Deadly Decoy

by Pocholo Peralta

The prototype of a small, training plane of Capt. William Morayta was almost finished. Almost after a week more before the awaited test flight. He was working on it when Army General Deramos, an acquaintance, paid a visit.
‘The door was closed', General Deramos abruptly said. ‘But since what you need to know is urgent, I let myself in without knocking'.
Captain William Morayta was unsure how to reply so he just stared at the arrogant Deramos and waited. The prototype of a small, training plane of Capt. William Morayta was almost finished. Almost after a week more before the awaited test flight.
‘What you're doing is good for the county's economy. But someone up there doesn't like what you're doing,' the general continued.
‘What are you trying to tell me? Do you want me to scrap my project when it's almost finished?'
‘I just don't want you to get in trouble.'
‘So what would you do if I go on with this?'
‘Up to you. I just came to give you a friendly advice and I hope you listen. Good day captain.' Deramos turned then walked away.
Now why would someone from high would want Morales to abandon his project when it was good for the economy? Morayta's joy with his project now turned into worry or even dread. But he wasn't a pushover. No one could scare him from going on.

Carolyn Morayta was a recent widow and is now a client of Joe Picasso. She's fifty-one and was married to Captain William Morayta. Was because her husband Will just recently died from a bullet in his head. And that's why Mrs. Morayta was talking to Joe P now.
Capt. Morayta was a pilot of Madrid Airways. He was fifty-four when he died. Two years earlier, he started building a prototype of a light two-seater plane. His project was a success. The plane passed the test flight. He parked the plane where he built and designed it—in a hangar owned by Madrid Airways.

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The next day during the celebration party, The Moraytas and some of their guests went to the hangar (of course the guests would like to see the successful plane). When they arrived at the hangar, there wasn't any plane there. Of course the captain was shocked. After a moment of shock, he told his guests to return to his house with his wife while he ‘clarify this mystery'.
After everyone was gone, Morayta asked every employee of Madrid Airways : ‘Where's my plane?'
Nobody knows. Of course everyone was busy doing their job.
The next day, Captain Morayta was found dead somewhere between his house and the hangar.

‘A whole damn plane is missing and the only damn clue we have is a 9mm bullet,' Picasso said to Victor Bravo whom he calls Torv. He's his partner at the Picasso Investigation Agency.
They questioned the guard assigned on the night of the plane's disappearance. The guard said he saw two men—one in a pilot's uniform, the other in a Madrid Airways uniform. They drove the plane away. He wasn't sure if the plane took-off or not.
Stealing a plane had become easy too in this new millennium.

Joe P is fairly ruggedly handsome. Medium-build at five foot nine. In contrast, his partner Bravo is neatly handsome. Taller than Joe P at five foot eleven but with less muscle. Joe P is forty-one while Bravo is thirty-seven.
‘Got any idea Torv?'
‘Maybe it was stolen so that the design could be copied. A friend of Morayta told us that the design wasn't expensive so the plane would be good for mass production. Maybe the captain threatened the guy who killed him.' A pause. Then, ‘What about the general Deramos Mrs. Morayta said warned her husband.'
‘We got no evidence of the meeting. Maybe the general was too foxy

as to avoid any witnesses or threaten them. He denied ‘warning' Morayta about the plane.'

On his bed and ready to sleep, Joe P recalled the word ‘design' mentioned by Bravo earlier. Design. Of course the design would be on sheets of paper. Blueprints they call them. So what to do about them even if the blueprints were produced? Seconds of time passed. Then BANG! Finally a great idea was in Joe's head.

Next day at Joe P's office.
‘We gotta see Mrs. Morayta and hope that the plane blueprints are still in her house.' Joe told Bravo. The house was just about two miles away. Or fifty minutes away.
When Mrs. Morayta met them at the door, Joe said, 'Good morning ma'am. Could we come inside and ask a few questions?' 'Sure. Of course. Come in.' Mrs. M replied. When they were all seated, Bravo said, 'We need to know if you still possess the design, the blueprints of the plane.' 'The design? Let me see if I could find it in Will's room. It must still be there.' She stood up and left.
After a minute, she came back carrying nothing. Oh oh. Joe and Bravo glanced at each other. But she announced: 'I think you should come and take a look yourselves. They're too heavy for me to carry alone anyway.' Bingo!
Some of the papers were on a table. Some still inside a drawer. But it was definitely the plane design. They gathered all the papers and went back to the living room.
'Do you want a drink or a snack?' Mrs. M asked. Both men only wanted water.
'Now this is my idea ma'am. What I plan to do is bait the plane thieves. I suggest we build another plane with this same plan or blueprints. I believe the thieves or the murderer of your husband will try to stop or steal the project again. When they do, we'll be able to identify them.' Joe paused then went on.
‘Now this plan is a gamble and would cost you as high as .8 million

dollars depending on when the criminals would react for us to catch them. If you decide to continue with this plan, you just tell us. If you decide not to, then I'm afraid we have to end this investigation. This plan is our last chance. The only thing left for us to go on.
‘We have to go now ma'am…'
‘Wait,' Mrs. M said. ‘I want this to go on. I have two sons and a daughter who can help me with the expenses. Raising money wouldn't be too hard. I want the investigation to continue.'
‘If that's what you want ma'am, then we'll continue. I need you to give me all the contacts of the captain. Friends, acquaintances, everyone in his address book. We'll come back for it later. Remember to keep the plan confidential ma'am. We don't want to waste time and money.'
‘Of course. I understand.'
‘Then we'll see you later ma'am.'

Picasso hired a different contractor to build the ‘bait' plane. If he used the same builders Capt. Morayta hired, the plane thief would smell the trap. Since Madrid Airways honored and sympathized with their fallen captain, The company confidentially cooperated with Joe P. They let him use their facility. Of course, they used a different hangar too this time.
To further avoid being detected by the perp they were trying to bait, Joe sub-contracted another Private eye and friend Elvis Pico to pose as one of the plane mechanics. Elvis was at the hangar only once a week just to ‘show face.' All the other metal workers don't know the real reason why they're building the plane.

A little more than two months later, Elvis informed Joe.
‘Someone's nosing around. Sometimes in army uniform, sometimes in civvies.' Elvis was able to steal a digital camera shot of the soldier later and gave the picture to Joe.
Bravo tailed the man until he learned that the soldier was a Deramos aide. Surprise, surprise! Time for Joe P to join the legwork.

Through one of Joe's friends in the army, he learned that the soldier's name is Brett Almonte. A captain.
The hangar where the second plane was being built is now in constant watch 24/7 (twenty-four hours everyday). The blueprints of the plane was returned and kept safe everyday in one of Joe's safe house from the hangar. The foreman named Gary Mastela who carries the blueprints was tailed everyday, sometimes by Joe or Bravo or another PI.
The foreman and the prints were also now targets for the perps. On the bright side, also baits now!
Joe and his men were now awaiting and expecting a major move from the bad guys.

Six days later, a major break came. Joe made a background check of a man meeting with Gen. Deramos. The man turned out to be an executive of Sierra Leone Aire named Conrad Espares.
‘It gets more interesting. From top to bottom, everyone in SLA are left leaning.' Joe said. ‘Communists or socialists, whatever.'
‘So it's a political war?' asked Bravo.
‘Or economic. Or both. If SLA murdered Morayta for politics, he was also killed as an economic rival because if his plane was ever mass-produced, Madrid Air would surely shoot up financially. I don't have to tell you that most political murders are done for money. Only a few crazy idealists kill for pure politics.'
‘Hey man! I think we're going big time with this if it's politics. National politics isn't always just national you know.'
‘Yeah. Mostly it's international. We might have to send legmen abroad. Even hire foreign agents… wow.' Joe said wistfully.

Joe failed to buy crime books earlier because there was no time left to do that. It was his longtime habit to read before sleeping.
He found a stray book by Emily Carr—a journal. He scanned the book until he reached this passage :
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'...perhaps some day radio will be so powerful (probably she meant phones too) that battlefield screams and the suck of sinking ships with their despairing chorus of the drowning will reach our ears... if the air were filled with sobbing nations, one could not bear it... when I told my maid there was a war, she laughed. It made me very angry. It was so with the two maids before this one... here was some new half- joke to explore and they sniffed around it, pleasurably excited on any change in the monotony of life that would make for variety.'
True prophecy and comedy in one article! Sometimes, it pays to read stray books thought Joe!
Two days later, while the foreman was walking towards his car, someone approached him on the stealth. Joe was watching them, hidden nearby. When the stranger came shoulder to shoulder with Mastela, he reached for his jacket pocket.
‘Hey!' Joe shouted at them. His gun already in his left hand, he ran towards them about twenty feet away.
When the man saw Joe, he scampered away.
Joe started walking towards Mastela and tucked his gun in the back of his waistband.
‘What the blazes was that all about?' the puzzled Mastela asked.
‘That man just attempted to rob you of the blueprints.' M glanced at the papers in his hand. ‘I'm Joe Picasso. Me and my men are always tailing you so don't worry.'
‘Hey Joe! You might have just saved my life.'
‘Just part of the job. It would be good for you if you keep this to yourself—my identification and what we're doing. If the bad guys learn about me, they would be more cautious and harder to pin. If you're not carrying, I suggest you arm yourself. For extra protection you know.'
‘Sure. Whatever you say. You wanna drink somewhere?'
‘Thanks. But I'm still not free yet.'
‘So these papers I'm carryin' is a bomb huh?'
Joe just shrugged then walked away.

Joe informed Bravo of what just happened.

‘So now our cover's blown.' Bravo said.
‘Maybe. If the perp recognized my face. Or remembered it.'
‘Then you must quit tailing Mastela yourself. Let me and the rest of our guys do that.'
‘Right. But the next try could be bloody.'

The next try turned bloody all right. This time, there were two men waiting for Mastela two doors away from his house. Before Mastela could enter his driveway, the men blocked his way with their car. The passenger jumped out holding a gun. He pointed it at Mastela and ordered him to hand over the blueprints. Mastela couldn't do anything but do that.
This time, it was Elvis Pico who was watching, hidden in his car. He got out and shouted at the goon. The goon fired at him. Mastela took advantage of the distraction. He got halfway out of his car and fired successively at the goon who tried to run but fell down.
The other one inside the car shot at Mastela while Elvis shot at him mainly to divert attention. The car's windshield shattered a bit. The driver goon decided it was a no-contest and sped away.

‘Both Mastela and Elvis were unharmed,' Bravo told Joe. ‘And surprise. The perp Mastela shot is an AWOL army. Probably dying at the hospital.'
‘That would make Deramos worried and edgy.'
‘And our cover blown. Now that the LPPD is investigating, it would be a miracle if our office isn't mentioned in the news.'

Deramos flew in his own helicopter to a nearby island. So Joe P couldn't do a tail job on that. Not enough resources or too expensive.
Conrad Espares is an executive or maybe the owner of Sierra Leone Aire. He asked the general for this meeting. They were now seated inside Espares' mansion.
Although handsome, the exec's face was grim.

‘You told me your men are professionals. How come they can't even snatch some f_____g papers from one man?'
‘Not exactly one man Conrad. They tried two times. Both times, Two different intruders barged in and fouled up the jobs.'
‘And you think that's coincidence? I expect you know who the intruders were. Or am I wrong?'
‘I was waiting for the news if they would be identified. But I can learn from the cops fast when I get home.'
‘You better learn fast then. The police or those intruders might trace your two idiots to you—and then to me. I won't risk my name because of your unprofessionalism.' Deramos wondered if that was a threat.
‘Conrad, what happened was just pure bad luck to us even if the intruders were pros. They didn't expect the foreman would fire while the intruder got them distracted.'
‘It's still incompetence to me Deramos. Now if you don't have anything more to say.'

General Deramos had been missing for two days.
‘Are the police on the search?' asked Bravo.
‘If not, they will be soon,' said Joe.
‘You think he was silenced?'
‘Or maybe he sensed a threat and went hiding in another country…
‘Do you remember a case five years ago about another air company? Or two airlines. A group of employees formed their own airline. When the firm started to rake in money, two stockholders and a staff got murdered one by one. The case was solved when one of their stockholders was caught. He was killing the other holders so that when he holds the biggest share, he could control the company and make deals under the table. He was even suspected of taking a bribe from their mother airline to sabotage their new airline. So that when the new one becomes bankrupt, their mother company could buy it. The suspicion wasn't proven true though.'
‘Well, compared to this new case now, that seemed small-time.'
‘Yeah. You know, I've got a feeling things will start running fast now,'

Joe said.
‘Yeah. Me too.'

Since most of the plane parts already had duplicates and spares, and its whole plan already edited perfect, it took just about four months before it was almost finished.
Two days before the plane was finished, something fast happened.
‘You better get here fast Joe,' Elvis said on the mobile phone. ‘A Madrid Airways van is parked near the hangar. The Madrid office told me it wasn't supposed to be there and I spotted two guys casing the area.'
‘Fifteen minutes.' Joe said and hung up. It was 9.20 AM.

When Joe and Bravo were about three meters from the hangar, there was a man pointing a gun at a security guard while someone was driving the plane out of the hangar.
Joe parked his car in front of the plane to block it. The goon on the ground shot the guard at the head. Elvis ordered the goon to drop it but the goon swung his gun. Elvis shot him in the face. At the same time, the goon in the plane stood up and fired at Joe. Joe and Bravo rolled out of the car. Elvis wisely ran for cover—he was too exposed. Bravo got behind the car and returned fire while Joe rolled sideways and took aim. Moving now in synchronized telepathy. Like a rehearsed move. When the goon raised his head, Joe fired twice and connected. The goon slumped twisted on the seat.

They waited for the police then Joe, Bravo and Elvis were taken to a LPPD station for questioning.
Colonel Sarmento, the station chief, was a big man. Broad shouldered and about six feet two. He was sixty-two.
‘Who do you think you are making trouble in my area without asking permission first? He addressed the three PI's seated in front of him.
Joe explained to him about baiting the plane snatchers.
‘So you see sir, we didn't intentionally, I mean deliberately tried to ignore you.' Joe said. There was silence for a moment.

Then Sarmento said, ‘I heard one of you is a Bravo.'
‘That's me sir,' Bravo said.
‘You related to the retired chief?'
‘My uncle sir.'
‘Hmm.' The colonel paused, scanning the three detectives. ‘You can go unpunished this once but the next time, I'll go for your badges. Be aware that the police are now into this. I expect you to coordinate with us. You can go now.'
The three stood up.
‘Hey Bravo!'
‘Yes sir?'
‘Tell your uncle I say hello.'
‘No problem sir.'
Because of the incident, the plane building was postponed and delayed.

‘The two dead guys were AWOL soldiers too.' Joe said.
‘Smells like a private army,' said Bravo. ‘Means that Deramos is still around and commanding.'
‘Maybe not. We still don't know if their connected to Deramos.'
They learned later they weren't.

Now Joe was stumped. Deramos was still missing. The dead AWOL soldiers can't be traced to anybody else. The only lead left was the exec of Sierra Leone Aire himself. And they still have no solid evidence against him.
Suddenly, there was news that SLA was mass-producing a light trainer plane.

When Bravo arrived at the office, he was surprised to se Joe smiling like a monkey. Joe almost never smiled while working.
‘Hey man. I think I just found a way to nail the bastard.' Joe greeted.
‘Yeah? So tell me.'
Joe told him. Then phoned the Federal Bureau.

The next day, two Fed agents and Joe went to Espares' office at SLA. They brought Morayta's blueprints.
‘We need to see the blueprints of the plane you're manufacturing,' one of the feds said to Espares as they flashed their ID's.
‘May I know what's this all about?' Espares asked.
Joe said, ‘It's about the murder of colonel Morayta.'
Espares' face whitened. The feds seemed glad.
‘So who's Col. Morayta?'
‘We need to see the prints first.'
Espares picked up a phone and said, ‘Bring me the plan of the new plane.'
We all waited in silence. The blueprints were brought.
‘May we use your desk sir?' A fed asked.
‘Sure. Go ahead.' Espares looked puzzled.
The feds spread out both Morales' and Espares' prints and compared them. While the feds were busy, Joe slyly watched Mr. E. who was getting paler and paler while he was getting gladder and gladder. Espares might get desperate and do something dangerous. After more than a minute, one fed said, ‘Got it. The prints are the same.'
‘The other fed said to Espares, ‘You're under arrest.'
‘What?!'
Joe said, ‘You stole Morayta's design. You thought we were building a different model because the crew was all new so you thought you were safe. Then you had Deramos killed (a bluff) because we were getting hot on his trail and he was goofing up. You blundered when you manufactured Morayta's plane.' Joe glanced at the feds. ‘I thought my bait failed. It worked a beauty after all.' Joe Picasso said proudly.