectedly out of the flat plains. Across the Rio Grande was Mexico. This "Big Bend" area of Texas was one of the most thinly settled parts of the United States. Former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt had suggested that much of the area be set aside as Big Bend National Park. Local folks laughed at the idea that tourists would come to such a remote area.

Erin was aware of Guadalupe—Jaime’s mother, who preferred to be called Lupe—bustling back and forth between the kitchen and the bedroom. Lupe was taller than Julio and Jaime but slimmer. She was also lighter in complexion than her husband and son, although much darker than the Burgesses. Her hair, worn straight and well below her shoulders, appeared as black as midnight unless she was in sunlight. In the sun, dark red highlights glistened like fire. Her flowing dresses were a kaleidoscope of brilliant colors. Erin thought that Lupe was one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen.

From the Burgesses’s first arrival at the ranch, Lupe and Mrs. Burgess had formed a close friendship. Whenever Mrs. Burgess’s illness confined her, Lupe would hover about like a guardian angel, trying to anticipate her every want and need.

The sounds of post-hole diggers pounding into the hard soil, the rasp of a hand saw on wood, and hammering drifted to Erin’s ears. Julio and Jaime were replacing the corral fence that had been destroyed by the escaping horses the night before. Big Red whinnied from time to time, calling for his missing mares.

Dr. Currie’s deep voice grew louder as he gave instructions to Lupe before he emerged onto the porch. The screen door slapped shut behind him. He strolled down the porch and settled into one of the tall oak rocking chairs.

“Pretty view. Mighty pretty,” he said as he leaned back in the rocking chair and gazed at the Chisos Mountains on the horizon. His eyes swept down the wide valley. “You get a lot of wildflowers during a wet spring like this,” he mused.

“Yucca, Mexican blanket, and ocotillo will be blooming soon.” He pointed with an old pipe that he pulled from one of the large pockets on the side of his coat.

Erin had learned that Dr. Currie often talked about one subject while he tried to decide exactly what he wanted to say about another. The family waited quietly. A breeze rustled the new leaves on the big cottonwood trees surrounding the ranch house and barns. A roadrunner, the strange, long-legged bird of the American southwest, scurried across the yard and into the flat brown blades of blue grama grass. A desert quail whistled and was answered by another. A black-and-white dominecker hen raced across the yard with a lizard in her mouth. Two red hens squawked loudly as they chased her, trying to take the lizard. The chair in which Dr. Currie rocked squeaked slightly.

Erin watched Dr. Currie expectantly. Age had made little impact on him, except to turn his mustache white, but Erin remembered Julio and Lupe wishing him a happy seventy-fifth birthday on his first visit to the ranch. The old doctor was a tall man—even taller than their father’s six feet, three inches. His gray eyes were still clear and quick enough to pick up the movement of an antelope a mile away. His deeply tanned face looked twenty or more years younger than it was. His dark suit was neat and freshly pressed, even after the thirty miles he had traveled by buggy from Marathon, the town in which he lived. Despite his age and his rural medical practice, Dr. Currie had a reputation of being well-informed about the latest discoveries and techniques of medicine.

“Mrs. Burgess wasn’t hurt last night,” Dr. Currie began, his voice becoming businesslike now that he was finally ready to discuss her condition. “Her coughing up blood

for the first time in months was due more to excitement and overexertion than to new damage to her lungs.”

The doctor paused. Erin sensed that there was more to come and waited patiently. Dr. Currie took time to pack tobacco into his old briar pipe, scratch a match on the heel of his boot, and light it. Blue-gray smoke billowed in a cloud around him. The smell reminded Erin of her grandfather. She thought about the many sunny afternoons that her Grandfather Burgess and Dr. Currie must have passed together. They had been great friends.

Erin’s father sat quietly, whittling a limb from one of the cottonwood trees. Long, thin shavings curled around his feet. Dr. Burgess was a big man—more than 220 pounds. His hands looked too large to work in the small space of a person’s mouth, but he had a reputation for being a skillful dentist. Although he appeared calm, his brown eyes were darker than usual, and the muscles along his jaw were rigid as he waited for the doctor to continue.

“I am concerned,” Dr. Currie said finally, his eyes pausing in turn on Erin and Fred and then resting on their father’s face, “because I know how much Mrs. Burgess loved those horses. Taking care of them was about the right amount of exercise for her. They gave her a spark. Her color was improving. She was breathing better.” He paused to puff on his pipe. “Getting well often has as much to do with one’s state of mind as with the body.”

Erin’s father nodded without speaking.

After giving additional instructions for Mrs. Burgess’s care and chatting for a few minutes, Dr. Currie plopped himself and his scarred, black leather bag into his buggy.

His long-legged bay gelding—reputed to be the fastest horse in the Big Bend area—raised a line of dust back north toward the town of Marathon.

Erin's father rose and went into the house. Erin and Fred sat quietly for a few minutes before each began to speak at the same moment. "We ha..." Both stopped. Erin pointed to Fred; he could finish. But she knew what he was about to say and nodded her agreement as he said it: "We have to get the horses back."