

26 Seconds

Dried paint sprayed off the wooden plane like angry bees ascending from their hive. The humming sound of the workers' paint scrappers filled the storage house. Until one called, "Hey! Hey, look at this." At the wave of his arms, the workers crowded around to see the plane's under skin.

"What's that?" someone voiced the question that everyone else was mulling over.

"Not what. *Who.*" Those three words never left the worker's minds, though it was just a name penciled into the workmanship of the *Spruce Goose*. The name also would just have to be lost again under the new coat of paint. The name: Alex Rainer.

1947 in Long Beach Harbor, California.

"Steady." Hughes kept his voice calm and commanding as he shifted the handles in the cockpit.

Stress and excitement coursed through Alex's bloodstream. This was it. This was what they've been waiting for. The flight of the biggest military plane in the world!

"Steady." Hughes told himself. Or was he talking to the plane? Alex ignored the shaking wooden masterpiece and focused in on the task in front of him: scooting up in his chair just like the ten other guests behind him.

Hughes began pushing the throttles. Fifty miles per hour. Another throttle. Fifty-five miles per hour. Another throttle.

The ocean currents beating the bottom of the craft made Alex's ears pinch. Just then a reporter scooted up into the conductor's breathing space. Thankfully, Hughes had a fresh air pipe on his left, but the closer Alex looked the more he realized that the reporter wasn't breathing. He was holding his breath in anticipation.

“Seventy-five miles per hour!” A radioman beamed.

Alex’s heart thudded. This was the moment that would prove everyone wrong. This was moment that would make up for the helplessness he was to the war. It wasn’t that Alex refused to fight in the Second World War, but that he was just too young. Underestimated? Maybe. All Alex cared about was justice. And this—gliding through the sky in a proving craft—would be thrillingly satisfying. Well, once the plane was actually in the air.

Alex scanned the controls in the cockpit. Ninety-five miles an hour.

Hughes glanced over at his copilot, making sure everything was set. Yep, everything was perfect. Expect the vibrating noise.

Alex half listened to Hughes and the interviewer chat as the lad reminisced the night when Hughes took Alex under his wing. The rotten trash, the blind bunches, the grinding words all vibrated through his head. Alex shook in his seat. At first, he thought it was the memories, but he sooner realized it wasn’t.

“Sir, I’m gonna to a sweep of the plane.” Alex didn’t wait for Hughes reassuring nod. Instead, Alex jungled out of his seat and stumbled through the plane. It wasn’t supposed to shake like this. Of course, it would have been helpful if the government gave them better material or at least gave them the benefit of the doubt. But there was no use in wishing. Alex knew that fact all too well.

“Jake!” Alex spread his three-foot arm span to stop himself from crashing into the compartment. “We need to add suppressors.”

Jake offered a furrowed brow. At least, Alex assumed that was what the I-need-a-hair-cut look was saying. “Like what?” Jake grinded his teeth in unison with the vibration.

“Mattresses, tape, anything. Until I figure this out.” Alex wasn’t sure how he could properly work shaking like this, but he was determined to try. Which gave the lad hope. With that kind of attitude people could get far.

Jake gave a thumbs-up before Alex continued his trek. The motion threatened Alex to give up his breakfast. He swallowed hard and kept pressing forward, toward, and . . . into the compartment.

Alex tried the crawling method into the room. He squinted hard at each gage. “O-ok.” The word ping-ponged through the wooden compartment.

Alex maneuvered to flex his numb knees and readjusted the gage.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Alex wiped his ear on his t-shirt, trying to erase the annoying buzz of the plane. And that was when he saw it. *Tick. Tick. Tick.* Exactly twenty-six seconds blinked on a neatly placed bomb.

Alex choked. And there went his breakfast. This couldn’t be happening. What worker would place a bomb in a craft that they’ve been working on for the last four to five years? Who would want to blow up a ship that they signed their own name on? Just thinking sent another minute down the tube.

Alex ran, bumping into a few arches in the walls. And into a person. Jake.

“Bomb!” Alex pointed, hands on his knees.

“Get Smith or Petrali or someone. I’ll report to Hughes.” With that the two parted ways, but twenty-six seconds wasn’t enough time. Alex scanned the tunnel for something, anything, he could disable a bomb with. Something caught his eye. A foot . . . belonging to a man probed up against the curved wall of the hall. Alex bent down, feeling for a pulse of life. It was hard to tell with all the shaking, but the countdown just notched up another stake. If there was any life in this

man, it won't be for long. Alex palmed the man's wrench, thinking just sent another second down the tube. *Click.* Alex grinded his teeth at the wrenching headache that was bubbling up in his poor brain. He forced himself to think. How hard could it be? *If this is the right tool—*

“Do you really not know who I am?” Truly, Alex didn't realize Jake starched behind him.

“Should I? Other than you're my friend and you're now pointing a gun at my head.”

Jake snorted. “I'm the one who beat you into the corner. I'm the one who should be Hughes' shadow. I'm the one who set that bomb!”

“Wait. Why are you telling me this?”

“You have nowhere to go, Rainer. No one to protect you now. No one to lift you up.” The last word was cut short. Jake flared his nose. And breathed. “You're all wrong. The enemy would have just shot this hunk of junk down, but no one listens. So, I'm gonna learn from you, Mr. Alex Rainer. I'm not gonna give up. Instead, I'm gonna rise above you and prove that this plane was a mistake.” Alex could imagine the “tick-tick” of the bomb or the reporting speed of the craft. The reporter. “Move it!” Jake directed Alex to the room destined to blow up any second. Twenty seconds. Knowing the fact upon the entrance of the room didn't comfort Alex.

“There.” Jake motioned to a pole while he unraveled a rope without letting go of the gun.

Alex wasn't sure if he should hurry or play it slow. He wasn't even sure if this was real or just a joke. Once Alex felt the knotted rope pricking his wrists and saw the door lock after Jake, Alex convinced that this was no joke. He hurried, fumbling with the knot behind his back. Nineteen. He vigorously rubbed the rope against the pole. Eighteen. *God, see me!* Seventeen. Heat pricked his back. Fatigue hitting him head on. Sixteen. Something wet tickled the palm of his hand. Alex tried untying again. Didn't work. Alex glanced at the countdown. Ten. How did it get to ten? He prayed some more. And *snap!* Free, Alex dove for the bomb. Wrench in hand, he

pinned the wrench into the device. “00:01” froze on the device. Air whooshed out of Alex in relief. *Thank You, God!* Now, Alex found the plane’s vibration relaxing. Until he thought about Hughes with the reporter and a mad Jake floating throughout the craft.

“Ok. Let’s see what else you can do.” Alex Rainer palmed the wrench. After some tricky door busting, Alex charged into the cockpit. “Mr. Hughes!” He didn’t hear him, not many did. Alex scanned the area. Everything was . . . perfectly fine. Cheers echoed throughout the plane as it came to a stop. Handshakes and flashy lights wafted throughout the rest of the day. And then there was excited but confused Alex filtering under Hughes’ shadow. Was everything really just perfectly fine?

“She flew for twenty-six seconds. Now there’s no more need for her,” Hughes confessed. Hundreds crafted the *Hughes H-4 Hercules* for the Second World War. “We chose to persevere . . . for twenty-six second flight.” Alex shifted at the number. “You did well, Alex. Perfect. Don’t let anyone stop you from completing your mission.” Hughes licked his lips. “From doing what’s right, even when everyone is against you.” Alex recalled the name he penciled onto the aircraft the first day he began working for Hughes. Yes, they all worked to help the war, to prove what’s right, to stand for justice. Yes, those twenty-six seconds of soaring a 250,000-pound wooden vessel was too late to preserve those soldiers in the war. But those twenty-six seconds of bulleting through the atmosphere at 135 mph proved the unjust wrong. Those twenty-six seconds of untouched earth penciled a way for the future. “Disappointment is not the definition of failure.” Alex Rainer had a point because all it took for the world to change was twenty-six seconds. And because of those twenty-six seconds, Alex Rainer would seek for justice. He would not give up in seeking for ways to serve his country, because Alex Rainer knew that every second of life counts and will be judged by the God that saw him in those twenty-six seconds.