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will take root in your brain and heart just like they do each
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"Smart, beautifully written, and teeming
with delicious romantic tension... *Love and Other Brain
Experiments* is a dopamine rush from start to finish"

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"A whip-smart, flirty and fun debut! Frances and Lewis's
witty banter and sizzling tension had me hooked from page
one. This book changed my brain chemistry"

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"Smart, tender, earnest, and masterful, this debut
does STEM romance right. I'm no scientist, but my study's
results say that *Love and Other Brain Experiments*
needs to be on your bookshelf"

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Love and Other Brain Experiments

HANNAH BROHM



An Aria Book

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations,
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Julio,

*Remember when you came up to me and asked
what statistical model I used in my Bachelor thesis?*

Favorite moment of serendipity, right there.

This one was always going to be for you.



Chapter One

Murphy's Law

/ˌmɜːfɪz ˈlɔː/

noun

a supposed law of nature, expressed in various humorous popular sayings, to the effect that anything that can go wrong will go wrong.

I've always been skeptical of Murphy's Law.

As a scientist worth her salt, I know that it's all about the probabilities. With the thousands of actions we take every day, it's just extremely unlikely that so many of them go wrong. But honestly? After sleeping through my alarm, barely making it to the airport on time despite Lennart's—my sister's husband—shortcuts and misplacing the allergy pills that make me drowsy enough to keep my flight anxiety at bay, I'm starting to believe that Murphy's Law might actually be a thing.

It's seemingly not enough that I have to be awake on this flight, visualizing what feels like a million different ways that this plane could crash. The seat belt signs on flight UA 963 from Berlin to Newark Liberty International Airport have barely been switched off when the universe decides to throw an emergency into the mix.

"Your check-in data say you're a doctor. Is that correct?" asks the flight attendant with the black polka-dot headband. Right after boarding, when I asked the crew for some pills,

she gently pushed me back into my seat, which shouldn't have come as a surprise. I'm well aware that the crew isn't allowed to hand out pills just like that, even if it's over-the-counter medication. They probably don't even have them on board, but with mine out of reach, I was desperate and thought it was worth a try, no matter how unreasonable the request.

Now, the flight attendant is staring at me with big brown eyes, polite smile plastered onto her round face, while I'm too panic-stricken to respond, tongue thick in my mouth and heartbeat heavy against my ribs. She leans over the man sitting on the aisle seat next to me—the one with the thick, caterpillar-like eyebrows—to tap on my shoulder and try again.

"Excuse me? Ma'am? Dr. Silberstein?"

Caterpillar Eyebrows decides this situation is more interesting than his doorstep of a thriller and slots his finger in between the pages of his book. On my left, the woman is still fast asleep, tie-dye hoodie scrunched up between her head and the window, and one leg tucked up onto the seat.

"Could you confirm if you're a doctor?"

Murphy's having a field day with me today.

As I force my vocal cords to work again, I cringe into the pleather of my seat. Five years ago, freshly graduated with my PhD, it had struck me as a good idea to register my new official title in my passport. To show it to the world and rub it in everyone's face. Yes, I'd TAed almost as much time as I'd spent in the lab because my stipend wouldn't cover my monthly costs, and yes, grad school and the ensuing breakup with my ex had sanded down my self-confidence. But at least I had something to show for it. I could skip past the *Miss* and *Ms.* in the drop-down menus, and demand to be called *Dr.* instead.

"I am. But not that kind of doctor" I mumble awkwardly. When she tilts her head, I blabber on, "Not the medical kind.

I have a PhD in neuroscience. I can't help with any emergency, unless it's a statistical one."

"That should do," she says cheerfully. "Can you bring a thousand-word abstract down to five hundred? It's due in two hours."

My gaze pinballs from her face to my neighbor, who raises those thick eyebrows at me. The woman on my other side stirs as I shift in my seat. Did I mishear? Maybe the flight attendant *did* give me pills after all, and they're giving me surreal dreams?

Unless the abstract is about neuroscience or anything remotely related, I won't be of much help, but I'm desperate for any kind of distraction. "I guess I can try," I reply. And from how she snaps into action and gestures for me to get out of my seat, I begin to suspect that she's being serious. That this is not some cosmic joke.

"Let's get you to your new seat then, Dr. Silberstein," she prompts.

My neighbor has already swung his knees into the aisle to let me through, so all I can do is get up and get out. "Just Frances is fine," I tell her, stumbling out into the aisle and trailing her, my oversize tote bag bumping into my thigh with every shaky step.

As ridiculous as the request sounds, I feel for this person who's racing to meet an abstract deadline. It's a rite of passage in academia; one we've all been through. With the experiments, heaps of teaching, grant proposals, peer reviews of colleagues' papers, and other admin work we have to do, conference prep—like abstracts—tends to be an afterthought, tacked on to train journeys, slotted between meetings, or, like yesterday, preceding my younger sister Karo's wedding. Already dressed in my bridesmaid's gown and waiting for the nail polish on my left foot to dry, my fingers whirled over my keyboard to put together the interactive code I need for this week's workshop.

What a glamorous life.

Ahead of me, the flight attendant weaves effortlessly around other passengers down the aisle. "I've never been called for any emergencies before," I tell her, grabbing onto headrests left and right. "I'm not really the useful kind of doctor."

"The desperate man in 44L will find you plenty useful, I'm sure," she replies as she picks up someone's trash from their tray.

Seat 44L. We're still only at 30. I scan the rows in front of me, trying to spot the person who didn't understand the concept of an abstract—summarizing a study or a set of studies in a short paragraph, like a sort of preview—and wrote half an essay instead.

"And don't worry, if it had been an actual emergency, we would've used the intercom," she informs me. "I'm just bored, is all."

I can't help but be intrigued. "You help out desperate academics when you're bored? What else do you do? Match up seat neighbors based on their interests?"

"Darling, have you ever flown long haul before? It gets real boring real quick." She looks at me over her shoulder, while also helping a short, elderly lady grab something from the overhead bin before stepping around her. "Especially if the back galley chat is stuck on the same old topic. Kimberley's wife just had a baby so that'll be all they talk about today. Don't get me wrong, lil' Jonah is cute, but I'll survive without seeing sixty more photos of his wrinkly face by the time we land."

We pass through the mid-cabin galley, where the other flight attendants are preparing the drink carts. One of them bumps into me.

"We sing birthday songs or participate in people's proposals," she continues, pulling me out of the way by the cotton of my white T-shirt. "Nothing as exciting as that going on today, so I thought I'd help someone out. I've always had a soft spot

for nerds." She crooks her palm over her mouth, voice pitching lower. "And it helps that he's cute." Glancing at the seat numbers, she stops. "Here we are. I told you I'd find someone who can help you," she chirps, turning to the people sitting in row 44.

I size up the three people in the row. In the aisle seat is a guy about my age with the most enviable shade of strawberry blond hair and a blush tainting his cheeks. Next to him, there's a nondescript white middle-aged man with a sports cap that screams sitcom dad. A teenage girl with pointy cat ears attached to the band of her headphones has the window seat, an open bag of saltines in her hands. The flight attendant's comment implied it was a guy, which rules out the teenager, plus she said he was cute. Unless her criteria for cuteness include a dad bod, it's down to Blond Guy.

"You really didn't have to," Blond Guy says.

Bingo.

I'm not a native English speaker, but based on the accent, he's American, maybe even from New York. He bites his bottom lip, but there's a flash in his blue eyes. He looks bashful. Definitely cute.

"Well, it's your lucky day," the flight attendant responds, her words a different kind of slow now. With the way she leans toward him, I wonder if he flirted her into this absurd search for a nonmedical doctor.

"And mine," Sitcom Dad adds. The flight attendant steps to the side, letting Blond Guy and Sitcom Dad stand and file out of their row, before she guides Sitcom Dad to a free aisle seat a few rows down, leaving me face-to-face with Blond Guy and his receding blush.

"One thousand words, huh?" I mock.

"It was a joke." He shrugs, almost apologetically.

I glance back at the empty middle seat I vacated. "So you're not over the word limit by five hundred?"

"I am," he hurries to say. "That part's true. But she asked if there was anything she could help me with and I said I had this abstract deadline, and I didn't think she'd take it so literally and—"

"Look, do you want to get in?" A passenger behind me grumbles and we jump back into action. Blond Guy steps aside so I can slide into the middle seat.

Before I manage to settle in, though, there's a bump underfoot and my pulse skyrockets. I reach out to steady myself. For a moment there, I'd forgotten that planes are lethal.

"Are you okay?" Blond Guy wants to know.

I wait for another bump before responding, and when it doesn't come, I straighten. I rarely get manicures, but for my sister's wedding I carved out time, and now my nails are an unfamiliar berry-red against the backdrop of Blond Guy's soft flannel.

Whoops. It seems like the solid ridge my hand reached for wasn't part of the airplane fixtures after all.

"Sorry," I stammer, dropping my hand from his biceps. A corner of his mouth flicks into the blink of a smile.

I push my leather tote under the seat in front of me, and by the time I'm sitting upright again, he's already back in his seat, his arm brushing mine. The sleeve of his flannel is pushed up, exposing a tanned forearm with golden hairs that dust up toward his elbow.

He clears his throat. "So."

I blink up to his face, to the set of blue eyes and the scatter of freckles plotted over the bridge of his nose. His hair is parted at the side, and the soft waves fall to the tips of his ears. Something about him makes it impossible to look away. Is it the knowledge that he's an academic who happens to look hot? Is it that I'm finally away from my desk long enough to appreciate it? Or is exposure to fearful situations correlated to a heightened attraction to people?

Someone should run a study on this.

"The abstract," he says.

"Right. Let's see what I can help you with. I'm Frances, by the way."

He holds out his hand in the cramped space between us. "Lewis. Nice to meet you." His fingers close around my hand briefly, then let go—and that's when gravity decides to make another entrance. It pulls us down like we're on the world's steepest roller-coaster ride, only we're not, we're in a freaking plane, and there's nothing below us except the green fields of Ireland or the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean and we're plunging toward them and—

"Hey."

When I open my eyes, the lights of the cabin are too bright. People are chatting, someone is giggling, and it grates against my ear. Blond Guy—Lewis—shifts and blocks out my view of the cabin with his shoulder. I look down to find his hand in my lap, sandwiched between mine.

"Breathe with me," he says and maneuvers our hand sandwich to his chest. My breaths are a dizzying harmonic of his, short and quick, and I force myself to focus on how his lungs expand and contract against the sides of my fingers.

"Frances? Are you—"

"I'm a little afraid of flying," I choke out between clenched teeth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking," a tinny voice comes over the speakers. "You've seen the seat belt sign come on. We're encountering some turbulence as we enter the airspace above the ocean, so the ride may be a bit bumpy for the next fifteen to twenty minutes. Crew, please return to your jump seats."

"Fuck," I hiss. It's been ages since I witnessed the hours between takeoff and landing. Usually, I'm well knocked out at this

point, allergy pills working their magic. But then again, usually my pills are tucked into my carry-on, ready for me to take right before boarding, and not out of reach in the pocket of a pair of jeans I decided to wear last night only to change my mind this morning because who wears jeans on a long-haul flight?

Lewis's long exhale reminds me to breathe. "You're doing great," he encourages me over the captain repeating his announcement in German. I drag my eyes up his clean-shaven jaw to his bottom lip that's slightly larger than the top, the set of lines that brackets the corners of his mouth up to the wings of his nose. He nods as I draw in a breath and slowly let it out again.

"Did you know that it's the lift around the wings that gets planes off the ground and keeps them in the sky?" he says. "Turbulence is really just a perturbation in the air that interferes with the lift, but the wings balance it out, see?" He nods to the window, in front of which the teenager has inexplicably fallen asleep. Behind the tinted glass, the wings are violently swinging up and down. "It won't break the airplane apart. Turbulence is dangerous because it jostles people around, but since we're safely strapped into our seats, we should be okay."

I know he's just trying to distract me, but unfortunately, throughout his speech, my mind has found a new image to latch on to: a GIF of a plane snapping in half. Rationally, I know this is very unlikely to happen, but my brain has abandoned all logic, letting panic steer my thoughts. "Our plane might break apart?" I whisper.

He tugs at my hand. "It won't. I thought the science might comfort you, but let's talk about something else."

The plane shudders, and my stomach decides it's time to ignore anatomy and climb into my chest. The rapid up and down reminds me of my parents' house outside Berlin, where the last stretch of the road was paved decades ago with large and irregular cobblestones.

But unlike there, where I'd get out of the car and walk the last hundred yards to avoid motion sickness, now there's no way out as we plummet toward earth. The seat belt digs into my thighs. Panic taps on my shoulder. I burrow my face into Lewis's flannel, and he immediately stiffens.

"Oh god, I'm sorry." Mortified, I pull away and press the crown of my head into the back of my seat. His scent—woody and warm—reminds me of that time Karo joined me after a conference and we canoed the lakes of Central Sweden. "I swear I don't use everyone I meet as a human comfort blanket."

He squeezes my hand. "It's fine." After another moment, he clears his throat. "You can use my shoulder, if you think that helps."

I wince and press my eyes closed as another jerk goes through the plane.

"Tell me about yourself," he prompts, his voice quietly confident. If the memory of him freezing when I nuzzled into him weren't quite as fresh, I'd hug him in gratitude for his attempt to distract me.

"I'm a postdoc," I tell him. Since he's an academic, I don't go into the usual spiel of explaining that it stands for postdoctoral researcher and describes the time of fixed-term research contracts after grad school until you finally make it into a tenured professorship—or, the more common outcome, leave academia for good.

I force myself to continue talking through the blood rushing in my ears. "I'm from Germany, but now I live in the Netherlands. Although I don't know for how much longer."

"Is your funding running out?"

Ouch. "Dead center, Dr. Lewis. Or is it *Professor?*"

"I'm a postdoc like you, and just Lewis is fine. I'm sorry for bringing that up."

"It's okay." I take a deep breath and his scent unwinds something in me. "But yeah, my funding is running out, and my lab

doesn't have money to extend my contract. Which means I'll be out of a job soon, unless I find another open position somewhere else. I've applied for grants to extend the funding myself, but that's not a guarantee. Well, you probably know the drill."

He sounds wistful when he says, "I do. Makes me question why I don't just leave and get a cushy job in industry."

It's Karo's favorite question, whenever I tell her I've been working at all hours to make a paper revision deadline or when yet another one of my fixed-term contracts ends and I gear up to find another job with an expiration date. The reasons are numerous, or they were at first: Because I love working at the forefront of discovery and my mind switches off when my fingers type out lines of code. Because I have so many questions and I can't bear to leave them unanswered. Because one day my work might help someone in this world. Because there's nothing better than seeing a student get passionately interested in something I explained to them. But with every passing year and being nowhere closer to achieving the long-dreamed-of job stability that would allow me to fully focus on my research, it gets harder to answer Karo's question.

I'm glad for the opportunity to be the one asking it, for once. "Well. Why don't you?"

"I don't like to be told what to do, so I don't think I'd last long in a company." He hums, low in his throat. "But no, truth is, I love it too much. I was that kid who annoyed the hell out of everyone with all my questions. I wanted to understand how everything works. That never changed, except now I get paid for it."

It's not only his words that trigger an immediate sense of connection, but also the way he says them. Lewis's voice softens as he talks about being an academic, like it's the most precious thing in the world.

"What about you?" he asks, squeezing my hand, which I

guess I should take back soon, but I can't make myself pull away just yet. Though it does give me the courage to open my eyes and find his gaze.

"I guess . . . I want to make a difference," I tell him. "And I know, don't we all. I don't mean it in the 'I want to find a cure for Alzheimer's' way—although, don't get me wrong, I hope we do find it at some point. But I'm working in this tiny niche of science that is sort of far away from anything that can be applied in the real world. I love my tiny niche of science. And I love chipping away at it, and maybe, somewhere, at some point it will make a difference?"

I'm surprised that I'm sharing this much with him, but he's easy to talk to. Maybe it's the fact that I'll never see this stranger again, or the fact that, as a fellow academic, he understands the strong pull of those unanswered questions and doesn't need justifications like my sister does. Or maybe it's the fact that he hasn't let go of my hand, either.

After a beat of silence, Lewis shifts around to face me fully, leaning his temple against the headrest. "And what brings you to New York? Summer vacation?"

I push out a laugh. "I wish. I just got done with a paper revision that took ages, so a holiday sounds tempting, but no. There's this summer program that I'm attending. I thought it would be good for some networking, collaborations. Maybe to see if anybody would hire me if my grant application gets rejected."

"It sounds like there's a *but* there," he notes.

Of course there's a *but*. A giant one. One that made me glad I'd missed the taxi when I woke up this morning, and tempted me to stay in bed rather than race down the quiet corridor of the country estate my sister got married in. But the dread of having to quit my research and leave all my questions unanswered got me up those stairs to the honeymoon suite,

where I banged against the wooden door until Karo's fiancé—*husband*—Lennart opened it with a rumpled look on his face.

It's a *but* so personal that I'd usually not get into it, not even with Karo. Then again, I've already shown this guy my deepest irrational fear so what's there to lose?

I take a deep breath, focusing on our linked hands. "The Sawyer's Summer Seminars I'm attending—if that tells you anything—is organized by my ex. We were together when I lived in New York, but then I left and we . . . Well, we didn't part on good terms, and I'm not at the point where I thought I'd be when seeing him again."

"You're not over him?"

I look up and find Lewis scrutinizing me. Shame burns in my throat, a phantom reaction as Jacob's words from five years ago come echoing back.

"I'm sorry," he starts. "That was a personal question."

"No, it's okay. I'm one hundred percent over him, it's not that." I swallow thickly. "But at the end he told me I'd end up unsuccessful and alone."

Lewis's cringe mirrors the feeling that's buried deep in my stomach. Naive younger me was convinced Jacob had no clue, that his retaliation was only meant to hurt me, but in the days counting down to this flight, and at the prospect of seeing him again, doubt has crept in. He's always been good with people, and he knew me more intimately than anybody else.

What if he was right?

"I don't care so much about being alone," I continue. "It makes the nomadic life of academia a little easier. But I'd pictured myself starting the tenure track by now. Job security. Staying in a city for more than a year or two. More high-impact publications. Something that would make it all worth it. Something to show him how wrong he was."

Although it's only half of the *but*, off-loading my worries

to someone is freeing. Vulnerability is not my strong suit, but Lewis makes me feel at ease—and knowing that I won't see him again makes it easier to open up.

The other half of the *but* is a little more complicated. It involves a know-it-all scientist who goes by the name of Theodore L. North. Once upon a time, I thought we could be friendly colleagues, but then he tore it all down with a paper he published, making it clear that his life's mission is to sniff out any and all weaknesses in my academic papers. I don't know what I did to him, because while he loves scrutinizing me, he seems perfectly generous with the rest of the scientific community on social media. He makes his data sets openly available, hosts online panels to amplify researchers from underrepresented communities, and every month, he dedicates a day to giving online advice for people who are starting out. Although we both work in memory research, we've never crossed paths. But I know he'll be at the Sawyer's, and I'm not sure if I'm looking forward to finally putting a face to the name, or if I dread having to fight our battles in person.

"Well, for what it's worth," Lewis says, tilting down his head so he can look me straight in the eyes, "this ex of yours sounds like a douche. Good that you put your career first and don't let yourself be intimidated by him."

"Thank you." I smile at him. They may be a mindless offer of kindness, but his words ease something in me. Maybe Murphy's Law is a lie after all. Without this seat change, I'd be freaking out all on my own. "Now, please tell me you have nicer reasons to be traveling."

"To be honest, I'm also torn about my trip." His eyebrows pinch together. "I'm traveling to the Sawyer's as well, which is exciting."

Columbia University is hosting this year's Sawyer's Summer Seminars, with topics ranging from the neuroscience of

memory to personalized medicine and antimicrobial peptides. I'm about to ask which one he's going to, when Lewis continues, "But I also have family in New York, and I should probably make an appearance at a few things that are happening there."

"Like?"

His gaze swivels past me, and for a moment he looks lost in thought. Then he focuses on me again, and his voice is low as he responds, "My little brother's college graduation."

"That's exciting."

"Yeah, well," Lewis replies, as if it's anything but. "He doesn't even know I'll be in the city, so I'm not sure I'll go."

He sounds like it's normal to skip a sibling's graduation. To me, the thought of missing any of the big events happening in Karo's life feels wrong. When she got promoted to her current job as social media manager at a publishing company, I felt sad for a whole week because I was too tied up at the lab in Phoenix to fly out and celebrate with her, and although we live on the same continent now, the seven-hour train ride that separates us still feels too far.

"What's holding you back?"

Instead of answering, he tips his head to the ceiling. "Looks like we're finally in the clear."

There's a blank screen where the seat belt sign used to be. A flight attendant wheels a food cart down the aisle, and the plane seems mercifully steady. Enough for me to finally lower my shoulders.

I'm burning with curiosity about his relationship with his brother, but it's obvious he's in less of an oversharing mood than I was so I don't push. "Thank you," I say instead, and give his hand one last squeeze before I let go. "Should we look at your abstract then? The deadline is in a few hours, right?"

"Noon—the conference is in Auckland, so midnight in

their time zone. It'd be nice to go. I've never been to New Zealand." While Lewis pulls his backpack out from under the seat, I bring myself into work mode and tie my hair into a bun. The back of my neck is still slick with the traces of my panic. "But first, I need to shorten it massively. I'm not sure what your area of expertise is, Dr. Frances . . . ?"

"Silberstein," I supply. Lewis's laptop slides out of his hands, and I catch it against my thighs. "Actually, my name is Franziska, but I go by Frances ever since I moved to the US. Lived in the UK, for a bit, too, which is why my English is all over the place. Anyway. My area of expertise is cognitive neuroscience. I investigate the mechanics of memory in the human brain, so I'm not sure how much I can help with your physics stuff."

He frowns. "Physics?"

I wave to the tinted window, where the clouds pile up behind the tip of the wing. "I assumed. Since you gave me a quick rundown of aerodynamics."

"Um, I'm not a physicist. Just a bit of a nerd, that's all." His cheeks redden again.

"What's your research about then?"

He seems strangely nervous, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down the column of his throat. "I'm a neuroscientist. Cognitive neuroscientist, to be precise." He pauses and fumbles with the crew neck of his T-shirt. "I think . . . we've exchanged a few emails."

I shoot him a questioning look. "I'm pretty good with names, but I don't remember a Lewis."

A corner of his mouth ticks down. "I also didn't remember a Frances. Lewis is my middle name and what my friends call me. But I publish under my first and last name."

Because he's clearly stalling now, I narrow my eyes at him. "Well, what's your name?"

Lewis clears his throat, and just then, Murphy throws me his finest curveball. “You probably know me under the name Theodore L. North, and I’m afraid I may have just submitted a comment discussing your recent paper on detecting neural replay with fMRI.”