

DEATH FLIGHT

HOPE SZE MEDICAL CRIME NOVEL 6

MELISSA YI



Windtree
Press

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The danger? But danger is one of the attractions of flight.

— *Jean Conneau, 1911*

Fighting in the air is not sport. It is scientific murder.

— *Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, Fighting the Flying Circus*

Fight on and fly on to the last drop of blood and the last drop of fuel,
to the last beat of the heart.

— *Baron Manfred von Richthofen, the Red Baron*

I figured Los Angeles would be full of Botoxed, Brazilian-waxed blondes honking their BMW's through the smog, but I was surprised by how much it seemed like any other city—until it launched me directly into hell at 35,000 feet.

My name is Hope Sze. I'm a resident doctor who ends up *mano a mano* with murderers way too often, but right now I was on a different kind of mission. A Christmas mission.

I was here to surprise Dr. John Tucker.

"Excuse me. You have to check in first," called a secretary with an asymmetric white bob that was displayed to advantage by a purple backdrop framed in white fairy lights and—was that an aquarium? L.A.'s Healing Hospital sure didn't stint on its design budget.

I gave her a death stare, ignoring the tank burbling behind her. It might lower your blood pressure to watch iridescent blue fish weave their way through seaweed, but I didn't want orthostatic hypotension. I wanted my man.

Tucker nearly died on November fourteenth, when we were both taken hostage. We survived, but Tucker ended up in L.A. for definitive reconstructive surgery after Montreal doctors hesitated to reoperate. Tucker didn't tell me he was leaving. He flew off and did it.

It was up to me to drag him back across the continent.

So for Christmas Eve, I'd taken a deep breath and charged a flight from Ottawa to L.A. at the most expensive time of the year. I'd made up for it by taking the bus from the airport. Then I'd marched straight into the Healing Hospital, searching for the closest elevator amongst the sunlit marble walls, until this secretary stopped me.

"I'm here to see John Tucker." I tried to smile. Ever since the hostage taking on 14/11, I've got PTSD and a wee bit of trouble with human interaction.

She adjusted her Chanel glasses. "Let me see if I can find him."

Yeah, you do that, since you're costing him \$3,000 a day, even before his surgery. The very name of the Healing Hospital made me want to smash the fresh lotus arrangement on her steel desk, but that would scare the fish undulating behind her.

"I don't have a John Tucker listed," she said.

I pushed my hair out of my face. My backpack was glued through to my skin with sweat, because it's winter in Ottawa, and I didn't leave my coat in my car and run to the airport, freezing, the way some people do. Instead, I was carrying all my belongings on my back, like a homeless person.

A combative homeless person. "Sure you do. J-o-h-n T-u-c-k-e-r. He's on general surgery. Room 4524. Bowel reconstruction three days ago by Dr. Hiro Ishimura. I'm Dr. Hope Sze." I don't usually flaunt my credentials, but if you've got 'em, flaunt 'em in the face of recalcitrant administrators.

She clicked her computer again. "No, John Tucker checked out this morning."

I paled. Not easy to do with Chinese ancestry. My hands flexed on her desk like I wanted to tear out a hunk of steel. "That's impossible."

Her eyes softened with sympathy that I didn't want to handle. I whipped out the Finding Friends app that tracked Tucker's location. I'd checked it last night, but turned off my roaming data before take-off this morning to save money when I landed in the U.S.

"We have Wifi. The password is Serenity with a capital S."

Of course it was.

And of course Tucker's little yellow dot sat at LAX, Los Angeles's main airport.

I wanted to scream.

This can't be happening.

Of course it's happening. My entire life is a Murphy's Law.

Calm down, Hope. You've had murderers try to strangle, shoot, and knife you.

You can do this.

"Excuse me," I said to the secretary, and called Tucker.

He answered right away. "Hope!"

"Tucker. I'm at the hospital." I enunciated each word.

"Yeah? Well, good thing, baby, because tonight I'm back in Montreal—"

"Tucker. I'm at *your* hospital. The Healing Hospital. I took the first flight to L.A. this morning."

After a stunned moment, he burst out laughing. "*T'es pas sérieuse.*"

I gritted my teeth. "Dead serious. I wanted to surprise you."

"I wanted to surprise *you.*"

I felt like banging my hospital germ-laden phone against my own forehead, except I can't afford another iPhone. "Me too."

"It's like 'The Gift of the Magi.' You flew in to see me, and I'm flying into Montreal and driving to Ottawa to see you."

I cut to the essentials. "What time does your plane leave?"

"At 15:55. I'm on flight number 783."

I wrote that down. One thing about both medicine and confronting killers is that you spend less time wringing your hands and more time leaping to plans B, C, and D. "Okay. That's not so bad. I'll hit the airport at 1 p.m. I don't know if I can get on your flight, but I'm coming. I'm only here to see you, anyway."

"I'll buy your ticket."

"No, Tucker, you don't have any money."

"Neither do you."

"More than you." My parents help as much as they can. Tucker's might, too, but he has two sisters and negative income. "You just had surgery in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Come on. I'll

call Avian Air, or the booking website, and change my ticket while I'm in the cab."

The automatic doors swooshed open. I squinted at the sunlight. It was chilly, maybe ten degrees Celsius. That was positively balmy after the snow and ice in Canada, but a little cold on my bare legs. I'd changed into shorts at the airport, partly as a "Yay, I'm in L.A." thing, but mainly so that I could show off my legs to Tucker. How embarrassing! The only way this could get worse would be if his family greeted me at the airport. Mine would never let me fly cross-country post-op without them. I asked, "Is your family with you?"

"No. Hey—are you okay?" His voice changed.

"I'm fine." I stepped toward the taxis idling in the hospital's front circle. I couldn't wait for a bus this time.

Tucker said, "Do you need help?"

"No ... " But then I realized he wasn't talking to me.

"I can help you. It's okay. I'm a doctor."

In the background, I could hear an angry, indistinct voice. A male one.

Tucker kept talking, as was his wont. "I'm from Canada, so I don't have an American medical license, but I can do first aid and call for help."

The man rumbled again.

I didn't like the sound of it. "Tucker, just let security know. I bet LAX has some sort of medical help available. You don't need—"

A woman screamed. Even over the phone, tinny and warbling, it made me want to scream too.

"**S**orry, Hope. I'll call you back." Tucker cut me off.
No time for Uber. I dashed for the first orange taxi, driven by a man with dark skin and a neatly-trimmed moustache and beard.

"I need to get to the airport. Stat." Unlike Grey's Anatomy, I never say stat. Until now.

Before the driver finished nodding, I jumped in the car.

Take me to Tucker. Please.

I checked my phone. His dot was still at the airport. Unmoving.

My heart thundered. I loved Tucker. We'd never managed to hook up properly. Something always got in the way, whether it was gunfire on 14/11 or me falling in love with another guy named Ryan. Yes, I have two simultaneous boyfriends. Yes, I love both of them. No, they're not okay with it. They would like to drop each other off a cliff.

I tried to make it up to Tucker by abandoning everything, including Ryan, to fly here as soon as my stem cell rotation would allow. What were the chances that everything would go pear-shaped?

Between the two of us? Astronomical.

The taxi driver signalled left and shoulder checked twice before pulling out. I gnashed my teeth as I brought up the Exploria.com

website. I needed that airline ticket, because if I couldn't get on the plane with him, I wasn't going to hang around in L.A. a minute longer than I had to. I was here for my man. One of them, anyway.

"It's an emergency," I told the driver, but maybe I was speaking too quickly, or his English wasn't great. Either way, we immediately hit a stop light, and he paused, listening to his call radio squawk over some sort of Bollywood-ish background music.

"Could you turn it to the news?" I asked. That way, I could use my phone to get on the same flight and still catch any worrisome stuff at the airport. Like a shooting.

I tried to talk myself down. The chance of a shooting at the airport is minimal. They have excellent security. I was only there an hour ago. If I hustled through security and nabbed a last-minute ticket, I should be fine.

As long as Tucker was okay.

I tried to analyze the scream that had warped my cell phone speakers.

It was a woman.

She had her ABC's, because she was screaming. Airway, breathing, and circulation guaranteed, at least for the moment.

But she was unstable enough that Tucker hung up on me.

I texted Tucker. Not that he had thumbs to spare, but then he could see I was thinking of him, even though the cell phone roaming charge would kill me.

Ryan texted, *Landed okay?*

I sent him back a thumbs-up sign. I couldn't talk to him right now. It felt like I was being unfaithful to Tucker, which made no sense, but I didn't make much sense. Ever since Tucker and I had delivered a baby under gunfire, I had my ABC's, but also a D, for deranged.

Overhead, I could hear helicopters. That reminded me of critical cases being airlifted out of hospitals, and I flinched. Was that happening to Tucker right now?

I searched the news and checked Twitter while I was on hold with Exploria.com, waiting for a "travel specialist" because apparently you can't change tickets online. It took so long for my phone to load

websites, I wanted to rip apart the seat cushions in order to de-stress. I asked the driver, "Is everything okay at the airport?"

He turned down his music. The radio crackled. "Okay," he said.

"Okay at the *airport*. Could you check on the *airport*?"

"Airport." He pointed straight ahead, through the windshield.

"Airport. LAX. Is the airport O. K." I made the O and the K signs with my fingers, to emphasize my point.

"O. K." He made the circle with his fingers and tried to imitate the K, the index and third fingers extended and his thumb pressed in the V between them.

What was up with this language barrier. I took two deep breaths and reminded myself that it wasn't the driver's fault he couldn't speak English and that I couldn't speak his language. Swearing at him wouldn't help any more than kids yelling, "Ching Chong!" at me.

I couldn't use my phone to translate because I needed it for my tickets. That was why I'd requested the radio. I pointed at it. "News. Okay?"

"News," he repeated, struggling with the word.

"News. Now. Please. Okay?"

"News," he said, clearly not understanding.

How do you explain news? How do you act it out in charades? Did he need the radio for his work?

His call radio crackled to life, and he started talking back, not in English or French, so I left him alone.

What's happening to you, Tucker?

I had to know if he was okay.

I closed the too-slow browsers and flicked over to the Finding Friends app. It reloaded. *Come on, come on.*

The driver was laughing now. Unreal. Why was he happy? What is this thing called laughing? Post-traumatic stress makes you feel like you're in an alternate universe, segregated from the rest of humanity. They're taking pretty photos of their food, and you're obsessed with breathing tomorrow's oxygen.

I forced myself to breathe today's oxygen and wait for Tucker's light to come on.

It did. He was at the airport. Same spot.

That was good, right?

Unless he was dead. That wouldn't be good at all.

Don't jump to conclusions, Hope. Just because he's not moving doesn't mean he's dead.

Yes, but you can't get to him because you're stuck in traffic with a driver who doesn't understand you.

Now I was doubting myself. I rubbed my bare thighs with my palms—suddenly, I was freezing—and clenched and unclenched my hands until I finally spoke to a woman with a Southern accent at Exploria.com. Success! I could change my ticket for a mere \$275. After I accepted the usurious rate, I glared at the traffic boxing us in.

What would James Bond or Jason Bourne do?

I rolled down my window.

It was winter, even in L.A. Everyone else had theirs rolled up, but I waved at the driver in the white car across from me. "Hey!"

He rolled down his passenger window, revealing a young, black man wearing sunglasses. It was hard to tell what he was thinking. He nodded at me. "Hey, shawty. What's happenin'."

"Is everything okay at the airport? Have you heard anything?"

He frowned at the panic in my face. "Everything's okay."

"Can you check the radio?"

"Everythin's ooooooo. Kay." His window rolled back up.

I squeezed my fists hard enough that my nails cut into my palms. It was better than howling like a frustrated werewolf, but only just.

Smoggy air dried out my contact lenses. I didn't care. I'd rather feel pain than feel nothing.

My taxi driver rolled up my window and started whistling tunelessly.

Do not kill him. Do not.

By the time I sprinted to the Avian Air counter, my backpack banging against my vertebrae, I was sweating again.

The good news was, the airport seemed just as I'd left it: giant, sunlit bays jammed full of people and their rolling suitcases, with prominent signs directing the flow of humanity through its walls.

No one was fleeing. No one was bleeding.

I approved of that part. Well, except for the fact that my previous taxi paranoia now made me look like an overreacting, PTSD maniac.

I avoided bashing into a twenty-something woman fixing her makeup in the middle of the hallway while I texted Tucker.

I'm lining up for my ticket!

No answer. Not even the dot dot dot showing that he was writing back to me.

I inhaled, exhaled, and spoke to the sixtyish woman in front of me. "Hi, did you hear anything about a disturbance going on at this airport?"

"A disturbance," she repeated slowly. She had a short pageboy haircut, a stocky build, and what sounded like a Russian accent. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Like, did you hear that something bad is happening here at LAX? This airport?"

She shook her head and spoke to the woman in front of her, in their language, while shooting me disapproving looks.

Crap. The wait dragged on even longer with every Russian head shake. I could ask the young, brown guy behind me, but he had his headphones on and his face down, and the last thing I needed was someone alerting the TSA that an Asian chick required extra security harassment. I'd already spotted one officer with what looked like a taser on his belt, talking on his radio.

Where are you, Tucker?

No answer. Well, the Finding Friends app showed him at the airport. That was a relief, although I'd have to recharge my phone. I was already down to 41 percent, and I had to show them my e-ticket before my battery died.

That meant choosing between supervising Tucker's dot and making sure I had access to my e-ticket. Internally, I cursed all that was good and holy, including snowflakes and homemade hot chocolate. Then I turned off my phone and breeeeeeeeathed while waiting in line for another five minutes.

Make that ten.

Jesus God. I know I don't believe in you, but if your birthday is coming up, how 'bout speeding this one up?

I tried not to think about how I'd almost lost Tucker. First during the hostage taking, second from a post-op infection, and third when Montreal doctors had played cautious about reconstructive surgery, and Tucker jetted off to L.A. Full disclosure: he probably took off faster because I was juggling him and Ryan, so our reunion was not guaranteed sunshine and cotton candy.

I finally bounded toward the agent, a Latina woman who seemed 27 years old, same as me, only she was trying to look older with her tight bun and navy uniform. I showed her my e-ticket and passport.

She clicked on her keyboard. Her bright red acrylic nails matched both her lipstick and the scarf twisted around her neck. Then she paused and frowned.

Uh oh.

"What is it?" I said, through dry lips. "Is there a problem with the flight? Or the gate?"

"No, it's ... " She held up a finger and spoke on the radio in a low voice. When she saw me trying to read her lips, she turned her back on me.

I bounded up and down on my toes before I caught myself. Something was happening. The woman with Tucker had screamed for a reason, and the gate agent knew why.

I wanted to snatch back my phone, which was resting on the counter, but even upside down, I could tell that Tucker hadn't messaged me back.

I should have skipped out on my stem cell research rotation as soon as Tucker took off for L.A. I would have failed that block—I've missed too much work, because of all the killers I've run into—but who cared? Instead, I'd failed Tucker.

I needed Tucker.

The agent stopped murmuring into the radio and turned around with a fake smile before she tapped her keyboard again. "Don't worry. Everything should be cleared up by the time you go through security."

"What happened?"

A flush tinted her cheeks. She printed out my boarding pass and shoved it toward me. "Nothing to worry about. The police have it under control."

"I was talking to my friend at the gate, and there was screaming."

"It's under control," she repeated loudly. "Go to Gate 68A, and everything should be fine. They'll take you to the remote gate by bus."

"What?"

She sighed and glanced at the Disney World-worthy lineup gathering behind me. "Just go to Gate 68A."

I didn't budge. "Was anyone hurt or killed?"

"Of course not. I'm going to have to ask you to keep your voice down, ma'am."

I understood the threat underlying her ultra-polite words. People

have been tased at airports for belligerence. A man died at the Vancouver airport after he got tased and went into an arrhythmia.

I snatched the boarding pass, my phone, and my passport and wound my interminable way through security. Since I only had my backpack with a laptop, some clothes, and an empty steel water bottle, it was maddening to watch other people protest taking off their jacket for the X-ray. One old couple, both in wheelchairs, had brought a bottle of medicinal oil that held up the entire line.

"Courage," I muttered through my teeth, recalling a Bethany Hamilton quote. She was a professional surfer who'd jumped back on the waves post op after a shark chewed away her left arm. "Sacrifice, determination, commitment," I chanted as I finally cleared security and dashed past the duty-free goods, ignoring the strange look from a woman holding three boxes of perfume. "Heart, talent, guts. That's what little girls are made of."

Not that I was a little girl anymore, but I used to be one, and I was building myself back up into a woman to be reckoned with.

The ticket agent had claimed everything was okay (*Ohhhhh. Kay*), but dread dragged my heart. Tucker and I kept missing each other, whether it was the hostage taking, my work, his health, or my other man. I had to find Tucker. I had to tell him that I loved him, in person, even if he laughed and flew away from me.

"I love you," I whispered to myself. I was practicing, basically, in between repeating to myself, "Courage, sacrifice, determination, commitment."

Please don't sacrifice Tucker.

Sacrifice the woman who was screaming instead.

It's terrible, the arithmetic you do when someone you love is in danger. It means that you'd rather anyone else got hurt in their place.

I was running again. Gasping. My backpack thumped against my lumbar spine.

The woman's scream replayed in my mind on a continuous loop.

Who screams like that? Nobody.

And who ignores his cell phone? Not Tucker.

What happened? What happened?

Of course 68A was at the end of the corridor. I dodged people holding lattes, a beeping cart for passengers who couldn't walk, and a slow-moving Segway.

Now I could see scads of people bunched up at gate 68A, including three wearing black uniforms. I bolted toward them with my arms in the air.

An officer who was about my height moved to block me. I'm only five foot two and a quarter, but he looked pretty ripped, and he had a police baton and a taser on his belt, so I wasn't going to mess with him. Except with words. "This is my gate."

"We're clearing the area. Stay back, miss."

At least he called me miss. I craned my neck. Hard to tell with the horde of people held ten feet from the nucleus of the disturbance, but I glimpsed Tucker's blond hair behind the throng. He was even easier to spot with the number 42 on both sides of his shirt.

Tucker was alive. That was the first thing I drank in. He was alive, and breathing, and talking to an older, male cop.

Thank you, Jesus, Yahweh, and Flying Spaghetti Monster for keeping him safe. I am not religious, except when it comes to survival. Then I'll take anything.

"What happened?" I asked the officer beside me.

He looked uncomfortable. His badge said "airport police," which wasn't the real LAPD, as far as I knew, but both possibilities made me swallow what little saliva I had left. Real cops have saved my life multiple times, but the real LAPD beat up Rodney King, and pseudo

cops can be even more dangerous with more attitude and less training.

My airport cop said, "One of the passengers created a disturbance. He had to be ... contained."

Had Tucker fought with that passenger in order to "contain" him? Right after abdominal surgery, he shouldn't fight anyone. His sutures and staples could rupture.

Tucker, you idiot. You beautiful idiot.

I spoke fast. "My friend—the one in the 42 shirt—called me. A man came up, and a woman screamed."

The airport cop ignored my play by play. He said, "Stay here."

The crowd shifted. I saw that Tucker had taken the time to gel his blond bangs straight up. Good. He'd stopped hair styling when he was super sick in hospital. This Tucker wasn't bleeding, he wasn't hyperventilating, and he'd gelled his hair. The Tucker triad of health.

Then a man bellowed, "No!"

That man was probably 78 years old and bent over like the letter C, but still plenty big. I'd say over five foot eight and 200 pounds. Not to be trifled with.

The crowd scattered, only to snatch their phones and start filming.

Tucker walked toward him with his hands in the air. "Mr. Yarborough, everything is fine."

My cop strode toward the action, and I followed in his wake. There was no way I'd leave Tucker alone with a crazy old man, surrounded by pseudo cops with tasers.

"Excuse me," I said to a tiny, white woman with even whiter hair. She wouldn't budge, even though she hadn't figured out how to work her camera yet.

"I was here first," she said.

"I'm a doctor," I snapped, and she stepped aside.

The old guy backed up, away from the crowd and the two other cops. He was unshaven with tufty grey eyebrows. He looked like a tottery silverback gorilla, if gorillas wore suspenders.

"We've talked about this, Mr. Yarborough," said Tucker. He was

calm enough that the crowd, including the cops, hovered instead of jumping in. "You're fine right here. You can't go back into security."

"They took my bottle!"

"Your water bottle was full. They had to take it."

"No!" The gorilla shoved through the crowd, stumbling at me.

Tucker twisted toward me, his eyes widening with a mix of thrill and horror.

Not exactly how I planned to make my L.A. debut with him, but *tant pis*. The rest of the crowd fell back. I didn't.

Neither did the airport cops. A female cop widened her stance and placed her hand on her taser. "Stay right where you are, Mr. Yarborough."

The male cops flanked her.

That horrible scream seared the air once more. A broomstick-thin old woman flung her ring-laden hands toward the sky, as if her gnarled fingers could halt the flow of electricity. "No, please don't!"

My cop shouted, "Stay back."

"He just wants his water bottle. Please!" the old lady called.

"Stay back!"

"He has dementia. Please don't shoot him! Harold!"

The other male cop said, "Stand back. Clear the scene."

"Out of the way!" yelled my cop.

This couldn't be happening.

Female cops are less likely to shoot. This guy wasn't harming anyone. He was an old, white man, which is a less-fired-upon demographic. And the scene wasn't "contained." There were too many of us within firing distance.

"No one has to be hurt. This is your last warning," said the female cop. She lifted the taser out of the holster and levelled it at him.

This is happening.

Tucker caught my eye. His thighs tensed. He was about to spring in between the old man and me.

ALSO BY MELISSA YI

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