

## **Young Guns**

**By Ian Healy**

Sometimes a car chase is just like in the movies. This one was more like the ones you see on Police Camera Action specials. In other words, there wasn't a lot of tight cornering and screeching skids. Mostly we were just barreling along the road in a straight line, occasionally swerving onto the shoulder to avoid slower traffic. Only the hills made it slightly less than routine, if there is such a thing.

I was driving, because Grimes' shoulder was still bothering him. We had been enjoying a quiet morning patrol through East Bay when the call came over the radio about the carjacking. Of all things, it was a dairy truck. The mysteries of modern criminal minds once again made me wonder what had happened to our society, but only for the moment it took me to toss my coffee out the window and flip on the lights and siren. We had the good fortune to be only a few minutes away and spotted the milk truck fairly quickly. Of course, it was hard to miss tearing down Santa Ana Boulevard at seventy miles per hour. It was Sunday morning, and traffic wasn't much of a factor this early, so we had clear sailing and were able to move in behind the van fairly quickly. Fred hissed as an exceptional pothole

jarred his shoulder the wrong way. "Hey, Harry, I'd like to avoid the hospital today. Spent enough time there last month..."

I chuckled and guided the patrol car past an early-morning bus. "Don't worry, rookie. You're in expert, veteran hands today." I always called Fred Grimes "rookie" because he had the misfortune to be ten years younger than me. He returned the favor in kind, referring to me as "geezer". My name is Harry Blaine, and I'm a twenty-year veteran of the Bay City Police Department. I'm also strong enough to yank a building off its foundation and bulletproof, but that hasn't stopped me from pursuing my chosen avocation of law enforcement. I didn't ask for my powers, and I didn't once consider using them in any way to fight crime as a vigilante or superhero. I preferred my justice by the book, thank you very much. The first (and only) time I ever used my abilities anywhere but at Powerman's Gymnasium was last month when I'd stopped a couple of teenage killers on a shooting spree in my daughter's high school. That was where Grimes had been shot. My daughter Dannan, who apparently inherited my powers, was a survivor of that bloody massacre. Neither of us had known about the others' abilities before that day. Since then it has caused..problems.

There were two young men in the milk truck. Both were howling and laughing like madmen as they swerved from lane to lane. Driving seemingly without any destination in mind, they

were likely just joyriding. Just then they whipped through a busy intersection. Cars screeched to a halt, horns blaring. Grimes cursed and grabbed the Jesus bar on the dash (called that because of the name most fellows were prone to yelling at times like this). Without really thinking the maneuver through, I tromped on the emergency brake and spun the wheel to the left. The rear end of the patrol cruiser swung to the right. As we pointed towards a clear section, I released the brake and hit the accelerator. Wheels squealing, we leaped over the curb and bounced back onto the road again. Okay, maybe it was like in the movies.

Grimes leaned back in his seat gingerly. "So...uh, how about them Bulldogs, geezer?" The Bulldogs were our own team, perennial losers and laughing stock of the NFL.

"Next topic, rookie," I grumbled. Grimes grinned, knowing I was a card-carrying fan. He had a perfectly annoying habit of never shutting up. It was pointless to try to silence him, a fact I had learned after my first year with him. The best I could hope for was to pick a fairly neutral subject when my concentration was required and just nod and agree when he paused for breath.

"How's Dannan doing with her new team?" He asked. Unconsciously I clenched my fingers and cracked the rim of the steering wheel. Shortly after I discovered that she had

inherited my unnatural strength and muscular density, Dannan announced to my wife Alisa and myself over dinner that she was going to join the Young Guns. The Young Guns were a trio of super-powered kids that wandered the Bay City area looking for crimes and super-powered villains. Occasionally they found them. More often than not they wound up getting into trouble themselves. "Absolutely not!" I had told her. The discussion degenerated from there into a typical family squabble that ended with doors being slammed (in her case, cracking the door down the middle) and lots of yelling. The gist of her argument had been that just because I never used my powers didn't mean that she wasn't going to use hers. My argument had been that I was her father and while she lived in my house it would be by my rules.

My lovely wife Alisa, peacemaker that she is, managed to bring Dannan and me to...well, it wasn't exactly an agreement. More like a treaty. It was understood by Dannan that if her grades slipped, or we got a call from anyone about vandalism or property damage or we had to pick her up at a police station, she would be grounded until she was thirty. It was understood by me that she would parade around in a skimpy, colorful outfit and I would grit my teeth and bite my tongue, which wouldn't do any good because it was as tough as the rest of me. She called herself Bombshell. Oh, the humanity!

Just then one of the rear doors of the van swung open. I could see one of the young men bouncing around inside. In a second he kicked the swinging door open all the way and he held a half-gallon of milk in a glass bottle in each hand. "Watch out!" yelled Grimes as he let fly with them. I swerved to avoid the homogenized grenades. One impacted on the grill of the cruiser and the engine smoked as the milk congealed on the hot block. Soon all manner of dairy products were being flung from the escaping van and our car was beginning to look like it came out second-best in an elementary-school cafeteria food fight. A pint of thick cream impacted on the windshield and the wipers only smeared it instead of clearing it completely. I hit the washers and turned it into a sticky mess. Grimes grabbed the radio. "One Mary Thirteen," he yelled, announcing our call sign so everyone would know it was me and Grimes in the milk-mobile when we got back to the station. "We're under attack...sort of...where's our backup?"

The radio crackled with giggles. "One Mary Thirteen, this is Air Three, we have the suspect vehicle in visual range," Bud Jenkins was Air Three's pilot and a terrible practical joker. By tomorrow this chase would be national news. I groaned aloud, wondering if it could possibly get any worse. "Uh...One Mary Thirteen, be advised there are four Code Twenty-Sixes approaching from the South up Santa Ana." I muttered a word

that I usually save for sporting events. Code Twenty-Six was the department's code for paranormals. That could only mean-

"Hi dad!" Dannan's voice rang out. She was riding on Surfboy's back as he flew past. Alongside of them was Toxic, cute as a button if you discounted the cloud of accumulated pollution on which she rode. Johnny Go ran beneath them, electricity crackling between his arms and legs. Eighty miles an hour was only a brisk stroll to him - he could do over two hundred easy. Together, they were the Young Guns, and that meant trouble with a ten-story "T."

Toxic. Surfboy. Johnny Go. And of course, Bombshell. None of them sounded like the superheroes I remembered when I was a kid, and certainly none of them dressed like the heroes of my youth. Surfboy wore wraparound sunglasses, an off-the-rack wetsuit with the logo of whatever company was sponsoring them this week - I think it was a skateboard manufacturer - and a pair of Army surplus jump boots. Toxic dressed like a Goth, had a pierced lip, nose, and eyebrow, and short spiky hair that looked like it hadn't been clean in awhile. Johnny Go favored Nikes, goggles, and the low-friction suits worn by Olympic speed skaters. Dannan preferred to fight her battles in hip-hugging blue jeans with flared legs and a matching denim top that was barely bigger than a sports bra, ostensibly because denim was a more durable fabric than most in combat situations.

The four youths overtook us in a matter of seconds and surrounded the speeding truck. As they approached, the boy in the back of the van spooked and stopped hurling dairy products at us. He hurried back into the front seat. The driver began to weave the van, trying to keep the young heroes from catching up, but to no avail. Once Johnny Go reached the side of the van, he was able to climb onto it using his adhesive abilities, and stuck there like a spider on a wall. Toxic levitated her cloud in front of the truck and began to fill the cabin with smog that she called out of the air molecule by molecule. Surfboy flew over the top of the truck, Dannan riding him like his namesake. She looked like she was getting ready to jump onto the roof. I resisted the temptation to shut my eyes. The truck swerved suddenly towards some parked cars as the driver gave in to panic and started to lose control. Johnny Go bailed off a second later, and Toxic drifted clear. The van sideswiped three cars in a row, rocking madly from side to side as it hurtled past. The driver over-corrected and nearly turned it sideways. Somehow he managed to regain control but at a price. The quick changes in direction catapulted his friend out of the step-door like a human missile. Johnny Go was able to catch him in mid-air. He wasn't strong enough to stop the young man's flight, but was able to deflect his impact enough that it wouldn't be fatal. In the process, he delivered a shock of

about forty-six thousand volts that he produced naturally as a side effect of his speedy metabolism. As we tore past in our stained and dented cruiser, the man slumped to the ground, where Toxic proceeded to wrap the man up in a gummy substance that she drew out of the ground. Dannan yelled something to Surfboy, who nodded and sped up passing the truck altogether. I didn't understand her plan until I saw her leap lightly to the ground, rolling and turning to face the onrushing van.

"No!" I cried out as the van hit her, expecting to see her body flung away by the impact. Grimes grabbed the radio.

"Air Three, One Mary Thirteen. What happened?"

"Bombshell's hanging off the front of the van, Thirteen. She's got her hands through the hood - Oh my God!" There was a terrific sound of metal tearing and machinery breaking. The truck immediately started slowing. In an instant, I knew what she had done, as the entire engine of the delivery van bounced onto the pavement, digging a long furrow in the macadam and skidding to a smoking halt. "The engine," yelled Jenkins over the radio. "She ripped out the entire motherloving engine!" He regained his composure momentarily and announced that the chase was coming to a halt because the suspects' vehicle had lost motive power.

Within an hour, it was pretty well cleaned up. The suspects were both shaken up and had been taken to a local

hospital. The Young Guns had given their statements, as had Grimes and myself. My supervisor had already cleared the Young Guns of any wrong-doing, stating that they had brought the chase to a halt without endangering any innocents and had managed to apprehend both suspects into the bargain. It all felt to me like dental surgery without anesthesia. I couldn't believe that they were just going to walk away without any consequences. Dannan could see the steam practically rising off my head and gave me a wide berth, saying she'd see me later. She and the rest of the 'Guns left without fanfare, television cameras tracking them until they were out of sight.

Grimes looked me up and down, and then suggested we go get a fresh cup of coffee and then go fill out our reports somewhere quiet. The rest of the shift passed quietly, except for occasional involuntary growls from somewhere deep in my throat.

Dinner was a tense affair. I had managed to avoid blowing my top at my daughter, and she managed to avoid mouthing off. Alisa sat between us, working hard at keeping topics neutral. Later that night, I was sure, I would appreciate her efforts. For the time being, though, it wasn't helping my mood any. Finally, I pushed my plate away, folded my hands, and leaned my elbows on the table. I had been debating for hours the best way to approach this subject with Dannan.

"Dannan, do you know why I never used my powers? Why I never became a superhero?"

Her eyes narrowed and she set down her fork, immediately on the defensive. "No," she allowed guardedly.

"In a nutshell, because there aren't any rules governing it." I was ready to elaborate, but held off, banking on her curiosity. I wasn't disappointed.

"What's that supposed to mean?" She leaned back, tipping her chair on its rear legs and nonchalantly began cracking her knuckles - something I hated. Alisa gently reminded her that the privilege of sitting at her table included the keeping of all four legs of a chair on the ground at all times. Dannan mumbled that she was sorry and tipped forward again. I always admired the way Alisa handled Dannan, especially when she was being a difficult teenager.

"How does a superhero know what laws to enforce? What punishment is appropriate? And what about due process? When you choose to put on a costume and 'fight crime', as you call it, you are effectively ignoring the laws of this country."

"Oh, please spare me," Dannan pushed her chair back to stand up.

"Please, hear me out, Dannan. This is not a chew-out session. I just want you to understand why I made the decision I did, and maybe it will give you something to think about. Ten

minutes, then you can go anywhere you want. Fair?" All things considered, I wanted to scream at her and shake her until she saw the light. In that respect, I felt I was doing fairly well when she sat down, closed off and unreceptive. "Those two guys today, they will probably walk. Sure, we can charge them with some minor things, but when they were stopped by paranormals, that opened up a whole can of legal worms. We don't have laws in this country - yet - about paranormals using their powers on normal humans, but every time there is a case like this one, new precedents are set. You could make your acts of heroism illegal without even intending to. Do you want to do that to your friends? Your community?"

I saw the little line appear between her eyebrows that showed she was actually thinking about what I was saying. Her body language still conveyed extreme disinterest, but her ears were open.

"Nobody can really oppose a paranormal but another paranormal. When that happens, things tend to degenerate into slugfests where property damage and injured bystanders are almost common. The only recourse normals have is to try and sue the combatants, and so far only the largest organizations have even offered any settlements. If somebody sues you for a half million dollars, what are you going to do? If you go to court, you will lose because the court system in this country is

unsympathetic to wild cards like paranormals. If you skip out, you can become a fugitive, and suddenly you are running from those who you wanted to ally with." I stared across the table, unclasping my hands. "Dannan, I don't ever want to have to be called to take you down."

For the first time since I started talking, she actually looked at me, a spark of comprehension somewhere in her blue eyes.

"I avoided the path you are setting out upon, because I saw these things I've tried to explain to you. I didn't want to make the one mistake that could hurt everyone I know and love. Even those heroes who are doing such good work around the country could be seriously hampered simply by some clever legislation. Right now it's illegal to be a drug addict. The law actually penalizes someone for what they are. What if they pass a law making it illegal to be a paranormal? What recourse would we have? Dannan, that's what the Nazis did to the Jews before World War II."

"So what are you saying, dad? You want me to quit?" She pouted.

Yes! I screamed silently. "No, I'm just asking you to really think about all the factors involved in your lifestyle and what it could mean for you, for our family, and for the entire country. It's a lot of weight to place on your

shoulders, even as strong as you are. It's a lot of weight for me. And I didn't want to chance letting that weight come crashing down. I chose to make a difference in peoples' lives; I became a cop. You don't have to be a cop, but you don't have to be a superhero either. Think about it, okay, hon?"

Dannan stood up, still pouting but more subdued than defensive. "Okay, dad. Can I go now?"

"Anywhere you want, Danny. That was the agreement. And, Dan?" She stopped, halfway down the hallway.

"Yeah?"

"You might think about a mask. I don't want to have to beat down a bunch of disgruntled perps here at the house who got beat up by my little girl."