

# WRITER REWIRED

MURRAY EILAND

## CHAPTER ONE

Mondays are the enemies of working people the world over, but for Elif, every day is Monday. Whether it is Tuesday, Wednesday, or even Thursday, with the promise of the weekend around the corner, the thought of going to work the next morning never ceases to exhaust her. But despite how much she hates going to work, Elif still loves being a reporter. Unlike most of her friends, who spend hours complaining about their career choices and more fulfilling things they would rather be doing, Elif loves being a reporter. Her problem with her job has nothing to do with her career choice. The problem, she knows, is in the position she holds.

Working at the giant news agency, Kadir, had seemed like a dream at first. Elif had known of Azra Saglam, the brilliant and beautiful founder and CEO of the online news outlet since she was a university student. She had even written a term paper about Azra like the dedicated fan she was. So, when she applied to work at Kadir shortly after graduating, she never imagined she would get an interview. Even now, as she walks into the building with her employee ID and pass hanging around her neck, she can barely believe how easy it was to achieve this dream. However, she must admit that working here is not all she thought it would be.

“Hey, Elif,” Sam, the burly security guard, says as she enters the lobby. “Looking good as always.”

“Thank you, Sam,” she replies with a smile and slows her pace, basking in appreciation.

“My friend just opened a restaurant down the road from here. It’s supposed to be the new big thing in the city. All I need is a ‘yes,’ and I can get us a reservation,” he says with a big smile.

“Thank you, Sam, but for the billionth time, I do not date people I work with,” she says with her smile still intact and hurries away before he tries to convince her like he always does. Honestly, the man is not a bother. In fact, he is one of the few things she likes about working at Kadir, so asking her out is just a daily dance, like an informal tradition only they know about.

As she hurries into the closing elevator, joining two co-workers she does not know well, Elif catches her reflection in the elevator door. Her short black dress stops above her knees, exposing her slender, athletic legs. She imagines Azra, who is slightly shorter, might stare her down today. Her dark hair is packed neatly in a bun, and her face is adorned with minimal makeup and tiny earrings. Azra does not like being upstaged at her company, and Elif does what she can to fit in.

Emre is already at their shared desk when Elif arrives. Although he is the newest hire, he has already gained the kind of company-wide popularity only striking looks can bring. He is a nice man and already a good enough friend that Elif knows he is not an attention hog. Besides, the man used to be in the military, so their lunch breaks are always filled with the fascinating stories he has to share.

“Hey,” Elif says as she settles into her seat opposite Emre.

“Hey,” he says, tilting his head so Elif can see his face beside his computer screen. “Rumor flying around the office this morning is that Azra has some exciting new stories to assign.”

Elif’s ears immediately perk up at that. Since she started working here nine months ago, all she has done are silly, fluffy articles about cute cats and fishermen who catch giant fish. She is sure most of their audience does not care about those puff pieces, but she keeps doing them anyway because she believes they are stepping stones toward the more serious stories she would rather be reporting on. “Really?”

“Yes, and I think she is going to have something for you this time,” Emre says.

Elif cannot help the smile that spreads across her face. “You think so?”

“Yes, definitely,” Emre says with an encouraging smile. “Azra always has amazing things to say about your work, and she has been dropping hints for weeks that she wants you to do more serious work.”

Although Emre’s words are encouraging, and she hopes Azra gives her a serious story to work on, Elif has learned not to hold her breath regarding Azra and her administrative methods. That is the only way to avoid disappointment.

Shaking thoughts of Azra from her mind, Elif turns on her computer and opens her email. The first real one she sees at the top of her inbox with the subject “Check This Out” is buried under only a small pile of spam. It’s from

her friend, Maria. She clicks it open immediately, and her eyes roam the body of the email. There is a short text where Maria adds links to a developing story that might interest Elif.

Since she started working as a reporter, Elif has had to endure numerous "pitches" of "interesting stories" from friends. None of these stories has ever panned out to be anything worth chasing, so she has learned to take these ideas with a grain of salt. But Maria is not one to just ask her to check something out for no reason. She is the most discerning of all her friends, except when picking a man for herself. Elif knows that whatever this is, it might be worth checking out.

With one click, the link opens on her browser and takes her to an anonymous blog page.

"This is... something," she says as her eyes roam through the web page's contents. At first, the long sensational headlines and winding sentences that comprise the articles published by this anonymous blogger seem like a foreign language to Elif. Words like "doping," "illegal," and "unethical" are thrown around with absolutely no regard for their context. It is obvious she is looking at the work of a non-professional who doesn't care much for clarity. However, piece by piece, the core information starts to reveal itself. The blog discloses information about doping, the slang term for mental enhancement surgery. Whoever is behind these articles knows a lot about the people who have had neural implants.

What Elif knows about neural implants and the people who have them done is mainly limited to what she has heard on the news and the rumors that flew in whispers across her college dormitory's corridors. She knows the fundamental facts - that neural implants, when successful, can boost a person's academic output by almost 1,000 percent. People with these implants can write academic papers with only a part of their mind and minimal concentration. Although how it works is an explanation that still eludes her, she knows that with a neural implant, a person can write academic papers, analyze months of research, or grade hundreds of student reports while simultaneously doing everyday tasks like cooking, driving, or even sleeping. Once these things are done in the neural implants (which, scientifically speaking, are microchips and neurons inserted into the cerebral cortex), they can be downloaded via One Touch to a personal computer.

By the time she resumed college in 2049, neural implants were already widely known about in the academic environment, even if the general public

had not yet been aware. There were incessant debates about their ethical implications and who should be allowed to have them. Elif remembers one discussion in particular where a physics professor insisted it was no different from doping with drugs in professional sports and should be treated as such, while a professor of Latin believed anyone should be allowed to do as they wish. "Humans should be allowed to reach their full potential; otherwise, we will plateau and never reach higher levels of civilization," he said, and many agreed.

It has been five years since her first year in college, and she is no longer deep within the academic community hearing about recent developments in neural implants. What she knows as a layperson and journalist is that neural implants are legally banned in most countries, especially in the West and in America in particular. The obvious argument for their ban is that they generate an unreasonable and unsustainable level of productivity that humans just aren't designed to deliver, and allowing academics to exploit the advantages in everyday settings would be a dangerous precedent. What next? Would workers in hazardous jobs need to be engineered to do the job? Would students be encouraged to have implants to enhance their studying and output? What were the long-term effects of doping? Besides, the implants are ridiculously expensive, and the corporations behind them fully exploit the academic community's well-known cutthroat nature and irrational desire for prestige and promotion. However, she can see things have now turned chaotic from the blog posts in the link Maria sent.

If this anonymous, non-professional writer is to be believed, thousands of academics from around the world are flying into Turkey under the guise of medical tourism to have neural implants applied in a few hospitals that cater to them. Unfortunately, it is not legal in Turkey either, but they are unlikely to get caught.

Before long, Elif's confusion turns to complete fascination. Her intuition that Maria would not send her on a fool's errand is correct. There is definitely a story to be told here with these academics and the Turkish hospitals, and she wants to be the one to tell it. Before Elif's excitement dissipates and she begins to doubt her ability to bring this situation to life and onto the pages of *Kadir*, she opens the "Contact Us" section of the blog. There, she finds the email of the person behind the blog, comically monikered 'AntiNeuralImplantRebel.' She composes a quick email, introducing herself as a journalist interested in bringing this story to a broader audience, and adds multiple means for the blogger to contact her. Before hitting send, she rereads

the email, careful not to come across as desperate. She is, of course. It is a real story that will have a significant impact. When she is satisfied with the tone of the mail, she hits send and waits patiently in front of the laptop for a minute as though the blogger would magically respond immediately.

“Pfft,” Emre’s voice suddenly grabs her attention. “Look alive. The boss is coming.”

Azra Saglam is the kind of person who walks into the room with an air of knowing she owns it. Elif wonders where she learned to walk like a queen bee. Besides, her father is Adlee Saglam, the oil tycoon known for his lavish lifestyle and overarching philanthropy. Azra has walked through life with red carpets at her feet at every turn.

“Hello,” Azra says with a smile as she stops in the small space shared by Elif, Emre, and four other junior reporters. Her wide smile highlights her high cheekbones and exposes her pearly white teeth, which are too perfect to be natural. Today, she is dressed in a purple silk top, black Palazzo pants, and gorgeous purple pumps that Elif is certain cost more than her rent.

“Good morning, Azra,” Lydia, one of the other junior reporters, says excitedly. Elif shares a look with Emre, and they both roll their eyes. So far, everybody knows Lydia is a suck-up whose enthusiastic greetings are only to gain favors with Azra.

“It’s a new week, and I am excited about all the amazing things we will be working on,” Azra begins, ignoring Lydia. “A few of the more senior reporters already have things they are working on, so some of you will be called upon once or twice to help with research, editing, and proofreading. It is their prerogative, but please make yourself available when they need you. In the meantime, some of you will be assigned a few important pieces to be published in our special women’s issue due next month.”

Immediately after Azra says this, Elif cannot help the smile that takes over her face, and although she does not look at him, she knows that Emre is watching her. She truly wants this big break, and she and Emre know it, and she just wishes Azra knew it, too.

“Lydia,” Azra says. “You will be writing a profile on the new dean at the university. She is only the second woman in the university’s 100-year history, so make her look good. Elif...”

“Yes?” Elif says, unable to hide her excitement.

"I want you to go to city hall and interview those women who do the traditional dancing for special occasions. Their group has been doing it for thirty years, which many people will want to read about. Something feel-good," Azra says, then turns away from Elif. "Everybody else, please make yourselves available if anyone needs your help. Have a great week."

As Azra walks away, Elif tries as hard as she can to hide her obvious disappointment but fails. It does not help that Lydia has a triumphant smirk on her face and is clearly elated about being the one writing the more serious article. On the one hand, Elif is happy that she will have her name at the top of an article as its lead reporter. But, on the other hand, she just wishes it was a better story.

"Azra!" Elif calls out suddenly, surprising everyone, including herself. Azra might not be a mean boss per se, but she is still one of those bosses that employees would rather speak to only if she speaks first.

Elif catches up with Azra, whose long strides have taken her out of earshot of all the other junior reporters, and just as she feared, Azra stares her down as she looks up and down at her outfit. Elif does not let this deter her, though. "Thank you so much for trusting me with that story of the traditional dancers down at city hall."

"Of course," Azra says with a patronizing smile. "You are one of the best junior reporters we have. I trust you will do a great job and get some great images, too." She begins to turn away to leave, but Elif quickly stops her again.

"Well, thank you for saying that, but I may be able to take on more impactful stories with my abilities.

"Oh," Azra says, her expression softening slightly. I understand that 'dancers at city hall' might not be what you want. That is fine. Unfortunately, all the other stories have been assigned. We will have to find something else for you."

"What if I have something I could work on?" Elif says, feeling bold. "It won't fit in the women's issue, but it will be a great story for our general publication when it is done."

"You have your own idea?" Azra asks with an approving smile. "What's it about?"

"It is about academic doping," Elif says, and immediately after the words leave her mouth, she sees Azra's entire body stiffen.

“No,” Azra says simply. “You will not chase nonsense stories like that.”

“But I saw this anonymous blog...”

“Anonymous blog?” Azra asks with a scoff. “There is no way to verify facts on muckraking sites,” she said definitively. “And I was really excited, Elif. I thought you had something substantial. Focus on the city hall dancers and let go of that nonsense conspiracy story. My door is open if you have a better story another time.” Elif thought Azra spoke very slowly to emphasize that she could choose her next story if she dropped this one.

Still, Elif watches Azra walk away, feeling equally embarrassed and annoyed. Not only does she have to do the story about the dancers, but her boss has also completely discarded the first thing she has been excited about in weeks.

Quietly, she walks back to her desk and slowly sits down, aware the others are looking at her. She feels blood race to her cheeks and realizes she must be blushing.

“Maybe next time,” Emre whispers, sounding almost as disappointed as she feels.

“Yes,” she says with a grimace bordering on a snarl. “Maybe next time.”

## CHAPTER TWO

For the rest of that week, Elif handles the story she has been assigned. She goes to city hall and watches the women dance. Like everyone else, she is enamored by their art and enthralled by the things they can do with their bodies. Her fascination doubles when she talks to them about the history of their art.

While doing this and trying to be the most agreeable and diligent employee of the month, Elif hopes she won't forget all the information she learned about doping. It has been four days since she sent the email to AntiNeuralImplantRebl with no response. However, no matter how much she allows herself to be enchanted by the dancing at city hall, she cannot forget about the doping story. To be honest, she is not trying that hard.

During breaks, Elif finds herself reading articles and watching videos on the subject. Just as Azra said, many of the threads are conspiracy theories,

but she finds a few of them to be quite knowledgeable. She suspects some were even written by the doctors involved.

As she sits opposite Emre in the corner booth of the small restaurant where they have lunch every day, she scrolls through a New York Times article written by a professor from Princeton on the threats that doping poses for the future of research.

“Are you okay?” Emre asks, startling her a little.

“Yes,” Elif says. “Just reading an article.”

If Emre says anything after that, Elif neither knows nor cares because a notification on her screen completely steals her attention.

*It states tersely, “We do not talk to reporters, but if you want to tell a story, find Michelle Woodward. She is a student at Dunham University. Do not try to contact us again because we will not respond.”*

Elif stares at her phone, unable to properly process what she is reading. She cannot say what kind of response she expected from whoever was behind the account, but it was definitely not this. She has nothing to work with and no indication whatsoever that any of her questions might be answered. All she has are questions and more questions. Who is Michelle Woodward? Where is she supposed to find the time to look for a university student?

“Are you sure you are feeling well?” Emre asks with one eyebrow raised in curiosity. From the look on his face, Elif realizes her face must be filled with uncertainty. She considers telling him once again that it is nothing, which, knowing Emre, would be enough to get him off the topic, but suddenly, she realizes that, unlike her, he is not working on an active story.

“Actually, there is something,” she says, pushing her chair closer toward him as though she feared someone might be eavesdropping. “But you have to promise me this will stay between us.”

“What is it?” he asks, his curiosity piqued.

“I have a lead on a developing story about Turkish hospitals where worldwide academics are going to get neural implants,” Elif says. “I pitched it to Azra, but she dismissed it as a conspiracy theory. So now, I have to do this research myself and unveil the story so I have something substantial to present to Azra to show it is worthy of publication.”

“Hmm,” Emre replies simply.

“What?” Elif asks. “Is that a good hmm or a bad hmm?”



“What’s a ‘bad hmm’?” he smirks.

“A ‘bad hmm’ means you agree with Azra that this is a foolish chase I need to drop,” Elif says.

“I don’t agree with Azra,” he says, and Elif releases the breath she did not even realize she was holding. “That ‘hmm’ was because I have heard rumors that Azra has a neural implant.”

“What?” Elif says sharply, sitting up. Not in a million years could she have imagined the conversation going in this direction. She had thought that she would be the one to do all the talking and Emre would just listen, but clearly, he now had something to say, and she had no choice but to listen.

“Yeah. I’ve heard one or two people gossip about it, but I don’t take them seriously. People will say anything if you give them an audience and a bottle of coke.”

“Ugh,” Elif groans. Emre tends to divert from the topic at hand and never ceases to annoy her. “What did they say about Azra?”

“Nothing substantial or worthy of being taken as absolute truth, really, but if she doesn’t want you anywhere near this story, then maybe it is because she is part of it,” he says, casually taking a sip of his water.

“Oh, my God,” Elif says, leaning back in her chair. “That could be true. So if I am going to do this, I have to present some very conclusive evidence, something that she cannot refute.”

“Yeah,” Emre says with a shrug.

“I need your help,” Elif says.

“No.”

“Please, Emre.”

“No, do it yourself,” he says, looking anywhere but at her. This is the only way to keep himself from succumbing to that helpless expression she wears whenever she needs him to do something.

“I would do it myself, but I have that thing with the dancers at city hall,” she says. “Besides, if Azra really has neural implants, she might have someone watching me to see if I am still chasing this story.”

Emre still looks skeptical, but Elif can see the wheels turning in his head and his expression softening slowly, so she ramps up her ‘pleading’ face

and hopes desperately that he agrees. There is literally nobody else at work she would trust with the information she has.

For the rest of lunch and the walk back to their office, Elif tells Emre how she came across the story, what she knows about doping, and her lead on the story. Emre is impressed for the first two parts, but when she tells him all she has is the name of some girl in a university, he is disappointed.

"I know that it is not a lot, but I think we can work from there," Elif says. "I'm sure we can find the girl somehow." Emre nods thoughtfully. "Okay, I'll help you out. But we have to be careful, Elif. If Azra has someone watching you, we don't want to endanger ourselves."

Elif nods in agreement. "I know, I know. But we have to do this. We can't let something like this go unreported."

They arrive back at the office, and Elif immediately pulls up the email from AntiNeuralImplantRebl. "Okay, so this Michelle Woodward person is our only lead. We have to find her."

Emre leans over her shoulder, reading the email. "Hmm, let me see what I can find on her. Maybe she has a social media account."

Elif nods eagerly as Emre walks to his desk and begins to type away on his computer.

"Found her," he says in barely thirty seconds.

"What?" Elif exclaims in shock and excitement, getting up immediately to see Emre's computer screen. "How did you find her so quickly?"

"Kids these days put everything on social media," he says teasingly. "All I had to do was search for her name with Dunham University, and here are pictures of her standing next to the Blue Mosque a few days ago."

"Oh," Elif says, taking in the picture, still unable to believe her luck. Michelle Woodward reminds Elif of her younger sister, Defne, with her hair packed into a high ponytail and the carefree way she smiles in her pictures. She looks like a young adult who still has the innocence of a child. Elif cannot help but wonder how someone like this could be involved with doping.

"So, what do you want me to do?" Emre asks. "How do you want me to approach this?"

"This is a sensitive story that could be very political, not to mention scandalous. I imagine this Michelle girl will put up some resistance if

cornered, so you must be persistent and smart about how you approach her. Employ some of that Emre charm I have heard so much about.”

“You’ve heard I’m charming?” he asks her with a smirk.

“Don’t even start,” she says, rolling her eyes playfully and returning to her seat.

In fact, this playfulness and recognition of kindred spirits drew them to each other and quickly turned them into friends. Sometimes, even though they try not to make it obvious, Elif sees all the other girls around scowl at her for being so close to Emre. They must think they are having some kind of affair, and Elif would not blame them for thinking that. However, she still has her personal rule not to date co-workers, and Emre is a fantastic friend. A friendship this easy is not one she wishes to jeopardize, no matter how many jokes he makes.

Emre spends the rest of the day planning how to reach Michelle Woodward, and Elif watches him work from her seat, occasionally glancing over to see what he is doing. She is impressed with his thoroughness and dedication to uncovering the truth, even if it is all for her sake. As the day wears on, Emre sends several emails to Michelle, each carefully worded to avoid alarming her, and Elif can see the determination in his eyes as he types away, not once giving up on the task at hand.

Finally, just before they leave for the day, Emre gets a reply from Michelle. Elif’s heart races as she watches Emre read the email, hoping it will be a positive response. When he finishes reading, he turns to Elif with a grin.

“We got her,” he says. “She agreed to meet me at a coffee shop near her hotel.”

Elif feels a surge of excitement. They are finally going to get some answers. “Yes, now remember, don’t badger her. Be gentle and reasonable.”

“I’ve got this,” Emre says with a confident smile. “I’m charming, remember?”

For the rest of the day, Elif does all she can to focus on something else, specifically the story about the dancers at city hall. She has yet to start writing the piece, and the first draft is due in two days. Yet, she cannot stop imagining how Emre’s meeting with Michelle will go. The obsessive part of her wonders desperately if she should disregard Azra and just go to the meeting with Emre, but she knows that’s a terrible idea.

"So, I will tell you how the meeting goes," Emre says as the two gather their things to leave at the end of the workday.

"Please do," Elif says, walking beside him toward the elevator.

"Hi, Emre, Elif." Elif hears Lydia's voice before she joins them in front of the elevator door and stands on the other side of Emre.

"Hi, Lydia," Emre says in his usual friendly tone.

"So, I might need some help with the story I'm working on with the dean. Do you want to help me?" Lydia asks with the right corner of her lips curved slightly upward, and Elif resists the urge to roll her eyes and groan.

"Sorry, I can't," he says. "I'm already helping Elif."

"Really?" Lydia asks mockingly. "All she's working on is that fluffy article about the dancers."

"It's always nice talking to you, Lydia," Elif says as she steps into the elevator, and Emre follows her. "Have a great rest of your day."

Before Lydia can respond, the elevator door closes, and Elif finally gets to roll her eyes freely. "I hate that girl."

"She's not that bad," Emre says with a playful chuckle. "She's just unreasonably competitive."

"Well, I'm not her competition in any way, so I want no interaction with her."

The ten seconds she spent talking with Lydia aggravates Elif more than she would have liked. If Lydia openly criticizes what she is working on, what has she been saying behind her back? Now, more than ever, she knows she must properly uncover the doping story. It is not just to tell the truth but also to save her reputation.

### CHAPTER THREE

Emre leaves the office with a new sense of purpose. The sky is a bright blue, and the sun shines gloriously against the clear sky as he says goodbye to Elif. He walks confidently as he makes his way to a short taxi ride to the cafe. In his experience, people tend to shy away from talking to you when you tell them you are a reporter, and if they do speak to you, they are less likely to be truthful. So, he wears a disguise of a pair of glasses and a fake ID card, just in

case he needs it. Emre is determined to get to the bottom of this story and knows that Michelle is the key to everything.

From Michelle's social media posts, he has learned she is a chemistry major at the university and stays in Sinclair Hall. Her roommate is a girl named Dalia, and both girls are big fans of some rock band Emre has never heard of. Although he had meant it to be a joke the first time he said it, it is disturbing how much you can find out about a stranger by snooping through their social media.

He arrives at the coffee shop fifteen minutes early. In his email, he told Michelle he was a Ph.D. candidate who wished to interview her about microbiology. As he sits and waits for her, he hopes she trusts him a little before his cover gets blown.

As someone who spent a considerable part of his youth in the Turkish army, watching students walk around in a less strict environment like this is a sight to behold. Yes, he earned a journalism degree while in the army and also made friends that would last a lifetime, but some parts of those experiences are buried so deep within his consciousness that he is unsure if he will ever allow them to resurface. Even now, as he tries to think about his experience in the army on just a surface level, his body cannot help but shiver a little.

"Hello," a thin voice says from behind him, and Emre turns around to face Michelle. "Are you Emre?"

"Yes, I am," he says with a gentle smile. "Please, have a seat. It is nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you," Michelle says.

Emre's first impression of Michelle Woodward is of a timid girl who does not look like she has much to say. Emre had wondered if perhaps she was the one behind the anonymous blog or if she was a front for that person or organization. But now he sees her, she would have to be a diabolical mastermind for that to be the case.

He decides to take the lead in the conversation, hoping to make it easier for her. "Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me. I'm conducting a research project and heard you are one of the best chemistry students on campus. I thought I could learn something from you," he says with a charming smile.

Michelle looks at him with a hint of suspicion in her eyes. For a moment, he panics that he might have overdone it while trying to make her feel comfortable. "What kind of research?"

"It's on gene modification," he says, hoping desperately that she would not ask too many questions. His brother is a microbiology major and can go on and on about his work. That is the only reason he might have something to say regarding what he claims to be his research topic, but if she asks too many questions, she will soon clearly see that he is lying.

"Oh," she says, her initial skeptical expression turning into one of excitement. "Gene modification is an area I am really interested in. What direction are you looking to take your research?"

Before he answers, Emre considers continuing this dance for a few minutes by pretending to know anything about what he is talking about, but the sun is beginning to set, and Michelle looks too innocent; he just cannot bring himself to keep her in the dark. He decides to steer the conversation toward his goal. "I am trying to discover how academic doping might be a long-term factor in how gene expression changes."

As soon as Emre says the word "doping," Michelle's body visibly stiffens, and although she tries to hide it, it is too late. Emre has seen that she knows something about the subject and might be willing to talk if the situation is right.

"Oh," she says, trying to keep her voice steady, but her face betrays her. "That is an interesting topic you want to work on."

"You think so?" Emre asks, attempting to lure her into talking about it.

"Yes," she says, shifting in her chair uncomfortably. "You know what? I just realized I have a study group in ten minutes and have to go. I am really sorry. If you want to reschedule, we can talk some other time, or maybe on the phone."

"Wait, Michelle," Emre says emphatically, stopping her in her seat as she tries to stand up. Now, as they stare at each other, Emre can see fear pooling in Michelle's eyes, and Michelle is beginning to realize that Emre might not be exactly who he claims to be.

"What do you want?" she asks, her voice breaking with every word. "I have not done anything wrong."

“Anything wrong?” Emre asks, a little taken aback. “I am not here because I think you have done anything wrong.”

“Then why are you talking to me here about doping?” she asks, the agitation in her voice growing.

“Look, I’m a reporter with Kadir, a news agency in Turkey, and I’m working on a story about doping and the hospitals doing them underground in Turkey. I got the tip to contact you from AntiNeuralImplantRebel. Whoever they are, they think you can help me bring some light to this. I am not here to accuse you of anything or make you uncomfortable. I just want to talk.”

“The blogger asked you to come to me?” she asks.

“Yes,” Emre says. “Perhaps they think we could help each other.”

Michelle scoffs at that. “I don’t know how you could help me. Unless you can get my parents to change their minds about me having the procedure.”

“Your parents are making you have the procedure?”

Michelle does not respond to Emre’s question immediately. From her pursed lips and furrowed brows, it is apparent that she is considering whether or not Emre is someone that she wants to talk to about this thing going on in her life. Just as Emre is about to fill the silence with another question, she lets out a deep sigh and opens her mouth to talk. “You know how the academic world is these days. It is very competitive, and everybody is trying to claw their way to the top.”

“Yes,” Emre says, shaking his head affirmatively. “I’m aware these neural implants are used by those who wish to boost their chances of getting tenure and becoming full professor.”

“Yes, but that’s old news. That was a few years ago,” Michelle says with a sad smile.

“What do you mean?”

“Doping has gone beyond just professors now; students dope too.”

“What?” Emre can’t hide his shock. “Are you serious?”

“Unfortunately, I am. Naturally, the competition has become even stiffer, and if you have dreams to ever work in academia, you will have to dope or watch your dreams go up in flames in front of you. From a child, all I have wanted to be is a chemist. I’ve had dreams of conducting groundbreaking research in top universities worldwide. Maybe if I had studied ten years ago

when everything was fair and getting into a good master's and Ph.D. program was based on your talent and abilities, things would have been much easier. But that's not the case now. Someone like me who is yet to have the incredible research output that doping brings cannot even dream of getting a scholarship to a good school."

"So, your parents are asking you to dope to better your chances?"

"Exactly," Michelle says with a dry chuckle. Emre knows she does not find this even remotely funny.

"But why would they want you to do that? Why can't they just let you work based on your abilities? Aren't they worried about the cost and all the possible side effects?"

"I don't think they are," Michelle says, adding, "I think they have been doped too."

"Okay, this is more serious than I thought," Emre says, sitting up in his seat. "Which hospital do you intend to have this procedure done at? You must tell me."

"I can't," Michelle says, standing up to leave. "I've already said too much. I have to go."

"Wait, Michelle. Just tell me the name of the hospital," Emre says, but it is too late. Michelle mutters another apology and hurries out of the coffee shop as though she is being chased.

Emre does not know what to do for a minute. He stays still, thinking about everything he has heard and allowing it to fully settle into his mind. Still slightly bewildered, he gets up and hurries out of the coffee shop. Just as he steps out, he sees Michelle climb into a taxi, so he quickly stops another one and instructs the driver to follow. As they drive slowly through the university campus, he brings out his phone from his pocket and dials Elif's number. She picks up after the first ring.

"Hello," she says. "Have you seen her?"

"Yes, and trust me, this is much better than either of us expected," Emre says.

"What?" Even through the phone, Emre can feel Elif's excitement at what he just said. "What did she say? What does she know?"

"I don't think we should discuss this on the phone," Emre tells her. "Right now, I'm following her, and I think she might lead us to a big



breakthrough in this story. Once I see where she's going and you've got home, I'll come to your apartment, and we can talk about it."

"Alright," Elif says. "Just be careful."

"I will," he says, then hangs up the phone.

"They're heading out of Istanbul," the driver says. "Should I keep following them?"

"Yes, please," Emre says.

"That's double the fare," the driver says.

"Alright," Emre responds. "Just keep your eyes on her."

Michelle's taxi cruises slowly but steadily along. It is already dark outside, and Emre becomes aware of the increasing unpredictability of the situation.

"Where could she be going?" He thinks out loud.

"Probably Galen's Hospital," the driver says. "A lot of the university students seem to go there. So, I must ask, why are you following that taxi?"

"My little sister is in it," Emre says. "Our parents think she might be getting wayward."

"Oh," the driver says simply. Emre cannot tell whether he believes him. "Looks like I was right," he says as Michelle's taxi pulls into the Galen's Hospital parking lot.

At Emre's instruction, the driver stops several paces from Michelle, who hurries out of the taxi and heads toward the hospital's emergency entrance.

"Thank you," Emre says as he hastily pays the driver and follows Michelle.

"Good luck with your sister, and please be gentle with her. You know how these young people can get," the taxi driver says.

Emre does not respond because he is keeping his eyes on Michelle, who does not enter the hospital's main complex. Instead, she goes around it toward the back, looking around as if afraid of being watched.

More than ever, Emre is confident that Michelle is at this hospital because he is following her. Before going any further, he considers calling Elif to tell her to meet him here so that whatever he uncovers, they will see

together. However, he is a military man, and he is unafraid. Besides, there is still the slight possibility that Michelle is at the hospital for a silly reason, like a sore throat, so he puts this phone away and follows her.

Michelle turns a sharp corner a short distance from the hospital's main complex, and Emre follows closely to avoid losing her. Immediately, a small building the size of a family bungalow comes into view. Emre's body reacts to seeing this building before his brain can process it. His heartbeat accelerates, he starts to sweat profusely, and his knees wobble. When he tries to breathe, his airways feel closed, and he clutches his chest as his ribcage tightens.

Emre finds the nearest wall for support and leans on it. At this moment, he no longer cares about losing Michelle. Instead, he wants his body's fight or flight response to switch off.

The memories manifest as he catches his breath. They come in short flashes and fast recollections. He sees himself at his military training camp, a young and impressionable soldier who listens to his superiors and does as they say. He remembers vividly, like it was yesterday, being brought to this very building in this hospital in the back of a van for what was described as a simple medical procedure. He remembers how afraid he was and how he had no choice.

"Oh, my God," Emre says with a gasp. "I have neural implants."

With this realization, he turns away from the building and hurries to leave. Knowing about the government-sanctioned horrors in that building, he wants to be as far away from it as possible, but his legs are still weak, and his body feels like it needs complete support. He does not get far before a black SUV pulls up before him, blinding him with its headlights.

"My name is Emre Sipal!" he screams. "I am a member of the Turkish armed forces."

That is all Emre can get out before he feels a sharp sting in his neck, and the tranquilizer enacts its numbing powers in his bloodstream.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Throughout that evening, Elif waits for Emre to come to her apartment as he said he would. She distracts herself with TV, fights sleep, and checks her phone regularly in case he texts her. She tries to call him multiple times but keeps getting disconnected. Eventually, she concludes that he must have

returned to his apartment because he was tired, although this was not his usual *modus operandi*.

The following day, Elif arrives at work half an hour earlier than usual and hurries in as quickly as possible. Even when Sam calls out to her in the lobby, she does not stop to talk to him like she usually does. She waves and hurries into the elevator, and when she gets up to her office and sees Emre sitting peacefully in his chair in a well-fitting white shirt, she heaves a sigh of relief and then frowns at him.

"You jerk," she says as she stands before him. "I texted and called, and you could not even be bothered to respond. For God's sake, you told me you were coming last night. I was worried sick."

Emre looks at her for a few seconds, trying to piece together everything she is saying and make sense of it, but nothing seems to click for him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Elif's frown immediately turns into a scowl. "I am not in the mood for your jokes; I was genuinely worried about you."

Emre searches Elif's face for signs that she might be joking, but he sees genuine concern. "Elif, I honestly have no idea what you are on about. Did I say I was going to meet you?"

"Okay, now I'm worried you're not joking," Elif says as she pulls a chair out from underneath the next desk and sits beside Emre. "Weren't you supposed to give me feedback on Michelle Woodward last night?"

"I remember us talking about her during lunch break, but after work, I just went home and slept because I was tired," Emre says.

"What is happening?" Elif asks, her confusion mounting with each passing second. She moves closer to him and drops her voice to the lowest volume she can manage. "Did somebody get to you? Is Azra watching you?"

"No," Emre says, his voice at a normal volume and one eyebrow raised. "*Nobody* got to me. This sounds like a conspiracy theory, Elif."

"You think I sound crazy?" Elif asks with a dry chuckle. "Something is going on here. We have to figure it out together."

"No," he says emphatically. "I'm no longer interested in whatever chase this is and suggest you let it go too. Azra was right. It is a silly conspiracy theory; even if it isn't, it is not your business."

Elif watches in absolute shock as Emre walks away from her. Not once in her life has she been in a situation so bizarre. She opens her phone and scrolls through her call log to confirm that she isn't going crazy. She sees Emre's name and the time he called her the night before. Someone must have gotten to Emre, and now that person is holding him and his information to ransom.

Elif lets her anger and rage fuel her. She gets up from the chair, grabs her bag off her desk, and heads straight out of the building. If whatever forces are at work here have gotten to Emre somehow, it only means she now has to do all this work alone. She stops a taxi and heads straight for Mehmet University. Over the past few days, she has watched numerous videos of Dr. Smith, a professor of sociology at the university and a vehement protester against neural implants. If anyone can offer some perspective during this confusing ordeal, it is him.

She tracks Dr. Smith just as he leaves his first class of the day, and when she tells him her mission, he leads her quietly into his office. "There are a few professors around who might be willing to talk to you," he says. "Professors who have had those implants and regret them."

One by one, Elif goes to the three professors whose names Dr. Smith provided. Of these three, only two agree to talk to her. One is a mathematics professor, and the other is an anatomy professor. The mathematics professor tells her how he was forced to implant a neural chip because of his high-profile job. He explains how he lost all control over his thoughts and actions after the implant. "It was like I was not in control of my own body. I did things I would never have done in my right mind," he says, shaking his head in disgust.

The anatomy professor tells her about the physical toll the implant has taken on his body. "I feel like I am always being watched," he says, his voice barely above a whisper. "They say the implant is supposed to help me with my memory and focus, but all it has done is made me paranoid and anxious." His eyes dart around the room as if expecting someone to walk in at any moment.

Elif listens intently to their experiences, taking notes and trying to connect the dots. But as each professor shares their story, it becomes increasingly clear that there is no easy way out. The government has too much power and too much at stake to let anyone who knows their secrets slip away. Besides, neither of the professors can remember the procedure, and she

imagines that it is the same for everyone. That must be how the government and these hospitals keep things under wraps.

"I know some doctors you can talk to," the anatomy professor says as she gets up to leave his office. "They were the ones who pioneered this neural implant research, and they have been trying to scrap it since they realized how horribly it has turned out. They might be able to shed more light on it."

"Thank you," Elif says, happy and sad in equal measure about this sudden breakthrough in her investigation.

"Thank you for telling this story," the professor says. "Most journalists are too afraid."

As she leaves Mehmet University, Elif thinks hard about what she is doing and wonders if all this is worth it. Her initial intention with this story was to use it as a stepping stone for her career. Now, she does not care if it jeopardizes her career; she just wants to uncover the truth. Perhaps that is why she keeps going, even though everything the professors have said and whatever has happened to Emre scare her to her bones.

"This is it," the taxi driver says as he stops in front of an abandoned warehouse.

"Are you sure?" she asks skeptically before leaving the taxi.

"Yes," the driver says, slightly exasperated. "This is the address."

"Alright," Elif says. The driver does not even wait for her to step entirely out of his car before he slams on his accelerator and races out of there as though he does not want to wait around any longer than necessary.

The warehouse is the only structure for several miles. It is surrounded by sparse vegetation, and the singular light source comes from a flickering streetlamp. Elif cannot help how afraid she is, but she thinks about Emre and Michelle Woodward and those professors and the numerous other people whose lives have been changed terribly because of these neural implants, and the desire to uncover the truth for their sakes propels her forward.

She pushes the entry buzzer at the warehouse entrance and waits patiently for a response. A deep male voice comes through the intercom, "Who's this?"

"I'm Elif," she says. "Professor Aslan sent me here."

"Okay," the voice says simply, and the intercom goes off.

When nothing happens for a while, Elif worries they won't let her in, but eventually, the door opens, and she is faced with several men and women in lab coats working hard on supercomputers. They are working so efficiently it is hard to imagine they were not coordinated somehow. It is immediately clear to her that this is a gathering of researchers who have most definitely had neural implants.

"Hello, Elif. I'm Dr. John James," the man who spoke to her on the intercom says as he leads her into the secret facility. Elif notes that she has never trusted a man with two first names. "Professor Aslan tells me you are a reporter interested in uncovering the truth about our invention."

"Your invention?" she asks, a little stunned.

"Yes," Dr. James says with a smile that does not quite reach his beaming eyes. "I'm afraid you are looking at the team whose work became the neural implants."

As they walk around the facility, going from desk to desk and examining information, Elif feels like a student on a field trip. Dr. James tells her the entire, unadulterated history of how neural implants came to be. For something so decidedly evil, neural implant research started off very harmlessly as nothing more than a graduate student's research work. After its potential was recognized by a few more experienced researchers, there was no stopping what it would become and the impact it would have.

"We just wanted a good thing, really," Dr. James says. "We imagined a world where, as an academic, all your ideas could come to life. Believe me, every successful academic, no matter how brilliant and dedicated they are, only gets to do about ten percent of the work they want to do in their lifetime. So we wanted to maximize human potential."

The problem began, Dr. James explained, when world powers and corporations caught wind of the project and started intervening. First, they attempted to forcefully take the product's patent from this team, and when that didn't work, they started their own development based on the researchers' work, and that is how the problem of underground hospitals charging so much and causing so much harm began.

"Wow," Elif says as she takes it all in, double-checking to ensure her phone records the conversation. She would hate to have to write all of this from memory. "But how does this concern the government, exactly? What is their business with the research output of college professors?"

"Well, Ms. Fisek, when the government started their research, they did not limit it to an increase in academic output as we did. They wanted something more," Dr. James says.

"In what way?" Elif asks.

"Soldiers."

"Soldiers?"

"At some point, while they were conducting their research, the government agency in charge of it found a way to modify those implants for application in the military. With these modified implants, soldiers can be faster, stronger, and more aggressive than a bull seeing a red cloth. The worst part is their memories can be controlled and erased at will. The military name for this procedure is SOL. You might have heard of it because it is widespread and talked about like it is some supplementary diet for our military when it is, in reality, something far more hazardous. There is even a different set of implants for military pilots and another one for spies to boost their memories to learn more languages and recollect larger sets of information."

"Oh, my God," Elif exclaims. Dr. James keeps talking, explaining the science behind this diabolical modification of his research work, but all Elif can think of is Emre. Could he have had the neural implant during his time in the military? It makes sense that he does not remember because most people don't, and it also explains why he can't remember the previous night. "Is there a way to reverse any of this?"

Dr. James takes in a deep breath and lets it out in a way that tells Elif she isn't going to like whatever he is about to say. "Unfortunately, not yet. But that is why we are here, and that is why we keep working. We created this evil, and we are determined to correct it. Thousands and thousands of people are cheating the system with this *doping*, and thousands of others do not even realize that they have been doped and are being manipulated by their own government. I am glad that there is someone as bold as you with a platform like yours willing to talk about this. I wish you great success in your endeavors." The whole laboratory smiles and waves her out of the door.

Elif hurries out of the facility before anyone can change their minds about the treasure of information she has. She has to walk for half an hour to find a taxi, but she is not tired. Her excitement about getting to the office and documenting everything she knows overpowers anything else she feels. The story needs to be told.

As the taxi driver drives down the mostly empty road, she looks at all the greenery and how a picturesque country view like this can give the illusion that everything is right in the world. But people's lives are not theirs, and the government that should protect its people is the enemy.

"Excuse me," she says when the driver takes a wrong turn. "I'm going toward the city center."

"I'm afraid you're not, Ms. Fisek," the driver says. "You're going on a short vacation."

"What? How do you know my name? Who are you?"

That is all Elif can say before her eyes close and darkness settles in.

\*

Elif has been back at work for two weeks since her vacation ended, and her work rate has increased so much Azra has promoted her, much to Lydia's chagrin. She and Emre are friendly as ever, and they playfully tease each other as they head toward Azra's office. They see she is on the phone, so they wait outside for her to finish and ask them to come in.

"Yes, General, I understand," Azra says.

"Elif was a close call. We must ensure all your reporters undergo the SOL program," the gravelly voice says.

"Yes, General," Azra says, aware that their conversation is over.

A faint sound like a "ding" goes off in Azra's head as she puts the phone down, and if anybody were to ask her what she was just talking about, she would not remember.

With a big smile and a wave of a hand, she ushers Elif and Emre into her office and asks them to sit. "So, the women's issue was such a success, I already have an idea for our next one. I want it to be about the glories of Turkish food. Some of my British friends were in town last week, and all we talked about..."

Elif sits comfortably by the coffee table, only half listening to Azra because the other half of her brain is actively working, producing an article she does not even realize she is writing.

END



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Murray Eiland holds a BA and D.Phil in archaeology and currently works as the Managing Editor of Antiquvs Magazine. He is an enthusiast of science fiction from the 1940s. Some of their academic work can be found here: <https://independent.academia.edu/MurrayEiland>. The magazine can be found here: <https://www.antiquvs-magazine.com/meet-the-team>.