

## Community Property

By Pearce Hansen

“Three months, Gordon. Maybe four if you don’t stress yourself out, if you give up burning the candle at both ends, and if you’re lucky.”

Gordon heard Doctor Benson’s words on an intellectual level, but forced their meaning to wash over and past him. All his attention was on the MRI scan printout of his abdominal region, trying to see if he could spot the tumor for himself. But it was no use: to his untrained eye the MRI was only a jumble of color representing his internal organs. Gordon was irritated to have no idea what was supposed to be there inside his body, and what was the cancerous parasite betraying him.

Doctor Benson’s hand touched his arm. Startled, Gordon turned away from that hypnotic MRI to look down at his plump, pretty primary-care physician. There was nothing wrong with plump, he considered as he eye-fucked her up and down. He was on the husky side himself, after all.

“You can get another opinion if you like, in fact I recommend it,” Doctor Benson said. “But I’ve run the tests more than once and there’s absolutely no doubt. The MRI is only confirmation. Would you like me to point out the malignancy on the display?”

“No,” Gordon said, refusing to look at the MRI again, wondering why he wouldn’t make this last acknowledgement of a truth he’d suspected since the first night he’d spent hugging the toilet bowl and vomiting up blood. Instead, he focused his attention on Doctor Benson.

“Linda,” Gordon said, using her first name for the first time in their acquaintance. That old seductive croon had entered his bass voice. “Linda,” he repeated, letting his unspoken offer color his words. He had nothing to lose anymore, after all.

Linda looked at the floor from under lowered lashes, avoiding his eyes. “Good luck Gordon.” Her voice was soft and almost regretful, but the shut down was firm.

“Don’t waste any time,” Doctor Benson said to his back as he left the examination room.

Out in the parking lot, Gordon lit up a Marlboro and started hot-boxing it, toking hard. He noted five missed messages on his cell phone when he turned it back on. He grimaced as he saw that four of them were from his wife, Yang. The fifth was from his attorney Chris Kellum, and Gordon hit *reply* as he walked toward Yang’s Mercedes, touching his thick head of hair to make sure his coif was still immaculate.

“Gordon,” Chris said on his end as he Caller-IDed Gordon’s cell. “We have to talk my friend.”

“I know, I know,” Gordon said as he hit the alarm button on his key ring. Yang’s Mercedes chirped greeting as he reached it and gave the hood an affectionate pat, admiring its perfect lines of his soon-to-be-ex-wife’s car. The Benz was top drawer, a 2008 S65 AMG, and Gordon enjoyed its luxury as much as he enjoyed the taunt he was sending Yang by keeping it from her.

“Don’t you blow me off again, Gordon,” Chris shouted, loud enough Gordon had to pull the cell away from his ear a bit as he threw down his smoke and got into the Benz. Gordon hit the speaker phone button and tossed the cell onto the passenger seat as he

buckled up, chuckling to himself even as he did it. He'd always been a careful man (except in his love life of course) and a lifetime of habit was hard to break even now when it didn't matter anymore.

"How long have we known each other, Gordon?" Chris asked, voice a little lower, a little calmer. "She says she wants her Benz back as part of her share of the community property, I'd say she really just wants the closure. You sign the papers, you show up tomorrow in court and hand her the keys, and I'll bet I can keep her from fucking you too hard."

Gordon laughed out loud as he started the engine and lit another smoke. "You don't know Yang as well as you think you do, Chris. The divorce is just her opening salvo, and the Benz is just the first trophy she's going to scalp off me. She's going to burn me down to the waterline. She's taking this all the way no matter what I do. Besides, I don't really have to give a rat's ass anymore." Gordon realized he'd said too much even as the words came out of his mouth, but it was too late to back pedal.

"And what exactly do you mean by that statement my friend?" Chris asked slowly, his attorney brain chewing hard on Gordon's words.

Gordon pulled out of the Kaiser Hospital parking lot and took Broadway west toward Oakland Civic Center, thinking hard himself. He powered down his window and flung out his latest butt, then fumbled another from his pack and lit up while he drove one-handed.

"I'm dying, Chris," Gordon said, wondering even as he uttered the words why he was burdening his friend with the information. Maybe he was trying the fact of his imminent death on for size. Maybe he wanted Chris's legal brain to show him some kind of loophole from his upcoming death.

"Jesus," Chris breathed, and was silent for several seconds himself. "Get your ass over here Gordon. Screw the divorce, you shouldn't be alone right now."

"You always were a good buddy, Chris," Gordon said. "I'll be in touch." He reached over and picked up the cell phone, ended the call. But it started ringing again immediately. Gordon powered down his window again and tossed the cellie out of the car without bothering to see if it was Chris or Yang vying for his attention.

Gordon reached Jack London Square and turned south along the Estuary to the industrial park his office was located in. He entered the lobby, took the elevator, and entered his office. His secretary Sarah looked as relieved at his arrival as if he was the Second Coming.

"She's been burning up the phone lines," Sarah said in that husky Midwest drawl that had turned Gordon on since the first time she opened her mouth at her job interview two months before. "I just about ran out of note paper keeping track of her calls. Oh, yeah: a process server came by but I refused to accept whatever paper he was trying to hang."

"Good work, babe," Gordon said, reaching up to make sure his hair was unmussed. He angled to get a look down the front of her low cut dress at her cleavage, but realized he was just doing it from habit, going through the motions. His heart wasn't really in it today, so he just took the paper listing Yang's calls from Sarah, walked past her toward his office.

“Gordon,” Sarah called out from behind him, and he turned. “Is everything all right?” Was that honest concern he saw on her face? Or did she only smell the possible end of her meal ticket?

Gordon made himself try to smile, not realizing that the facial rictus made him look anything but pleasant. “Everything’s fine.”

Sarah nodded as though she wanted him to think she was relieved, but he sensed she had more to say, waited in unaccustomed patience. “Do you think your wife knows about us?” she blurted after a moment, her face gone a little red.

Gordon almost laughed at the irrelevancy of the question, but restrained himself. “You have nothing to worry about, Sarah. Why don’t you take the rest of the day off?” As he saw the pleasure fill Sarah’s face, Gordon was moved to add: “Hell, take the rest of the week off. I’ve got some things to attend to and I’ll be away from the office for a few days. Here’s an advance paycheck to tide you over.”

Gordon ignored her murmured appreciative words as he made out a company check for a month’s wages to the girl. “Cash this right away,” he said, figuring Yang would be attaching his assets soon enough.

He watched Sarah’s perky ass as she left, remembering how that tush had felt when he’d clutched it with both hands as they did it on his desk yesterday, and she’d called out his name over and over. But now she was gone, and he was alone.

Gordon lit up a smoke as he walked back into his office. He hit the wet bar behind his mahogany slab desk, poured some Walker Red neat, and tossed it down his gullet without the scotch even touching the sides of his throat on the way down. He poured another tumbler and sucked hard on his smoke as he moved to stare out his window, which took up the whole outer office wall.

His office was on the fifth floor, and he could see Yang’s S65 below in his reserved parking space, he could look across Embarcadero to the Estuary, the deep water shipping channel separating Oakland and Alameda. High-end apartment buildings and condos paraded out of sight to his left and his right on the Oakland waterfront. Across the water he saw the low skyline of Alameda’s upscale homes, sprawled under their omnipresent canopy of trees like a high end version of *Leave It to Beaver*. Yachts and Cigarette Boats crowded slips and marinas on both sides of the Estuary.

It had taken Gordon four decades of hardscrabble labor to earn this view, to belong in high priced commercial real estate like this. He’d come straight out the trailer, nobody had handed him a thing, and he’d never asked for any favors. He’d built this consultancy from scratch, all by himself. But right now, with the knowledge of his upcoming demise forcing him to take a step back and examine his life objectively, Gordon realized that the good life had always been just out of arm’s reach for him no matter how much cash he threw around. What had he been chasing, giving up his irreplaceable time to scamper after?

Doing his best to keep it equally impersonal, he also thought about his soon-to-be-ex-wife Yang, and wistfully recalled their first meeting over in Shanghai. She was a part-time model, she’d even done some bit parts on Chinese TV, but she and Gordon had met when she was moonlighting as a taxi driver and she’d picked him up at the airport. Yang was northern Chinese, almost as tall as Gordon at six feet even, thin but shapely with ivory skin paler than Gordon’s own. He’d had to have her, and the trophy of merely

bedding her hadn't cut it at the time. He'd slapped a wedding ring on her finger as soon as humanly possible.

He admitted to himself now that he'd been an abject failure as a husband. He knew he was a proficient enough lover. Women had always wanted more of him than he was willing to give. But with Yang underfoot 24/7 as his wife, Gordon realized that he hadn't the foggiest idea of what to do with a woman outside the bedroom.

His infidelities had been nonstop, his emotional unavailability had hung over their home life like a pall, and Yang finally got fed up. Lo and behold, Gordon discovered that she had powerful relatives, both in China and the U.S. That her seemingly placid beauty concealed a ruthless dragon nature as aggressive as Gordon's own. And now that she was royally pissed, she was going to gut him in the settlement.

Gordon was surprised to find he actually liked this side of Yang as much as he feared it. Seeing her flex her claws made him wonder what their marriage would have been like if he'd tried even a little bit. Now he'd never know, with a tumor time bomb in his belly, and Yang's scorched earth version of a divorce looming over everything Gordon had managed to accomplish in his life.

Gordon sat at his desk and opened the drawer. He pulled out his Desert Eagle XIX, and unholstered it from its shoulder rig. It was only the six inch barrel, but he'd found that the ten incher hung up too much on the shoulder holster when he was competing in Quick Draw competitions, or at the Combat Handgunning range he trained at every weekend religiously.

Gordon spun in his leather office chair and faced his reflection in the office window. He put on a gunslinger's snake-eyed scowl as he held the Desert Eagle up, as if for his reflection's inspection. "Draw pardner," he said, pointing his pistol at his mirror image. "Bang," he said softly.

As the gun was in his hand, it was only natural that Gordon would hold it up in front of his face for a better look. Twisting and turning the 50-caliber Magnum as he examined it from multiple angles, Gordon reflected on how easy it would be to just stick the gun in his mouth and pull the trigger.

He holstered the Desert Eagle, stood, and took off his Brioni suit coat to strap on the shoulder holster. Gordon buttoned his coat back up, ground out his latest smoke and lit another. He looked at his reflection again, twisting from side to side to see if the holstered Desert Eagle bulged too conspicuously as it hung down the length of his ribcage. He decided it looked okay.

He started to reach up a hand to reflexively smooth the thick mop of hair on the top of his head, but stopped with a grimace. He dug his fingers into the hair, ripped off the toupee it actually was, and tossed the hairpiece to the carpeted floor where it lay like a dead poodle. He examined the revealed, reflected, bald Bozo-like dome of his head, scalp pale from years out of the sun. He left his office for the last time, pistol still holstered under his coat.

Gordon drove Yang's S65 around aimlessly for a while, even through his distraction, able to enjoy all the bells and whistles in this automotive piece of community property. The heated leather seats, the harman/kardon surround sound currently featuring Rush Limbaugh on the station preset, the agile handling and the feeling of overwhelming power barely constrained within the 600-horsepower V-12 engine. There was no way

Gordon would let Yang have this car back, even though he knew it was stubborn spite as much as possessiveness on his part.

Gordon drove and drove, toward where he didn't know, all around the East Bay. What was he looking for, now that all meaning had turned to ash? Where was he going to, besides the upcoming grave? He couldn't say, but he knew that as long as he kept driving he didn't have to think, he could just react. As long as he kept sharking forward, he could pretend he was safe, and that Yang wasn't hot on his tail eager to prove just what a failure his entire life had been.

He was in Berkeley when he finally decided on a semi-ultimate destination: Grizzly Peak Boulevard up in the Hills: a winding, scenic stretch of highway where he could let the S65 off its leash, really let it howl on those curvy inclines and slopes. It would be an easy enough thing to twitch the steering wheel to the side on one curve or another, send the Benz rocketing through space on a fatal, final ride down to impact. If he wanted to, of course. He'd decide when he got up there.

Gordon reached for another smoke as he headed up Ashby, planning on taking Claremont up to Grizzly Peak. But the pack was empty, and Gordon tossed it out his open window as a black guy stumbled backwards out of a store front about half a block ahead of Gordon's approaching Benz. Two white boys with guns followed the man out the door. As Gordon continued getting ever closer, he saw one of the kids raise his pistol and shoot the black guy. The man fell backward on his ass with one hand clutching the side of his gut, the other hand palm out and fingers splayed at the end of his outstretched arm, palm facing the gunmen as if in supplication or defense. The second gunman shot the man in the face, and the man's arm lowered to the ground as he subsided the rest of the way onto his back.

Gordon floored the gas pedal, the S65's powerful engine making him feel like he was riding a Valkyrie charger, he should have Wagner blasting from the harmon/kardan instead of the DJ's current NeoCon monolog driveling pointlessly from the speakers.

The two gunmen froze and whirled to face Gordon as he bounced the roaring Mercedes half up onto the sidewalk, accelerating like a rocket even as he aimed to make sure he missed the black guy's body on the sidewalk. For some reason Gordon didn't want to feel the guy's corpse under his tires.

Time slowed down, nothing existed but Gordon, his Mercedes war wagon, and the two men in front of him. Everything to either side was a blur pouring past, irrelevant bystanders pointing in slow motion. All Gordon's attention was focused on the two gunmen as their staring open mouthed faces got rapidly closer, limned in a crimson glow to his eyes. Gordon realized he was literally seeing red as a keening sound leaked from his mouth, and spittle flecked his lips in a dense foam.

In the last few instants, one of the gunmen started to jump out of the way while the other one raised his pistol and started shooting at the Benz, at Gordon actually. Gordon ignored the bullet holes starring the windshield as the supersonic rounds cracked through the interior of the car past his ear and out the rear windshield like angry hornets. The Mercedes was doing at least 80 as it clipped the fleeing gunman in the hip and sent him spinning through the air to the side like Jackie Chan on crack.

Gordon could see the unbelieving look on the other gunman's face in the final molasses-slow instant as the Mercedes folded him over at the waist and pinched him in half against the lamp post behind him. Gordon saw guts spewing out the guys' mouth

even as the Mercedes' hood folded in half around the lamp post, the airbag deployed, and the Benz came to an instant apocalyptic halt.

The expanding air bag slammed Gordon in the ribs like a jack hammer, and there was a red blossom of pain in his face as the air bag surrounded his head and upper body and blocked his vision completely. Gordon clawed in panic at the bag, which pressed him like a prisoner against his seat. Finally he calmed down enough to grope the keys out of the ignition and rip at the fabric of the bag until it deflated.

Gordon scrambled the belt off, wrestled the warped door open and half crawled out. Broken glass crunched underfoot as he reeled drunkenly to the front of the car, which was hissing like a tea kettle as steam escaped the ruptured radiator. The black guy's corpse was lying in the gutter, what was left of his face pointing at the sky. Gordon ensured the gunman he'd crushed against the lamp post was dead too, shooting him in the head with his Desert eagle, which had found its way into his hand somehow. The 50-caliber round almost made the kid's head evaporate as it hit. The other gunman was nowhere in sight, and it occurred to Gordon to wonder just where he was.

He strolled into the Dry Cleaners that the three men had vomited forth from, the Desert Eagle dangling nonchalantly at his side. The second white boy was in there leaning against the counter, hopping on one foot with his ruined leg dangling, holding a middle-aged black woman from behind by the throat, his pistol muzzle pressed against her temple as he lurched around on his only working leg.

Gordon looked down at the guy's hip and leg as the woman writhed and contorted her face at him; the kid was panting hard enough his breathing was a series of yelping snarls. His hip actually looked dislocated from when the Benz had sent him spinning through the air, and his foot was twisted at an impossible angle. His leg was swelling so fast, it looked like a balloon filling to press tight against the inside of his pants leg.

"You're not getting far like that," Gordon observed. The kid's eyes glittered, but that was his only response.

"Homicide in the commission of a robbery," Gordon mused. "You're looking at lethal injection, or at least life without parole."

"You're trapped," Gordon continued. "There's no escape for you, you're doomed." Gordon studied the kid closely as he spoke, but his words seemed to have no impact. Instead, the kid was listening to the distant, approaching sirens.

Going for a psychological whipsaw, Gordon focused on the black woman, who trembled in her captor's grasp, eyes pointed as far away as possible from the pistol pressed to her head. "What's your name?" Gordon asked, seriously interested despite the distraction she represented.

"What?" she asked, looking at him in disbelief.

"What's your name?" Gordon repeated.

"Larella, I'm Larella,"

Gordon returned to looking the kid deep in the eyes, trying to reach him for some reason. "You're scaring Larella, son. Is that how you want to go out, how you want to be remembered? The kind of scumbag that does a woman wrong?"

Gordon wagged the Desert Eagle but kept it down at his side. "Let Larella go, boy," Gordon said. "Let's keep this between us, go out together like men."

The kid's face slowly sagged into stillness, and his gaze seemed to turn inward for an endless moment or three. Then he grinned, flung Larella off to the side, leaned back against the counter on his one good leg and whipped up his pistol to fire at Gordon.

Gordon grinned right back at his current best friend as the kid's shot missed and the bullet whizzed past Gordon's head to his right. Gordon's Desert Eagle spoke three times in reply, every round on target: triple tap, two to the body and one to the dome. The kid's bloody rag of a corpse slid down the counter to lie on the floor, disjointed from the three 50-caliber Black Talons.

The black woman was pressed back against the wall as if trying to get as far away from Gordon as she could. Gordon looked at her with interest, the grin still on his face as he objectively noted the woman's revulsion toward him. "You liked it," she hissed in accusation.

Gordon's grin widened even further as he realized she was right.

She escaped out the door away from Gordon, knelt next to her husband's body and commenced to wail and grieve. Gordon holstered the Desert Eagle and followed her out at a stroll, ignoring the approaching sirens and the shocked babble of all the surrounding bystander drones on this busy Berkeley street.

Yang's S65 was still wrapped around the lamp post; the almost-headless dead kid was still folded in half face down on the hood with arms outstretched. All the Benz's windows were shattered. Safety glass lay strewn all around it on the sidewalk, and fluids drained away into the gutter as though the car was bleeding to death. This fine piece of German machinery was totaled.

Gordon felt a momentary pang at the waste of a \$200,000 car, but then he chuckled at the irony: this was one piece of community property Yang wouldn't be able to hold over his head anymore. He even considered showing up at the divorce proceedings tomorrow. If he signed, Yang would get half his shit. If only she knew, all she had to do was wait a bit and she'd get it all, one hundred percent.

Gordon buttoned his Brioni jacket as he ducked around the corner, snickering to himself at the comedy of it all. The first emergency vehicles were arriving on the scene, and he needed to be rapidly elsewhere. He also needed some fresh smokes and a drink or three as soon as possible.

It was good to be alive again, even for however short this little upcoming bit might be.

*Pearce Hansen is an East Bay native and proud of it. After an extremely sketchy youth, he was fortunate enough to find a good woman, and raise his son to strong adulthood. Pearce's first novel STREET RAISED is available from Amazon.*