

2008-09-22 18:30:00, McGruber's Farm

Dusk was just beginning to fall on McGruber's Farm. Trees gently swayed in the breeze. Leaves rustled, and McGruber's potato fields rippled, almost like an ocean. Three sleek police cruisers were parked next to the farmhouse, their lights flashing. A woman's gut-wrenching sobs could be heard, along with the whines of a dog.

Two detectives in a navy blue Camaro rolled down the driveway to McGruber's Farm. They parked next to the cruisers, got out, and walked to where a number of cops were already standing.

"What have we got?" a detective asked.

"Nick, Hank, I've never seen anything like it before," one of the cops replied. He wore a grim countenance.

"What's the story?" asked Hank.

"The farmer who lived here, McGruber, walked out into his fields this morning. Nothing unordinary there. But he didn't come back, so his wife went looking for him and found him dead. No witnesses or anything. The body is not a pretty sight," explained the cop.

"Where's it at?" Nick asked.

"You better come with me," the cop solemnly replied, "It's the most horrible thing I've ever seen." He led the detectives into one of McGruber's fields. A Collie dog resembling Lassie accompanied the group.

"That dog McGruber's?" Hank asked. The cop nodded. "She's been following us."

The group arrived at a little clearing in the field where McGruber's body lay. Hank and Nick approached the body and knelt down to examine it. The clothing McGruber had been wearing was shredded to pieces. Bits lay on the ground in tatters. Blood soaked the soil and drenched the body, whose limbs had been extensively mangled, some remaining attached by mere threads of skin.

"Damn," Nick gravely remarked.

"Damn is right," said Hank. He shot Nick a troubled look. "What do you think could have done something like this?"

"I don't know. An animal, maybe. A madman. Something straight out of Hell."

2008-09-22 7:15:00, McGruber's Farm

Old Man McGruber reclined at his kitchen table, sipping coffee and perusing the day's paper. His faithful dog Lassie sat next to his chair. McGruber gently petted her head as he made his way through the local headlines.

McGruber was a working man. He had toiled all his life in the fields behind his home, laboring to support himself, his wonderful wife Susan, and his two kids, both of whom were now off to college. He was known around town for growing the best potatoes in all of Idaho, and for conducting his business in the most scrupulous of manners. He was a modest man of modest means, and was very grateful to the Almighty for all the blessings in his life.

"Well, Lass, it's time to get workin'," McGruber said as he put down the paper and stood up from the table. He walked outside and began toward the barn where he kept his tractors, Old

Lass following him all the way. He passed by his bedroom window, from which his wife waved and smiled at him. He waved and smiled back. Susan was always a late-riser.

McGruber had just opened the barn doors when he heard a noise, a shrill shrieking sound coming from one of his fields. He looked at Lassie. Her ears were perked up, confirming that she too had heard the noise.

"Let's go check it out, Lass," McGruber said, moving in the direction of the sound. Right when he got to the edge of the field, he heard the noise again. Lassie whined and hunkered down.

"Don't be scared, old girl," McGruber assured. "It's probably just a hurt rabbit or something." McGruber quickened his pace, Lassie right behind him. They went deep into the field, so far out that neither the farmhouse nor the barn were still in sight.

"That's funny," McGruber exclaimed, "I thought the sound was coming from right around here." He scanned the area but saw no sign of a living creature aside from himself and Lassie. "Well, I guess we came out here for nothing, old girl. Come on, let's get back to the barn."

Just then, the earth under McGruber's feet trembled, and that shrieking sound again pierced the air. It was so loud here that McGruber doubled over in pain. Lassie bolted.

"What the devil!" McGruber shouted as he regained his senses. A violent explosion of soil and potato plants sent him sprawling again. "What in Lord's name..." McGruber picked himself up and looked at the source of the explosion. His mouth gaped open. His eyes widened with fear.

"Holy..."

2008-09-22 19:10:00, McGruber's Farm

The sun had set on McGruber's Farm. The body had been removed from the scene, and the police were gradually dwindling in number. Nick and Hank were interviewing Susan, McGruber's wife.

"He just walked into the field?" Nick asked.

"Yes!" Susan burst out between sobs.

"You didn't notice anything unusual about him or anything else?" Hank inquired.

"No, no, not a thing. He walks in the fields all the time, checking on the quality of his potato plants. It was a perfectly normal day. He woke up, ate his breakfast, and then went out to work." Susan shook with another round of sobs.

"Where exactly were you during all of this?" Hank asked.

"You don't think I killed him, do you?" Susan gasped.

"No, ma'am, not at all. We're just trying to be thorough."

"I see. I was just waking up when Mark..."

"Mark is your husband?"

"Yes. I was just waking up when Mark went outside to start the day's work. We had this habit where he'd always walk by our bedroom window. I'd wave to him and he'd wave back. So that's how I saw him walk to the barn this morning. But he always did that first thing. Nothing unusual. So I went and made myself some coffee and then looked out the kitchen window. Last I saw him he was walking out into the fields. I didn't think anything of it. Like I said, he was

always checking his crops, making sure they were the gold standard. He was very concerned about his reputation.”

“And you’re sure, ma’am, that there were no witnesses?” Hank questioned.

“I... I’m sure. You gentlemen saw where I found my husband’s body, so far from the house. Whatever happened, I had no chance of seeing it.”

“No one else lives here, ma’am?”

“Well, our dog Lassie. But you’d have a hard time getting her to talk,” Susan said with a melancholy chuckle.

“Your husband didn’t employ any fieldhands?” Nick asked.

“No, not one. Lord knows how he tended all those fields himself. But he did it. And he was damn good at it, too.”

“Well, ma’am, it’s a damn shame what happened here today. My partner and I are both deeply sorry and deeply troubled. Whatever killed your husband, we’ll find it. Justice will be served.”

“I hope so.” Susan stifled a sob.

“Thank you for being so patient throughout this entire process. If you come up with any leads or anything you think would help us, please don’t hesitate to give us a call.”

“Thank you, detectives.”

2008-09-22 20:45:00, Idaho City Police Department

Mark McGruber’s body rested on a table in the crime laboratory of the Idaho City Police Department. A medical examiner was looking it over while Nick and Hank asked questions.

“Could it have been an animal?” Hank inquired.

“Not any animal I’ve ever heard of,” the medical examiner replied. “Look at this.” He pointed to needlelike puncture wounds in the body’s chest and then to deep grooves gouged into the body’s legs. “I don’t know of any animal that kills this way.”

“So you think it was a human?” Nick asked.

“Not quite. This obviously isn’t a typical homicide. A madman comes to mind, but even madmen don’t kill this way. Their work is usually more deliberate. It seems as if this body was haphazardly mauled by a bear with needles for teeth.”

“So you do think it was some kind of animal, then?” asked Hank.

“Honestly, guys, I have no idea. This is beyond me. You said there was virtually no evidence at the scene?”

“Just some upturned potato plants,” Nick stated.

“Hmmm... How strange. Well, if that’s the case, I don’t know what we can do except wait and see if it happens again. We have virtually no leads at this point,” the examiner admitted.

“We have to do something!” Nick exclaimed. “Imagine that thing running around at night, preying on innocent people. There must be something we can do.”

“I’m afraid not. I can give no clear cause of death. And because we have no other evidence, we’re just going to have to wait it out.”

All three of them left the department that night frequently looking over their shoulders. The day’s proceedings had shaken them, Nick and Hank especially, to the core.

2008-09-23 1:25:00, Nick's House

Nick was having trouble sleeping that night. He kept tossing and turning and readjusting his pillows, much to the chagrin of his girlfriend. He had just managed to fall asleep when, all of a sudden, his cell phone rang.

"Aw, God damnit!" Nick cursed. He violently grabbed his cell phone and looked at the caller ID. It was Hank. Nick's fatigue evaporated. "What's up?!?!"

"Nick, we got to go! There's been another killing!"

"Shit!" Nick slammed his fist against his bedside table. "Where at?"

"The Frito-Lay plant out in the suburbs. I just got the call."

"On my way!" Nick quickly dressed and left his house.

2008-09-23 1:50:00, Frito-Lay Plant

Nick arrived on the scene just after Hank. Police lights were flashing and sirens could be heard in the distance.

"Do you know what happened?" Nick asked Hank as the two met up.

"They told me it was a security guard."

"Who called it in?" Nick asked.

"The guard who was supposed to have the next shift," Hank replied, just as they reached a throng of cops crowded around an entrance to the plant. The doors had been wrenched from their hinges and tossed on the ground. Broken glass was scattered everywhere.

"Nick, Hank, it's the same as last time," said that same cop who had led them to McGruber's body the day before. "He's been killed the same way."

"Where's the body?" Hank asked.

"Follow me." The cop took them into the plant and down a hallway. They found the guard's body sprawled in a blood-spattered corner. His clothes were torn and limbs mangled in the same manner as were McGruber's.

"Whoever killed McGruber struck again," Nick observed.

"That's what I'm thinking," said the cop.

"It has to be the same person." Nick knelt by the body and examined the injuries. "Look, there are those same puncture wounds that were on McGruber. And there, those same gouge marks."

"You don't think it could have been an animal both times?" the cop asked.

"What reason would an animal have for breaking into a Frito-Lay plant and killing a security guard?" Hank questioned. "And what kind of animal is capable of ripping those doors off their hinges like that?"

"I guess you're right," the cop agreed.

"Well, now we know we're dealing with homicide," Nick said. "Do we have any evidence aside from the broken doors?"

"No, that's the strange thing. In both cases, the murderer has left absolutely nothing behind. Either he really knows how to cover his tracks, or he's really lucky," the cop said.

"So we still have made pretty much zero progress," Hank said.

"Should we put out an alert to warn people?" the cop asked.

"No, not yet. We would just unnecessarily scare the public. These incidents have been fairly isolated, anyway. Let's wait until we know what this guy looks like," Nick said.

"Fair enough," said the cop. "We'll take care of the scene from here. You guys go home and get some rest." Nick and Hank thanked the cop and walked back to their cars.

"You think you're going to sleep tonight?" Hank asked.

"Nope."

2008-09-24 12:50:00, Idaho City Fall Festival

It was a beautiful, sunny day, the perfect weather for the annual Idaho City Fall Festival. The festival had made quite a name for itself through the years, so families from all over the state came out to play fair games, eat fair food, and ride fair rides. The festivities were proving especially lucrative for the vendors, particularly a certain french fry stand.

"What can I get for you?" asked the boy working at the stand. He couldn't have been more than 16 years old.

"A bucket of fries, please," a hot blonde answered.

"That's what I'm talkin' about!" the kid at the stand exclaimed. He turned away to prepare the order. He was just about to scoop the fries into the bucket when something suddenly grabbed his ankle and pulled him hard to the ground, knocking the wind out of him. The hot blonde jumped in surprise and peered over the counter. She screamed.

2008-09-24 13:10:00, Idaho City Fall Festival

Nick and Hank parked their Camaro and started running to a group of cops at the now-evacuated festival. The cop who took charge at the McGruber and Frito-Lay scenes was there, and he ran to meet the two detectives.

"Nick, Hank..." the cop started.

"Don't tell me," Nick said. "It happened again."

"I'm afraid so," the cop said.

"Damnit!" Nick kicked an elephant ear stand. "Who was the victim this time?"

"A teenager who went to Idaho City High School. He was working a french fry stand to earn some extra cash."

"Even worse!" Nick lamented.

"But we have some good news."

"What good could possibly come out of the murder of a teenager?" Hank asked.

"We have a witness."

"Thank God!" Nick exclaimed. "Did you find anything out?"

"We had her describe the killer to a sketch artist..."

"That's just what we needed!" Nick declared triumphantly. "I want an APB out on this guy as soon as possible. And I want his face on TV, in the paper, on billboards, everywhere! Let's get the whole city in on this. It's time we brought this guy to justice! We can't suffer any more killings!"

"Nick..." the cop started.

"What?" Nick asked exasperatedly.

"You're going to want to see the sketch first."

"What? Why? We need to act as fast as possible!" Nick remarked.

"Trust me, Nick. You have to see it first."

"Fine, let's go." The cop led Nick and Hank to a cluster of cops and forensic scientists standing around the french fry stand where the teenager was killed. He called over the sketch artist, who held up a piece of paper. Nick and Hank looked at it, and their hopeful expressions quickly faded.

"Uh... Sergeant Wu... The Hell kind of a joke is this?!?" Nick demanded incredulously.

"This isn't funny," Hank added.

"We're not messing with you," Sergeant Wu asserted. "That's seriously what the witness gave us."

"You expect me to believe..."

"He's telling the truth," the sketch artist interrupted. "I drew exactly what the witness described." On the sketch artist's paper was the rough outline of a potato.

"Where is the witness now?" Hank asked.

"She almost had a heart attack, so we're giving her medical attention," Sergeant Wu replied as he led Hank and Nick to an ambulance. The hot blonde (now really more of a "hot mess") was lying on a gurney in the ambulance with EMTs around her. She was shuddering uncontrollably, her hair a wreck and her face puffy and red with mascara streaks down it. One of the EMTs stopped Hank and Nick from entering the ambulance.

"She's in a fragile state. You have to be careful around her," the EMT said.

"We just want to ask a few questions," Nick respectfully answered. He and Hank approached the hot blonde.

"How are you feeling?" Nick gently asked.

"Not good," the hot blonde said, staring off into the distance.

"Do you want to tell us what you saw today?"

"It was a potato," the hot blonde whispered, almost possessed.

"A potato killed him?" Nick softly inquired.

"The potato did it."

"Are you sure it was a potato?" asked Hank.

"A demon potato!" The hot blonde shuddered violently and then fainted. The EMTs ushered Nick and Hank out of the ambulance.

2008-09-24 14:15:00, Idaho City Police Department

"So... Think we got a killer potato on the loose?" Hank asked somewhat sarcastically.

"No. I'm not even going to... Just no. But whatever the witness saw must have shocked her pretty badly."

"Yeah," Hank said. "Are you seeing the pattern though?"

"All the killings have been at places that have something to do with potatoes."

"Right," affirmed Hank. "So potatoes do play a role, for some odd reason."

"Now that you've brought that up," Nick ventured, "I think I know where the killer is going to strike next."

"Where?"

“Get Sergeant Wu. We’re going undercover.”

2008-09-24 15:20:00, McDonald’s

Nick, Hank, and Sergeant Wu sat at different tables at the local McDonald’s. Hank was sipping at a beverage from the McCafé while Wu was tucking into some McNuggets, having prudently thrown away the fries that came with the meal. Nick was anxiously twiddling his thumbs. The restaurant wasn’t too busy, as it was the downtime between lunch and dinner. Aside from the the undercover trio, the only other customers were an old man and a single woman with two small children and a baby.

Suddenly, something burst through one of the glass windows and landed behind the counter. The cashier shrieked in surprise and was promptly dragged to the ground. Nick, Hank, and Wu jumped out of their seats, sidearms drawn, and ran toward the counter.

“Everybody out!” Nick shouted. “Get out of here!” The baby started crying. Wu got to the counter first and jumped on top of it. He saw the killer, fainted, and fell back off the counter, conking his head on the floor.

“Wu!” Nick shouted. He jumped over the counter, followed closely thereafter by Hank. They both laid eyes on the killer for the first time. Now there was no denying it; the killer was, in fact, a demon potato come to life. It wasn’t any bigger than a regular potato, but it had piercing red eyes and needlelike fangs, with blood dripping down its mouth. It was growling incessantly and had just finished its work on the cashier when Hank and Nick got around to reacting and started firing their GLOCKs. Their bullets served only to enrage the potato, who dodged them with ease.

“We need a new plan!” Hank shouted. He grabbed a food tray and started swinging it at the demon potato. Nick followed suit. The potato evaded the trays effortlessly and started to turn a deep red in color. Its growling was fast becoming a jarring shriek.

“I got an idea!” Nick yelled out over the shrieking. He started swinging his tray frantically, shepherding the demon potato back into the kitchen and toward the walk-in industrial freezer. Hank realized what Nick was trying to do and added his tray to the effort.

The two, by flailing their trays wildly about, managed to drive the demon potato back into the industrial freezer. Hank slammed the door shut and locked it just before the demon potato’s shrieking reached eardrum-bursting levels.

“Thank God!” Nick exclaimed. He sat back against the freezer and slid to the floor. “I thought we were dead there!”

“Yeah, thank the Lord Almighty for this one,” Hank agreed. “We got the little b%\$#@.” But just as the detectives were congratulating themselves on a job well done, the demon potato went berserk in the freezer. It turned a bright red and started vibrating violently, generating massive amounts of heat, its shriek reaching inaudible levels.

“Hey, come feel this,” Nick said, a hand on the freezer door.

“It’s warm,” Hank said. Just then, a violent explosion came from within the freezer. Nick and Hank shot up and peered through the freezer window. There was too much steam for them to see anything. They unlocked the freezer door and carefully went inside. When the steam cleared, they stood sweltering as they looked at a hole straight through the ceiling, a hole that lead right out into the afternoon air.

"Damn! The little b%\$&# got away!"

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Three police cruisers sped into the McDonald's parking lot. Nick and Hank ran out to meet them.

"What happened in there?" one of the cops asked.

"Killer struck again. Got the cashier," Nick said.

"You're never gonna believe this, but..." Hank looked at Nick, then back at the cop. "The killer really is a potato. It's alive. It's like some sort of monster from Hell."

"You're shittin' me," the cop said.

"No. Wu fainted when he saw it," Nick replied.

"Wu's in there?"

"Yeah. We tried to ambush the thing, but it got away."

"Damn," the cop swore. Another cop came running up to them.

"Hey, Dave, we got another call coming in," the second cop said. The two of them ran back to the cruisers.

"Let's go check on Wu," Hank said. He and Nick went back inside the McDonald's. Wu was still lying on the floor where he fell. He was slowly regaining consciousness. Nick and Hank knelt down beside him.

"What happened?" Wu asked, rubbing his head.

"You saw the potato and fainted. We tried to capture it, but it escaped," Hank answered.

"I'm sorry, guys. I saw that thing and it was lights out," Wu said.

"Don't feel bad. Whatever that thing was, it's not natural," Nick replied. "We're lucky to still be alive." At this, the cop who had been talking to them earlier ran inside the building.

"Guys, it just happened again! That thing's going on a spree! It killed a couple having a picnic in the park and then took out an entire family reunion! It was last seen heading for Walmart."

"Damnit it all to Hell!" Nick cursed. "We got to stop it! Call in the National Guard. SWAT. The Army. Whoever we can get. We need more manpower."

2008-09-24 17:00:00, ABC Studios, Idaho City

Anchorman Rick Johnson was delivering the first round of the evening news. He talked about the national financial crisis and then moved to local headlines. He had just relayed how the Idaho City Fall Festival had been canceled when he got the call.

"What's that?" he asked, one hand on his earpiece. "Mhmm... mhmm... All right. This just in: there is a crazed demon potato on the loose. The city is now on lockdown, and residents are advised to stay away from potato-based foods. The police..." Rick Johnson was suddenly pulled to ground, out of the camera shot. Muffled screams could be heard from behind his desk. TV screens everywhere went dark. It was all over for Mr. Johnson. Thousands had witnessed his death.

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National Guard and SWAT troops were pouring into Idaho City. Military vehicles rolled down the empty streets. Helicopters scanned the area for any sign of the demon potato. Back at the police department, Nick, Hank, and Sergeant Wu sat anxiously awaiting a sighting. The monster had killed several more civilians, including a homeless man who was last seen eating a bag of potato chips. Still, its whereabouts were unknown.

"God, somebody should have found the thing by now!" Nick let out. He slammed his fist against the wall.

"It's only a matter of time," Wu said. "It can't hide forever. We'll find it."

Just then, as if in response to Nick's anguished exclamations, a cop called in: "We've sighted the potato. It's traveling down State Route 303. All forces converge."

"303?" Hank asked. "It's leaving the city. Where would it be going?"

"Back to McGruber's Farm!" Nick realized. "We have to get there first!"

2008-09-24 18:45:00, McGruber's Farm

All was quiet on McGruber's Farm. The sun had almost completely set, and not a mouse stirred, let alone a demon potato. No lights were on in the farmhouse. A navy blue Camaro sped down the farm's driveway. Nick, Hank, and Wu hastily got out, guns drawn. All three had exchanged their Glock 22s for Colt M4 Carbine assault rifles.

"Where is everybody?" Hank asked.

"Probably still in pursuit of the potato," Wu replied. "They'll be here soon enough."

"And we'll be ready to ambush the little b&%#@," Nick added.

"Hey, look!" Hank pointed down the winding country road from which McGruber's Farm's driveway branched off. "I see it!" Two penetrating red eyes could be seen in the distance.

"That's it, alright," Nick affirmed. "But where's everyone else at? I don't see anything behind it. No helicopters, no cruisers, no nothing. The damn thing must have lost them."

"Looks like it's just us, then, boys," Wu said.

"Our last stand," Nick said. "Our Alamo. It ends tonight."

"Here it comes!" Hank shouted. The potato began down the long driveway to McGruber's farmhouse. The trio started pumping lead in its direction, unloading round after round, but it somehow emerged unscathed.

"I'm out of ammo!" Nick exclaimed.

"Me too!" Hank shouted.

"I am too!" Wu yelled.

"F\$@%!" The demon potato was coming closer and closer, its horrible shriek getting louder and louder.

"What do we do?!?!?" Wu cried.

"Run!" Nick shouted. The group turned to make a break for it, but just then a truck sped into the driveway. The demon potato had just enough time to turn around before it was squashed, splattering starch all over the gravel. The truck continued down the driveway and pulled up next to the three officers. It was Susan, McGruber's wife, with Lassie in the passenger seat.

"Well, hello, gentlemen. I didn't expect you here tonight. I was visiting my children at Idaho State. This is a rough time for all of us, of course," Susan said, sniffing. "Have you brought my husband's killer to justice yet?"

"No, ma'am," Hank shakily replied. "You... You did. Just now." Several helicopters flew overhead and a barrage of police cars and military vehicles pulled into the farm.

"It's over," Nick said.

The End

2009-09-23 15:30:00, Hopkins Farms

John and Mary Hopkins, a newly wedded couple, sat on the porch of their new home. They were not native Idahoans; they were both born and raised in New York City. But they had tired of life in the city and wanted to start anew as humble farmers out in the country. They decided to try their hand at the potato business, moved out to Idaho, and bought a large piece of land that was fortunately for sale. They ended up making a killing on it, as the previous owner, Susan McGruber, had been extremely eager to sell. Thus, they made a bargain, and their new life together started on a positive note. Things only got better when their first spring planting was a huge success, as they were able to plant the potato fields to maximum capacity.

Now, several months later, it was fall, almost time for harvesting. John and Mary were relaxing on their porch swing, gently rocking, enjoying the fresh air and each other's company. Mary put her head on John's shoulder.

"I want to live here forever," Mary quietly said. "It's so beautiful here."

"Sure is," John said. "Sure is."

And then the shriek came.

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