

NEURALS

CHAPTER 1

Someone yanked my ponytail. I jumped as much from nerves as surprise and twisted around to find Bice, my mischievous older brother. His laugh lifted my spirits until I noticed his eyes. Something was up.

“Sorry about that, Ali,” he said, the little boys and girls giggled because I nearly fell off of Parker’s bed. She and her sister Taylor were two of the sweetest children in the kindergarten group I’d ever cared for.

“It’s their fault, too, you know.” Bice tickled Parker until she lost her breath. “They didn’t warn you I was behind you.”

“Me next. Do me next.” Taylor wanted to share in her twin sister’s joy.

That’s probably why I liked them so much. They were twins like me and Bice. They even wore matching rings to prove it. Their tiny fingers held half of a heart. Together a whole.

“He’s silly, isn’t he?” I slugged Bice in his arm.

“Ow.” He feigned pain and squeezed me tight. “How’s it going, sis?”

“Just reading them a story before lights out.” They all whined in unison when I stopped.

The worst part of life in 2026 was living it in The Loop. Not to have a home where you can be warm in your own bed was bad enough, but to have to sleep in a large room with others was even worse. Even though the twins were laughing now, nighttime was a different story. In the large room, the cries and sobs throughout the night reminded us that we were all alone among virtual strangers.

We were all brought to The Loop for one reason. We are all incredibly smart, so we were pulled from our parents by Circulus9 with the promise of a scholarship.

Most of us called our school The Loop, because it was built like a giant circle with pods jutting off in various places. They were the same all across the country. My Loop was just outside of North Atlanta. Nor-At for short.

Even though Bice and I have been here for ten years, it doesn't get any easier. My ward mates still cry in the night because they miss their families. I have to admit that even though I just turned seventeen years old I sometimes cry myself to sleep with my face buried deep into my lumpy pillow. Though I don't cry as often as I did when we first arrived, the pain and sadness always strike at night.

"I need to give you a head's up about tonight." Bice's smile faded.

The hair on my arms stood at attention. I hated being right sometimes.

"Kids, I'll be back in a second." I set the ratty-covered picture book down on the bed.

"Awww!" One of the little boys protested.

"It'll be okay, Philippe." Bice's warm brown eyes put them all at ease. "I won't keep her long. She'll be able to finish your story soon."

We walked just outside of the children's dorm, into the hallway. It was relatively secluded because the younger children were housed away from the older kids. My job was to care for them after our schooling was done, but I couldn't stay with them at night. The night is when they disappeared. Out of sight, out of mind.

"Tonight's the night." Bice tapped his watch.

Even though I knew what he was referring to, I always hated to hear about it. I feared for his life when they snuck children out of the Loop, but I knew they had to so the little ones would be safe from experimentation.

"Which ones?" I hoped it would be some of mine.

“You know I can’t tell you that.” Bice never told me which kids he planned to free. “In case we get caught.”

“I know, I know.” I chewed on my bottom lip. “I still don’t understand why you won’t let me help.”

“You do enough for these kids already. Leave the dangerous stuff to us.”

When he said *us*, I knew he meant Dante. Another member of the Resistance. Dante didn’t live in The Loop. He lived on the outside.

“When?” I asked but already knew what he’d say. “Never mind, you won’t tell me that either.”

Even though I loved the little kids I cared for, I secretly hoped he’d take some of mine. They deserved a chance to live. They all needed hope, even though they had no clue what they were really here for.

“I just wanted you to know, in case something happens to me.” Before I could say anything, Bice held up his hand. “Not that anything is going to happen. Trust me.”

My brother was careful and smart. He never took unnecessary risks when it came to helping the kids, but he wouldn’t give me details, because he said I was too sensitive. Because I was a girl. He was wrong, of course. Girls were strong, and he knew it.

He kissed me on the cheek, gave me a quick hug, then walked me back into the room.

“See you knuckleheads in the morning. See ya’ later, Ali-gator.” Bice’s little joke caused the kids to burst in an uproar of laughter.

“After a while, crocodile.” This was a typical routine before bedtime, but the kids always laughed like it was the first time they’d heard it.

Bice and I were older now, so we wouldn't see each other again until morning. The older boys and girls of The Loop lived in separate dorms.

He turned to go to the other side of The Loop, leaving me with the kids. He loved them as much as I did, so I knew that when he took them it was for the best.

"You finish the story now, *por favor*?" Julio asked.

"You got it, amigo." I opened the book to where I'd left off. As I read the last few pages, doing voices for the characters, I couldn't help but worry about my brother. I hated it when he put himself in harm's way, even though I knew it was for a worthy cause.

About half an hour later, I'd finished the story, tucked them all in and kissed them goodnight. I had twenty little kids that relied on me for protection and love. Love they'd probably never get anywhere else. Love we all needed.

I turned the lights out before the automatic timer shut them off. There was nothing worse than being in the middle of something and having everything slam off, leaving you in complete darkness. Without even a window to see the moon by. It was scary to the children. Honestly, it was scary to me.

After making it over to my ward, I went through my evening ritual of face washing, brushing my teeth, and changing into my school approved pajamas, which were more like itchy canvas.

I chatted with a few people in my ward, asking how their day went. Typical nightly banter. Some of the girls I bunked with took care of children, too, but many of them were responsible for other things like food preparation and cleaning. What we were told was woman's work. It always pissed me off to hear them say that, but I didn't mind working with the kids. I loved it, in fact, and hoped that one day when I was free of The Loop I'd have my own child.

I tossed and turned thinking of Bice. I couldn't sleep knowing that he risked his life to save the children. I worried about him, though I knew he was good at what he did.

Mostly, now, I worried about what we were all being used for. Plugged into a computer all day couldn't be good for anyone.

Taylor was still having trouble sleeping through the night. Oftentimes, she wouldn't fall asleep for hours, so I always went back to check on her after they'd been down for a few hours, even though it was against the rules. I'd snuck over and back many times without getting caught, so I grabbed my penlight and slipped out of my dorm.

When I peeked through the doorway to Taylor's dorm, it was pitch black. I flipped on the penlight. As usual, she stared wide-eyed and sat on the edge of her bed.

"I'm scared, Ali." Taylor mouthed her words, careful not to wake the others.

"I know, baby." I sat on the bed beside her. "I sometimes get scared at night. Want to know what I do when I'm scared?"

"Uh huh."

"I sing my favorite song softly, so nobody else can hear, and think of the people I love."

"Like Mommy and Daddy, and Sister?"

"Just like that," I said. "Give it a try."

She lay back down, and I tucked her in as her little lips moved to the song that played in her head. Her eyes closed and within minutes, she was sound asleep.

After kissing her on her cheek, I went from bed to bed and kissed each one of them on their cheek like I did every night before going back to my dorm and climbing beneath the worn sheets of my bed.

Just as I lay down and pulled the cover under my chin, the wall exploded into the room and knocked me off my bed.