

Chapter one

Fera terribilis

On the evening of October 16th, 1976, a horse breeder named John Turazza walked into the Stafford sheriff's office with a shaken look on his face and a breath that reeked of whiskey.

At the sheriff's nod, he sat down and spilled his whole story in one breath.

He said he'd taken his truck out to the Waltanna marshes that very afternoon to look for a colt that had escaped the fences—a black-coated mustang—and that he'd gone in on foot, following the tracks the horse had left along the muddy trails.

But the tracks stopped at a small pier, near the remains of an old barge.

And that's when he realized something was wrong.

The marsh—normally a nonstop racket of birds and frogs—had gone perfectly silent.

A moment later—he swore it on his kids' heads—he'd seen something rise from the water.

A huge shadow.

A shadow, yes, but solid, pushing aside the thick, muddy water as it surfaced.

He couldn't say more, because he'd run without looking back, jumped in his truck, and raced straight into town.

The sheriff—a tired man with an empty stare—listened to the story with clear reluctance, and only asked how much Turazza had been drinking.

“What's that got to do with anything?” Turazza shot back. “I drank after, if anything—just to rinse the taste out of my mouth!”

“We'll look into it,” the sheriff said, pointing at the door to dismiss him. Then added, almost absent-mindedly: “Always wanted to raise horses myself.”

When Turazza finally left, the sheriff picked up the typed statement, read it over, and slid it into the bottom shelf—the one reserved for trivial reports.

Then he shook his head, muttered a curse, and picked up the phone.

A couple calls gave him everything he needed: no, John Turazza wasn't known as a drunk; yes, he had kids, two boys and a girl; and yes, everyone described him as a harmless, slightly odd fellow, clearly imaginative, but sane.

Two years earlier he'd gained minor fame among local breeders for building a life-size mechanical horse that started up when you turned a crank. Started up meaning: it neighed and pooped. Nothing else.

That was enough for the sheriff.

Another crazy story to add to the long list he'd heard since pinning on the badge twenty years earlier. He went home and didn't mention it to a soul—not even to his wife—because experience had taught him that certain stories are better left unspoken. Once they start spreading, you never know what might happen, and it's usually trouble.

His caution didn't help much, because two days later the Stafford Gazette ran a story—penultimate page—with a dramatic evening photo of the marshes, all shadows and ominous reflections.

The article reported a “mysterious sighting” in the Waltanna marshes and repeated Turazza's account word for word.

Clearly, the breeder hadn't kept it to himself.

And in the final paragraph, the reporter added:

Without wishing to alarm anyone—and without setting aside the good sense that should always guide our judgments—we feel duty-bound to remind readers that the journals of the first pioneers who explored the lowlands mention a terrible creature, fera terribilis, emerging from the marshes from time to time to feed on anything that tasted of flesh.

No superstition on our part, of course—just an old Osage legend, as the pioneers themselves explained. But legends, however fanciful or unlikely, are born from a seed of truth... a truth often mixed with a generous swallow of whiskey.

The article did not go unnoticed.

Over the next few days, the story spread quickly, even beyond the county. Newspapers, TV stations, and especially local radio picked it up.

One DJ in particular—Martin Hell, wildly popular with younger listeners on Radio Sullivan—talked about the marsh creature with a boyish, contagious enthusiasm.

And so exactly what the Stafford sheriff had feared came to pass: the Waltanna marshes became increasingly crowded with curious people and thrill-seeking tourists. And with more visitors came more “sightings,” because it really isn’t hard to see, in the dark flicker of a swamp, exactly what you’ve already decided to see.