

## **The Strange Tales of Maxwell Zoelegger**

### **On the Case with Agent Johnson**

**By: Joseph Rollins**

The Arizona desert was hot. I say that like it's some sort of profound fact that no one else is aware of. Most people know it's hot in the Arizona desert, and they may even know how high the temperature can reach. But people don't know what it feels like to pound the pavement on a 118-degree day, driving between tiny towns built out of sun-bleached pallets and rusted sheets of corrugated iron.

I had wandered this desert for forty days and forty nights; ever since Zoelegger slipped through my fingers in L.A. At least it felt like something epic, something lifted straight from the Old Testament.

Maybe it was the hot air that blasted into the Crown Vic every time I opened the door. Sometimes when I stood up out of the car the heat made me sit back down in the front seat and wait a minute before standing up again.

But I've dealt with rough environments on the job before. Maybe the problem was the two idiots in the back seat.

"Can I sit up front?" I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw my lackey, Agent Blue, staring back at me.

"Not until you can get along with your sister and agree on who gets to sit up here," I replied.

"We can agree," said Agent Green.

“Oh really?” I said. “Then who gets to sit up here first?”

They both answered me at the same time: “I do.” In the mirror I could see the Wonder Twins turn their heads and glare at each other.

“Blue, Green, no fighting now,” I said.

“We have names,” said Green. “I would appreciate it if you showed us the slightest bit of respect and called us by them instead Blue and Green.”

They were the same person; stock characters pulled right out of a bad noir film. Same suit and haircut, same thick skull and thicker neck, same holier-than-thou attitude.

I lit a cigarette and cracked the window. The air outside seemed impossible to breath if it didn't first pass through an air conditioner. It heated you up from the inside out, pushing to escape and not liking being drawn back in.

“Do you have to smoke another one?”

“Yes.” At that point the two monkeys-in-suits in the back seat ignored me and decided to talk to each other.

“He acts like he doesn't respect us,” said Green.

“That's because he doesn't respect us,” said Blue.

“Why do you think that is?”

“I read his psych profile,” said Blue. “He's afraid to be real with us because his last partner was killed on the job. The agency even changed this guy's service record in arrears. Turns out he was completely crooked. Didn't come out until after he died.”

Blue flashed me a big toothy grin in the mirror. I finished my smoke and dropped the butt over my shoulder into the back seat.

“What the fuck,” yelled Blue. “You just threw your cigarette butt in my lap.”

“Did I?” I said. “You better hurry up and get it out the window. I can smell burning hair.”

Blue pinched the cigarette butt and held it out in front of him like he was holding a dirty diaper. “Roll down the window.”

I kept driving and ignored Blue’s request.

“Roll down the fucking window, Agent Johnson,” yelled Blue.

“Why don’t you roll it down?” I asked.

“Because this is a retired cop car, you idiot. There is no way to roll down the windows from the back seat.”

I pushed one of the buttons on my door panel.

“You rolled down my window,” said Green. “Roll down the other one.”

“I think it’s broken,” I replied.

“Push the other button.”

I rolled Green’s window back up. “Like that?”

“No, you rolled my window up. Try again.”

I rolled Green’s window back down. “Better?”

“No, that’s the wrong window again.”

“Just pass the butt over and throw it out.”

Blue swung his arm over to Green with his elbow locked like a mechanical loader. I saw Green in the mirror take it and flip the live grenade over his shoulder.

I couldn’t resist having a little more fun, so I rolled up Green’s window just as the cigarette got there. It hit the glass and bounced onto the floor, making Green shriek like a six-year-old in a Halloween fun house.

I rolled down Blue’s window. “I got the other window working guys. Just flick it out.”

I could smell the burnt carpet in the back seat. Green reached down at his feet and started feeling around for the butt.

“Ow, son-of-a-bitch,” he yelled, sticking his fingers in his mouth.

“Did you get it out,” I asked. Both men stared back at me in the mirror.

Green managed to pick up the cigarette and hand it over to Blue. I decided to be nice and let Blue flick it out the window.

“It’s gone,” muttered Blue. I rolled the window back up and kept driving.

“Do you think he did that on purpose,” asked Green.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Blue. “He’s either really stupid, or a malicious asshole. Either way we’re in trouble.”

At that moment my phone rang.

“Agent Johnson,” I said, pressing the phone to the side of my face.

“Hi Agent Johnson, this is Sheila. I’m a dispatcher here in Quartzite. We met when you were here talking to the chief.” She paused, probably waiting for some acknowledgment that I knew her. I didn’t remember her, so I didn’t respond.

“Anyways,” said Sheila, “you asked us to call you if anything odd came through dispatch.” She paused again; I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to say.

“Did something odd come through dispatch?”

“Yes, just now. I think it might be that guy with the long name that you’re looking for.”

I eased the Crown Vic off the road and onto the gravel shoulder. “Go ahead Sheila,” I said. “Tell me what happened.”

“There’s this trailer park, Cactus Shade Mobile Home Community, about forty miles north of Quartzite. Normally La Paz County Sheriffs handle them because the park is out of our

jurisdiction. Anyways, some meth-head blew up his trailer and now there's a bunch of weird orange smoke coming out of it. The sheriff on the scene isn't sure if it's from cooking meth; he really doesn't know what it is. He called for a hazmat team and the call got routed through me."

"Sounds like something we should check out," I muttered while fumbling through the glove box for a pen and paper. Sheila filled me on the details and gave me directions to the park. I turned and looked at the two buffoons in the back seat.

"We got a lead?" asked Green.

"Yep," I said, not even trying to keep the smile off my face. "Someone blew up their science fair project and now there's a ton of weird orange smoke around this guy's home."

"Sounds like our genius."

I dropped the Crown Vic into drive and peeled out, chewing up the miles at a record pace.

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We turned off the highway an hour later onto a two-lane dirt road. It was the only way in or out of the Cactus Shade Trailer Park.

We followed a trail of orange smoke down the road that left no doubt we were heading in the right direction. It was a thick tube of smoke, too thick to see through and floating a couple feet above the sand. It looked like the body of a snake that never touched the ground. The smoke ran alongside the dirt road for several miles leading us to Cactus Shade, like it was trying to hitch a ride out of the park.

The meat-heads in the back seat got bouncy and giggly when they saw the smoke.

“At least we know we’re going the right way,” said Green.

“Yep,” said Blue. “Only an egghead like Zoelegger could fuck up like this.”

The entrance to Cactus Shade Mobile Home Community had a neon sign with an actual Indian on it. He was aiming a bow and arrow while riding a horse over a white background with turquoise and orange stripes. The sign was something you might see at a Route 66 motel in the 1950s.

The scene inside Cactus Shade was chaos. Firemen and guys in airtight, plastic hazmat suits wandered around without any apparent direction. Cops were everywhere, wearing the tan police uniforms you find in backwater, Andy Griffith jurisdictions. The sun was setting and the emergency crews were setting up enough extra lights to play a full nine innings.

The trailer that blew up hadn’t actually exploded. All the windows were shattered. Orange smoke tentacles extended out of the missing panes of glass like the tentacles of an octopus. They disappeared in every direction, stretching for miles towards the horizon, like the orange snake that ran alongside the dirt road.

A uniformed deputy approached me as soon as I stepped out of the Crown Vic. The roads inside the community were hard packed desert dirt. I had learned that it didn’t matter how hard packed the earth was in Arizona, the dirt was so dry it was always in the air and the wind was aggravating my allergies.

“Sir, I’m afraid you can’t be here. This is a crime scene, and until we know what we’re dealing with, we’re treating the smoke as a hazmat level-two substance.”

“That’s alright, officer,” said Blue, stepping out from behind me. “We’re federal agents.” He and Green walked away before the cop could respond.

The deputy looked me over look like he was a judge in a beauty pageant and I wore a bikini. “Who are you?”

“Federal Agent Samuel Johnson.”

“What department of the federal government are you with?”

“Yes, I am,” I replied. “Who’s in charge here?”

“Sheriff Bradley. That’s him over there with clipboard.”

I nodded my thanks and walked over to the big, round sheriff. He had a handsome, clean cut face, shiny with sweat underneath a brown cowboy hat.

“Sheriff Bradley?”

“Who are you?” The sheriff didn’t look up from his clipboard.

“Federal Agent Samuel Johnson. I’m looking for the individual responsible for this mess.”

Sheriff Bradley lowered his clipboard and lifted his nose so he could look down on me like he was Boss Hogg. At least he tried to; I was taller.

“What agency are you with, Agent Johnson?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m looking for this man, sheriff.” I held up the three by five picture of Zoelegger I kept in my shirt pocket.

Sheriff Bradley leaned in and squinted at the picture. “That’s the idiot that caused this mess.”

“Where is he now?”

“Sitting over there,” said the sheriff, pointing across the street.

“All I see is a woman sitting on a plastic landscaping rock wearing a pink robe and fuzzy bunny slippers.”

The sheriff put his nose down and focused on his clipboard. “Take another look, Federal Agent Samuel Johnson. That’s the man in your picture. He was buck naked when we arrived, so one of my deputies grabbed the robe and slippers from the trunk of his car. We keep them there for domestic abuse victims.”

“Why was he naked?”

“He said his clothes were contaminated from the explosion, so he took them off. What does the federal government want with him, anyway?”

“He’s wanted on charges of treason and theft of national security secrets.”

Sheriff Bradley scratched behind his neck with a pen. “You’re saying that the idiot that blew up his meth lab did all that?”

“His name is Dr. Maxwell Zoelegger. He’s not an idiot and I doubt he was cooking meth. In fact, he is an exceptionally dangerous man with a very high I.Q.”

“You’re telling me that the man we found buck naked in a cloud of orange smoke, the man now sitting on a rock in a fuzzy pink robe and bunny slippers, is a dangerous fugitive being hunted by the federal government.”

“I feel like we’re going around in circles, sheriff.”

“I just wanted to be clear.”

“Yes,” I replied. “They appear to be the same man.”

“You’re welcome to him,” said Sheriff Bradley. “But you’ll have to arrest him in front of the state penitentiary after he serves his time for manufacturing a controlled substance and

reckless endangerment of these people's lives." He swept his pen from left to right, pointing at puddles of clustered residents and emergency personnel.

"I'm sorry, sheriff, but federal law supersedes state in this matter. I'm taking him with me tonight."

"Not if you don't have a court order signed by a federal judge." The sheriff paused and gave me a chance to play my hand. "No court order? Then I'll be taking him to the county lockup once we get this mess under control."

I could get the right piece of paper, but it would take a day or two. For the moment, Sheriff Bradley had me beat.

"Can I at least interview my man before you take him into custody?" I asked.

"I guess that would be alright." The sheriff waved to an old man in a tan cop's uniform. "Schneider, would you please escort my friend here across the street so he can ask the perp a few questions about his associations with Al-Qaeda. Get a couple of the younger recruits to help you keep an eye on them both."

Schneider was the oldest police officer I ever met. He smelled like he lived and perspired every day of his life in the desert, but only had enough clean water to rinse off the top layer of filth once a month.

Before we got across the street, a commotion inside a sea of tan uniforms caught my attention. Blue and Green were shouting at a handful of good-ole-boys with badges.

"His name Maxwell Zoelegger. I am a federal agent and I demand that you bring him to me."

Blue shoved an officer in the chest, knocking him back against a second cop. Someone knocked Blue to the ground, causing Green to start swinging at the officers. In a matter of

seconds it was an all-out, barroom brawl as a pair of young officers stepped up and started throwing big hay-maker punches. Blue and Green dodged and weaved easily and laid the two cops out cold.

I was impressed watching my agents go a couple rounds with these deputies. Granted they had nothing but rocks in their heads, but they knew how to handle themselves in a fight.

A smaller commotion in the direction of Zoelegger caught my eye. A bunch of kids cut off my view of the doctor. They were yelling and shoving each other. I started walking towards the kids; something wasn't right. Kids usually fight dirty, biting and kicking and pinching. These kids looked like they were afraid to hurt each other.

I broke into a run, plowing through the crowds and confusion. I was in front of the fake landscaping rock moments later. Zoelegger and his fuzzy pink robe and bunny slippers were gone.

I searched Cactus Shade Trailer Park for twenty minutes, combing the narrow dirt streets and questioning the residents of the trailer park. I was quickly convinced that no one there would willingly harbor Zoelegger; he must have fled the park to take his chances in the dark desert.

I returned to Blue and Green and grabbed each one by an ear, dragging them to a quiet alley between to trailers.

“What were you thinking? Your idiotic behavior allowed Zoelegger to get away.”

“He would have run anyways,” said Blue. “From what I heard, a bunch of kids helped him escape.” He stared at me defiantly while Green stared down at his shoes.

I stuck my finger in Blue's face: “If you weren't so busy playing macho-man, we would have seen him run and we could've caught him before he got over the fence that circles the park.”

Deputy Schneider interrupted us, tugging on his ear and fidgeting with his other hand.

“Tell me it’s good news,” I said, already knowing the answer.

“Sorry, sir,” said the officer. “Sheriff Bradley says he can spare four deputies to search the desert for the perp. He says making sure the residents here are safe is his first priority.”

The orange smoke was still creeping out of Zoelegger’s blown out windows, the unbroken tentacles reaching further into the desert.

I got on the phone, eventually wrangling a pair of helicopters from the naval base outside Yuma. They picked up me and Blue and Green an hour later. We searched the desert, looking down on scrub brush and tumbleweeds until noon the next day. We never found any sign of the good doctor.

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