

GREEN LIGHT

I.

Okay, Creighton, since you ask, here's the story. I'm tellin' it to you 'cause you're now a member of the brotherhood. I'll stop once the wedding ceremony starts:

We gathered--as cops do--in the sergeant's tree-ringed Salinas home for lasagna.

I'd heard it all before, but this version had a new wrinkle. The new guy had a Ph.D in Criminal Justice. Name of Jared. Jared was gonna lecture us:

Big business needs cheap labor, says Jared. Democrats want their votes.

I say, Weird. They stagger in from Mexico to escape oppression. Then they vote for big government politicians.

Jared says, The Napoleonic Code's implanted in their DNA.

Sergeant Nathan, the ex-offensive lineman from Sacramento State, chimes in with, I'm gonna take *mordidas*. Make 'em feel at home.

I say, Our Sheriff beat ya to it.

Ph.D Jared counters with, Rumors. Just rumors, spread by malcontents.

My wife Carla, a supervisor in the Monterey County Gang Task Force, comes in from the kitchen and rests her palm on my shoulder. She flicks off a piece of lint. That's Carla. Maybe one day you'll meet her, Creighton.

Those're no rumors, says Carla.

Jeeze, says Jared, now realizing his boat's leakin' water.

Guess they never covered that in your happy happy joy joy Doctorate program, eh Jared?

I say.

Carla says, Lasagna'll be ready in five.

Jared calls out to the kitchen. Honey? The wine aired out yet?

Jared's wife Lori appears in the doorway with a corkless bottle. Let's wait for the lasagna, she says.

And then--

The screech of tires, like polyester tearing, sawed through an open window.

Then the operatic crash of metals.

Blinding white light greeted me as I exploded out the front door, shadowed by Carla. After-images and silhouettes dogged me as I heard spectators' shouts. Which were followed by swallows overhead, tweeting and darting in ragged dots across the twilit sky.

Yes, Creighton, "darting in ragged dots." So shoot me, I'm Irish. Strange, the little details you remember. Silence, while I continue:

Two copulating vehicles shimmered into focus. A copper red Ford Courier labeled "Central Coast Fire Alarm Sprinklers" had mounted a blue Toyota pick-up.

The Courier's left front panel, driven back by the impact, covered the driver's door. A man thrust his bald head and his shoulders through the shattered window.

With a sob and a grunt, the Mexican pulled himself through and landed head first on the pavement. He pulled himself to his feet and hobbled crablike from the wreckage.

Sergeant Nathan's automatic timed lawn sprinklers periscoped upward, spitting their circular spray. I ignored the water.

As the neighbors edged forward, a woman with a baby on her hip ran across her dichondra lawn.

Hey, that's my truck!

I reached the curb and skidded to a stop, preparing for a grab-and-hold. Hit-and-run is still a crime in lawless California.

The Mexican, palming his wounded knee, limped my way as he glanced back at the spectators, taunting them, grinning. I recognized him from somewhere.

The lowering sun lit up his dome like an incandescent bulb.

The Mexican turned forward to survey his escape route. We locked eyes.

A week before, he'd installed a fire alarm sprinkler system in our new add-on game room.

He recognized me. His Michael Jordans squeaked as he stopped, fell forward. Arms splayed, he righted himself, his eyes big as trash can lids. Then they narrowed as he slid the orange-tipped gun from his belt.

("Orange-tipped?" said Creighton MacLeod. "Yeah," said Billy. "They paint their barrels orange because cops won't know if they're airguns or not. In that uncertain split second, the banger gains critical advantage.")

Billy! screamed my wife. My hand had already snaked to my hidden holster.

The Mexican curled a lip, then paused a fatal split second as he lunged forward.

I crouched, aiming for the center mass of a moving target.

As I fired, my left shoe slipped over the wet curb. I tumbled forward, still focused on his chest as I squeezed a nine millimeter slug into him. I hit the pavement. Something snapped in my back.

The bullet pierced a lung, then veered into his Mexican liver, blowing it apart. The bald man fell like a packed coffee bean gunny sack.

This really hurts, he moaned, blood spilling through his fingers.

No shit, *cabron*, I said, my Glock still on him as I smelled the gutter gravel. No shit. I shot you.

As he commenced to writhing, I ripped his gun from his dancing fingers, then stood above him.

A sliver of fiery ice shot down my spine.

I heard Carla on her cell phone. Yes. The 100 block of Catalina Street. Bring an ambulance.

The Salinas cops whisked me to the station. I waited for my attorney in the watch commander's office.

I later read the report of the two officers who escorted twenty-nine year old *Norteño* gang member Adrian Castro in the ambulance.

Through the tangle of tubes, as he faded from consciousness, Castro told the cops his *compadres* know the home address of every law enforcement official in Monterey County.

The news story, complete with my so-so photo, claimed the front page of every newspaper from King City to San Jose.

Castro, father of two, died ten days later. During his last two months, his wife, claiming he was going to shoot her, had filed for two restraining orders as she and her children fled from one safe house to another.

While I recovered from the back operation that bounced me from my career, a reporter with a concealed mic interviewed me in my bouquet-drenched hospital room.

How'd I feel about taking a life?

I strengthened the gene pool, said the morphine into the invisible microphone.

California's a dual consent state when it comes to taping conversations.

Even the reporters here are felons.

The reporter lied that our talk was off-the-record as he strolled out of focus.

I buzzed the nurse for another shot of morphine.

Ph.D Jared and Sergeant Nathan walked in.

You got a microwave in here?

Why?

Nathan handed me a plastic container labeled "Killer Lasagna." We saved some for you.

The nurse showed up. She fluffed my pillows. Hey, Officer Crash, no more morphine.

Jared says, Give him two of those five hundred dollar aspirin you guys charge.

Yeah, what the hell, says Nathan. County's payin' for it.

The prim nurse, unamused, disappeared down the hall.

Jared laid a piece of paper and a pen on my lap. Your John Hancock, please.

I've signed all the papers I'm ever gonna sign.

I'm running for Sheriff. I need eighty-seven more signatures to waive the filing fee.

Sign it, Billy. You'll need a buddy with muscle, said Nathan.

I laid down a wobbly autograph and handed the petition to Jared. Why?

Norteños put out a green light on you. And I hear the widow's planning a wrongful death lawsuit.

Aint't that how it goes, Creighton?

II.

Creighton MacLeod's new security guard belt had slipped down round his hips. The hand cuffs clanged as he lined up the plastic snap with the blue steel belt buckle of his razor-pleated black pants.

"That's quite a story, Billy," said Creighton.

Billy Crash shushed Creighton. Then, walking a few steps toward the bride and groom, Billy nodded at the Universal Life Church minister as he pronounced the two Mexicans man and wife.

Creighton straightened up, then placed his palms on the bar, next to the box of colored yes-I-can-buy-alcohol wrist bands.

The guests applauded as the groom, an Aztec prince in a three-piece suit, kissed his chubby bride.

Over in a corner, her father pushed a button on the CD player, and 1950s doo-wop poured out of the speakers.

"Are the stars out tonight? / I don't know if it's cloudy or bright. / I only have eyes for you, Dear."

Billy bellied up to the bar opposite Creighton. "The Four Satins, right?"

"No," said Creighton, watching to see if anyone would dance. "The Flamingos."

"The Flamingos, right." Billy surveyed the hundred middle-class Mexicans. "What a sedate bunch. I was expecting a mariachi band and rivers of tequila." Billy grimaced, adjusted his posture, straightening his spine. "I did security at a Mexican wedding last month. Had to toss the bride's sister for drunk and disorderly."

A Mexican in a Wild West long coat ambled up to the bar and slapped his driver's license on the polished wood. Creighton checked the birthdate as the man offered his forearm. Creighton pulled an ID band from the cigar box and wrapped it around the man's wrist.

"Gracias," said the man.

"Disfruta la boda," said Creighton as the man moved to the bartender and ordered a Manhattan.

"You know Spanish," said Billy.

"Picked it up at Universidad Ibero-Americana. Polished it when I worked at the embassy."

"So why you end up here?"

"The ambassador's wife took a shine to me, and well, you know how that goes."

Billy Crash knew how that goes. "Lemme know if you overhear anything."

"Sure. Didn't you learn any Spanish when you were a cop?"

"In Carmel? Never rubbed elbows with the gardeners."

A fireplug short Versace-suited Mexican with thinning blonde hair strolled up with his wife, a Cleopatra lookalike in a slit black skirt, revealing an alabaster thigh to the hip.

She offered her left wrist. Pale blue, barely visible veins crisscrossed her forearm.

Creighton fumbled with the ID bracelet as Billy and the husband watched.

"Calm down," said the husband. "Don't let the pretty lady rattle you."

"I just didn't want to make it too tight."

The wife winked. "Feels just right."

The Mexican husband held out his left fist. Creighton aimed for a hairy patch behind the gold watch.

"Feels just right," mimicked the husband.

"Knock it off, Frank," said the wife. "Leave the handsome man free to gab with his senior partner here."

Frank lingered on Creighton with his fuck-you glare before guiding his wife down the bar.

Billy said, "Your first assignment?"

"Second."

"Whaddya do in real life?" said Billy, surveying the wedding guests. "When you're not a rent-a-cop?"

"Online trading."

"Market's up. You musta bet on Solyndra to end up here."

"Invested in a Nicaraguan oil dig. Before Ortega seized it."

"Shoulda bought Disney. I own 370-plus shares," purred Billy.

Creighton noticed Billy's soft eyes. With their natural eyeliner. The Roman nose. The cat purr voice.

"Then why you here instead of counting dividends?"

Billy chuckled. "Had a small legal problem. It'll be resolved soon."

Creighton waited for a clarification. Billy surveyed the room.

A hipless middle-aged *señora*, her jet black hair haphazardly teased and sculpted, approached the bar.

"*Buenas tardes*. I'm the mother of the groom. May I offer you some food?"

Creighton looked up at Billy, who nodded.

"*Gracias, señora. Y felicidades*."

"Go ahead," said Billy. "I'll man the ID station."

Creighton threaded between the tables and the whispering families. He excused himself past the table with Cleopatra and her blonde husband Frank. Cleopatra smiled his way. Frank caught it and, looking at Creighton, grabbed her wrist.

Cleopatra smiled her little victory.

At the buffet table, Creighton picked up a plate.

Odd, he thought, taking a place in line. No Mexican food.

As Creighton ladled some red-sauce goulash onto his plate, a red-haired *chicana* rattled his hand cuffs.

"Ever use these?" Smiling.

"No," said Creighton, ignoring her innuendo.

"But you carry a gun, right?" Again with the smoky you're-such-a-stud tease.

Creighton put out the flame with, "This room, and the entire Santa Cruz Fairgrounds? They're a gun free zone."

"*Se nota*," she said, then ambled back to her table.

As Creighton balanced his plates back to the bar, he watched the red-haired *señorita* whispering to her date.

Her date stood, looked across the room to the bar, then walked through the doors to a patio, where Creighton saw him remove a cell phone from his red leather jacket and make a call.

At the bar, Creighton spread butter on a biscuit, then dug into the goulash. "Last week, I showed up at the Carmel Mission after they asked me if I wanted to do security at a mass. I like churches, so I said sure."

"I live near the mission. Wonder why they didn't call me," said Billy.

"I get there, and a guy says, 'I'm Sergeant Ted. You'll address me as Sergeant Ted.'"

"Ted Sanico. He's a snitch. Hope you watched yourself."

"Ted says we're there to protect Cardinal Mahony. Seems there were death threats when the news came out he'd be there to celebrate Father Junipero Serra's 300th birthday."

"Cardinal Mahony. He covered up a pedophile priest ring, right?"

"Yeah. So Ted says we're to consider ourselves a Secret Service detail, complete with concealed radios and code words."

"What was Mahony's code word?"

"New York."

"Mahony lives in LA."

"So I get stationed at the door, and Ted tells me to watch for anyone fidgety who might be packing a gun."

"This was an unarmed assignment?"

"Right. And I'm thinking, I'm supposed to take a bullet for a pedophile enabler, at eleven bucks an hour?"

"Ted's a retired medic from the fire department. He loves playing secret agent."

"After dark, Ted radios me to go out into the bushes and look for suspicious characters."

"Welcome to the security biz."

Creighton started in on the salad with the watery ranch dressing.

Billy said, "Last week I drove armed duty for Bill Gates."

"Microsoft Bill Gates?"

"None other than. Chauffeured him and his science adviser Boris Nikolic to various meetings."

"Wow. You overhear anything?"

"They talked about the similarities between tennis and squash."

"Lives of the rich and famous." Creighton sipped his iced tea. "So you didn't shoot anyone?"

"Nope."

"You packing today?" Creighton loved how "packing" felt on his tongue.

"You know the answer. But I can still carry my knife. Tanto SOG Vulcan."

They surveyed the guests while Sinatra crooned "My Way."

Billy said, "I gotta pee."

Billy walked down the hall to the men's room.

Creighton chewed his brownie and saw a new guest come through the glass doors.

The man had that bald goateed Satan look Creighton used to see on fireworks boxes when he was a kid.

A popular look with wannabe tough guys. Which seemed to include everyone these days.

Creighton watched the man sit at the table with the flirtatious girl and her red leather-jacketed date. They conferred.

Then the man walked up to the bar.

"You look over twenty-one," said Creighton. "But I still gotta check your ID."

The Mexican decided to make it easy. He flipped open his wallet.

Revealing a Mexican driver's license. Antonio Castro.

"Good enough, *Señor* Castro," said Creighton.

Antonio Castro extended his left arm, and as he did, the man's jacket lifted, revealing the silver glint of a gun handle.

Creighton kept his nerve as he wrapped the ID bracelet around the man's tattooed forearm.

"A snake in the claws of an eagle," said Creighton. "Pretty cool."

Noting the "XIV" beneath the eagle and the snake, Creighton said, "What's this mean?"

The man said nothing, then said, "Tequila, extra *añejo*" to the bartender.

The bartender, reaching upward, said, "This is the fairgrounds, not the Hilton. I can only offer you this tequila from our top shelf."

The Mexican nodded. "Let's play pretend. I'll pretend it's extra *añejo*." He flipped a twenty dollar bill at the bartender.

Creighton edged down the hallway and met Billy as he emerged from the men's room, still drying his hands.

“We got a guy with a concealed gun,” whispered Creighton.

“I got it,” said Billy.

As Creighton followed Billy down the hallway, Billy chuckled, “Happy happy joy joy.”

Billy stopped at the entrance to the big room. Looking toward the bar, he said, “Him?”

“Yeah.”

“Watch the crowd.”

The man leaned back on the bar, elbows resting on it, every few seconds sipping his expensive tequila. Just looking out over the room.

Billy towered over the Mexican. “I need to speak with you. Outside.”

“I ain' lookin' for romance, *cabron*.”

“I know what you have on you.”

“I got a nice jacket on me.”

“Don't do anything with it.”

“With my jacket?”

“You try anything, I'll fuck you up.”

The Mexican sipped his tequila. “Lemme finish this extra *añejo*, *pendejo*.”

Billy stared the Mexican down.

The Mexican said, “You wanna sip? It's above a rent-a-cop's pay grade. Here, lemme turn you on to one of life's finer things.”

The Mexican reached under his jacket and as he flashed his orange-tipped gun, Billy slapped the man's forearm downward with his left hand.

With his right hand, Billy brought his dinosaur claw Tanto blade across the man's throat.

Women screamed. Creighton heard chairs scraping the floor as wedding guests scrambled across the room, coming at the bar in a human wave.

Creighton fumbled with his belt, grabbing for the pepper spray.

The Mexican choked his gushing neck with his free hand. Billy sliced the man's abdomen back and forth.

The Mexican dropped his gun and covered his stomach with both hands. That's when Billy drew the knife in the other direction across the Norteño's throat.

Then Billy slammed the blade into the man's heart before twisting it.

Billy, to the bartender: “Call 911.”

The bartender reached for the phone. Creighton pulled his pepper spray canister from his belt as Mexicans fell on Billy, coyotes on elk.

Billy fanned his blade windmill fashion, slashing Mexicans here and there while Creighton let loose with the spray.

Frank with the thinning blonde hair grabbed a butter knife from the plate on the bar. Without wiping the blade free of sauce, he slammed it into Creighton's back. The dull blade found its way between two ribs, and into Creighton's heart.

Creighton staggered and continued hosing the wedding guests as they covered Billy like flies. The pepper spray only made them angrier, and they clawed at Billy's eyes and bit his ears, even after they drove Billy to the floor.

As police sirens howled in the distance, the room tilted. The floor rose and cracked Creighton's cheekbone. He saw his father pushing a fertilizer spreader across their dichondra lawn. Black grains of nitrogen dropped neatly on the fresh lawn, the lawn, the fresh lawn, as Creighton rose through the ceiling and mingled with a flock of swallows, darting here and there, and then everywhere.