

WHISPER

LYNETTE NONI

PROLOGUE

They call me “Jane Doe.”

They say it’s because I won’t tell them my real name, that they were forced to allocate me a generic ID. The name is ironic, since there’s nothing generic about me.

But they don’t know that.

They could have given me any name, but there’s a reason they chose “Jane Doe.” I hear the whispers. They think of me as little more than an unidentifiable, breathing corpse. That’s how they treat me. They prod, they poke, they badger and tweak. All of them want to coax a response from me. But their efforts are in vain.

Two years, six months, fourteen days, eleven hours and sixteen minutes. That’s how long I’ve been locked away from the world. That’s how long I’ve been pried for information, day in, day out. That’s how long I’ve been experimented on, hour after hour, week after week.

They don’t tell me much. It’s all confidential, highly classified. But they did give me the rundown when I first arrived. They prettied it up and wrapped a bow around their words, selling a dream and not the nightmare I’ve been living.

They said all the right things, lulling me into a false sense of security. But it was all lies.

“Lengard is a secret government facility for extraordinary people,” they told me. “It’s for people *just like you.*”

I believed them. That was my mistake.

I was stupid.

Gullible.

Hopeful.

I know now that there isn’t anyone else in the world *just like me.*

I’m different.

I’m an anomaly.

I’m a *monster.*

My name is not “Jane Doe.” But that is who I’ve become. And that is who I’ll remain. It’s safest this way.

For everyone.

CHAPTER ONE

“Subject Six-Eight-Four, place your hands above your head and turn to face the wall.”

The crackling voice comes through the intercom speaker beside the door to my cell. I know I have only ten seconds to do as I’m ordered before the guards come storming in here and force me to obey. My body can’t take any more abuse after my session with Vanik today, so I quickly stand and do as I’m told.

“We’re entering the room. If you make any sudden movements, we won’t hesitate to stop you.”

I don’t acknowledge their words. There’s no need. I know the drill by now. I know that even breathing too loudly could scare them into sending a Tasered bolt of electricity into my body. It’s happened before.

The guards take their jobs seriously at Lengard, the secret government facility buried deep underground that constitutes my “home.” I’m classified as a Level Five threat. They don’t know what that means, and that makes them nervous. All they know is that I’m dangerous. They’re wrong.

But they’re also right.

The door glides open and a *whoosh* of air hits the back of my bare legs. The regulation clothing I wear is little more than a shapeless pillowcase with holes at the neck and shoulders, falling to just above my knees. It offers no protection, no warmth, no comfort. It is durable; it is versatile. It's a constant reminder that there are no luxuries in life, not anymore. Not for someone like me.

“Subject Six-Eight-Four, you're coming with us. Remain in place until we have you secured.”

I'm still facing the wall, so they don't see my forehead crinkle with confusion.

Life at Lengard follows a strict, unchanging routine. Every day is the same. I'm woken first thing in the morning by a bowl of fiber-enriched, protein-infused, tasteless gruel being shoved through the slot at the bottom of my cell door. I have ten minutes to eat before I'm escorted to the bathroom and given five minutes. From there, I'm sent straight to Dr. Manning for my daily psych evaluation. That lasts two hours, and afterward I'm delivered to Enzo, who oversees my physical strength and endurance training for the next three hours. After that, I'm given fifteen minutes to shower and change into a fresh pillowcase uniform before I'm sent back to my cell for an hour, during which time another bland, protein-enhanced meal arrives. Following lunch, I have two hours of hell — officially referred to as “experimental therapy” — with Vanik, and if I make it out of his lab still conscious, I'm then shuffled between visiting practitioners and evaluators until they decree that I'm done for the day. That can take anywhere between two and six hours. I'm then given a nutri-shake — a drink filled with vitamins and nutrients to keep me in optimal health — and have five final minutes in the bathroom before I'm shoved back into my cell for the night.

The routine has never changed. Not once.

Until now.

My day is meant to be over. It's nighttime; I've ingested my nutri-shake and I've visited the bathroom for the final time. I'm supposed to be locked away until morning, when it all repeats again. I have no idea why they're deviating. But I stand still as the guards approach me from behind and reach up to grasp my arms, yanking them down to secure them in metal handcuffs behind my back.

When they turn me around, I see that the two men on either side of me are double my size. The handcuffs are unnecessary. I'm no threat to them physically. And no bindings will keep them safe from the real danger I present. Nothing can keep them safe from that.

"Follow us and remain silent," says the man on my left, reciting the same words the various guards use every time they lead me out.

He wraps his hand around my upper arm, and I almost wince at his painful grip, but I manage to keep my face carefully blank. I don't nod — I don't even blink. I stare straight ahead and place one foot in front of the other as they guide me out of the cell.

It's bright in the corridor. The overhead lights sear my retinas, and I struggle not to flinch. Instead, I tilt my head down and let my hair shield my eyes. I continue to focus on the gleaming black and white tiles underfoot as we proceed. I don't dare ask them where we're going. I heard their orders; I will remain silent. Even if I chose to ignore their warnings, I still wouldn't ask my questions. But they don't know that. And I won't tell them.

The guards lead me along hallways and through doorways — some paths I've traveled before, some I haven't. Lengard, I

discovered early on, is built like an underground labyrinth. A sterile, ultramodern, high-tech maze. Only those with the highest level of clearance know how to find their way around the facility, while I move about the corridors as good as blind, relying on them to deliver me where I need to go.

Right now we're moving deeper into the facility than I've ever been. The tiles are still black and white, the lights are still blinding, but there's more warmth to this area. I can't explain it — it's more a feeling than anything else — but the sterility doesn't seem as intense.

There are doors spaced out along the corridor, some of them labeled, but I don't read their descriptions. My head remains lowered, my eyes on my bare feet. I only glance up when we come to a halt. We've stopped at a dead end revealing a single doorway. It looks just like all the others we've passed, whitewashed and unassuming. There is no label on this one. I have no idea where it leads.

The guard not squeezing the blood from my arm moves to the panel beside the entrance and inputs his clearance code on the touch screen. My wariness grows when he lowers his face for a retinal scan and pricks his finger for a blood swab. In my whole time at Lengard, I've never been delivered to a location with such stringent security measures.

A quiet *beep* sounds, and the door slides open. I don't keep my head down anymore; my curiosity is piqued. But all I see is another identical corridor, black and white tiles, unassuming doorways.

I want to ask where we are, why clearance was needed to enter this area, what's different about this corridor. It looks the same, but there must be a reason for the added security at the entrance. Lengard has secrets — this much I already know. Other than the guards, I've never seen people walking the

hallways. Everyone else — if there even *are* others — is locked up. Just like me.

“Move.”

The pincer-grip guard yanks me forward, and I realize that I’ve been standing motionless for too long. I stumble a little at his rough action but regain my feet and move obediently onward.

We’re halfway down the corridor when something unexpected happens.

A doorway only a few feet in front of us bursts open, bringing with it a sound I haven’t heard in over two and a half years.

Laughter.

The guards jerk me to a halt when three children surge out of the entryway. Two golden-haired boys are cackling gleefully, one holding a rag doll above his head. A little girl with a head full of dark ringlets is chasing after them, shrieking and near tears.

“Give it back, Ethan! Isaac, make him give it to me! It’s *mine!*”

“You’ll have to catch us first, Abby!” taunts the boy with the doll, keeping it out of reach when the girl jumps for it.

“Don’t hurt her!” Abby cries, attempting to claw her way up the boy’s body. When the other boy pulls her away, she screams, loud and clear, “*Mummy!*”

I’m frozen to the spot, mesmerized by the sight in front of me. They’re so young. So carefree. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen an interaction so ... normal.

“Abby, what on earth is the matter?”

A woman steps out from the doorway, wiping soapsuds off her fingers with a dishcloth. Her eyes sweep over the scene, and she places her hands on her hips. “Ethan, Isaac, you know

better than to steal your sister's toys. Give the doll back and apologize." When the boys hesitate, the woman steps forward and lowers her voice. "Now."

Isaac quickly mumbles an apology, and a grumbling Ethan does the same as he hands over the doll. Little Abby clutches it to her chest and runs to hide behind her mother's legs.

"Back inside, all of you," the woman says. "You know you're not allowed to play in the hallways. I don't know what you were thinking."

She turns to shoo them back through the doorway and, as she does so, they catch sight of me for the first time. The children merely look curious, but the mother's reaction is much stronger. The emotion flooding her features — I've seen it before.

Pure, unadulterated fear.

"Kids, inside. Right now."

She all but shoves the children through the doorway and slams it shut behind them.

I feel as if I've lost a rainbow of color in my otherwise bleak, whitewashed world. Seeing people — normal people — sparked something in me. A memory. An emotion. A hint of a life long forgotten. But now it's gone again, hidden behind yet another doorway.

"Let's go," grunts the pincer-grip guard.

And just like that, it's as if that flash of beauty never happened.

We walk for two minutes, three minutes, four minutes and more, until we come to another dead end with a door, but this one is open. My non-gripping escort reaches out to rap his knuckles on the entry, and a commanding "Come in!" beckons us forward.

We step into some kind of office. There are no adornments on the walls, no framed accreditations or photos. There's not

even a bookcase. The room is without personality; perfectly functional, nothing more. A large mahogany desk takes center stage, but even that lacks the usual disordered chaos. No loose papers, no wayward pens, not even a coffee mug. The only disturbance on the otherwise-pristine surface is a touch screen tablet, powered up and emitting a soft glow.

A wave of apprehension overcomes me, and I look away from the tablet to meet the gaze of the man seated behind the desk.

“Jane Doe.”

His voice is as gravelly as his salt-and-pepper hair. Appraising eyes take me in, from my bedraggled hair to my bare feet. He tilts his head slightly, a muscle tenses in his jaw and he waits.

I don’t know if his words are a question or a statement. Either way, I see no point in responding. He’s wrong — and he’s right.

A silent beat passes as he continues to stare me down. I maintain eye contact even though I want to look away. Something tells me it’s important to hold his gaze.

Finally, he nods and turns to my guards. “Release her. And leave us.”

I can feel pincer-grip’s surprise. And his hesitation.

“But, sir —”

“That’s an order.”

The guard’s grip instantly disappears, while my other escort releases me from the handcuffs.

I move my hands around to my front and rub my wrists, while the two guards step back through the door and close it behind them. Only then does the gravelly man stand and walk slowly toward me.

He’s taller than I expected and, despite his hair color, his face shows only a few wrinkles, suggesting he is younger than

I first believed. He's immaculately dressed in business attire — including a sapphire button-up shirt underneath his blazer. He wears no tie, but his lack of regulation Lengard military uniform still puzzles me. I'm not the only person at the facility with clothing restrictions; all the people I've encountered here have been color-coded based on their position. The guards wear gray; the doctors, scientists and other evaluators wear pristine white; and the physical trainers wear a brownish-beige. There are no striking colors, no eye-catching shades of beauty. The inhabitants are nearly as whitewashed as the walls. But this man's blue shirt — it's almost hypnotizing.

I should have been watching his progress across the room rather than noting his clothing. Before I know it, he's standing directly in front of me.

"Jane Doe," he says again.

And again I don't respond.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you for some time."

I want to ask why. And I want to ask why he waited. But I stay silent.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me your real name?"

A stuttered breath is the only response I give him. It's been so long since anyone has asked me, since anyone has tried to find out who I really am.

"No? Nothing?"

He continues to wait, and only a slight tightening of his features reveals his frustration when I remain silent.

"I guess 'Jane' will have to do, then. For now. I'm Rick Falon."

He holds out his hand, and I look at it with trepidation.

Rick Falon. I've heard the guards whispering. I know exactly who he is.

Maverick Falon.

Director Falon.

The man in charge of Lengard.

“I understand that you’ve been down here for some time, but social courtesies haven’t changed much since your arrival,” Falon says, wiggling his fingers pointedly.

Feeling unbalanced, I slowly reach forward until my hand is clasped in his grip. He gives me a firm shake before releasing me once more.

“There now. It’s good to see you haven’t forgotten how to act like a human being. Vanik’s reports imply otherwise, but I know he tends toward the dramatic.”

I have no idea how I’m supposed to respond to that.

“Have a seat, Jane.” Falon gestures toward one of the chairs facing his desk, and he moves to retake his original position. “We’ve got lots to discuss.”

I don’t want him to notice my confusion, so I’m quick to follow his instructions. The plum seat is plush, and my tense body sinks deep into its softness.

When I look up, Falon is watching me. He appears pleased by what he sees, like he can tell that the chair has magical properties that are soothing the ragged edges of my tension.

“Subject Six-Eight-Four,” Falon recites, picking up his tablet and reading directly from the glowing screen. “Allocated ID: Jane Doe. Date of birth: unknown. Current age estimation: eighteen. Parents: none listed. Other relations: unknown. Recruitment status —” he lifts his eyes to me “— transfer.”

He lowers the tablet but holds my gaze. “I’m curious, Jane. Our records show that you were transferred to Lengard after a short stint at a psychiatric institute that you reportedly checked yourself into.”

My stomach lurches, and I struggle to beat back the memories his words call forth.

“Our scouts discovered you three weeks into your time at the institute, and after confirming your potential, they delivered you to this facility — a much safer alternative than a psych ward for unstable and dangerous youth. That’s why I find myself curious, Jane, because from all I’ve read, it appears as if you’ve been wholly uncooperative since your arrival.”

His eyes remain fixed on mine as he finishes, “I would very much like to know why.”

I keep my mouth shut. No words escape my lips.

“In preliminary testing, your results gave us reason to believe that you would be a distinct asset to our program.”

I fight against my brow furrowing, having no idea about any “preliminary” testing or the program he’s speaking of.

“Despite that, you’ve since shown nothing to prove your worth,” Falon continues, his eyes skimming over the tablet again. “Dr. Manning says it’s easier to draw blood from a stone than it is to evaluate your psychological disposition. I’ve already alluded to Vanik’s opinion of you, and many of your rotating evaluators tend to agree with his assessment. Only Lieutenant Enzo has anything encouraging to report, claiming that you are surprisingly committed to your physical training. He seems impressed by how far you’ve come in the time you’ve been here.”

A flicker of warmth stirs inside me. Of all the people at Lengard, Enzo is the only one for whom I hold any positive regard. He knows I’m classified as a threat, even if he doesn’t know why, but he has no fear of me. And for that I respect him. I do what he says and push my body to its limits daily. It feels good: the running, the sparring, everything else he demands of me. I’m stronger than I’ve ever been. Faster. Fitter. That knowledge is what keeps me going on the days when all I feel is weakness.

“Enzo’s report is the only positive among a slew of negatives,” Falon says. “Your apathy and lack of cooperation in every other area should have prompted us to remove you from Lengard long ago. It’s true that Vanik believes your brain chemistry is —” he searches for an appropriate word “— *unique*, but we have others who can assist him with his research. So, why are you still here, Jane?”

I assume the question is rhetorical; I don’t think he expects me to answer, since I can’t possibly know what he wants me to say. I have no idea why they’re keeping me here. I have no idea why I was brought here to begin with. I have no idea why, day in, day out, my hours are spent undergoing tests and — in Vanik’s case — torture.

Lengard is a secret government facility.

That’s all I’ve ever known.

But *why* it’s secret, I’m not sure. Nor do I understand my purpose here. That is something that has never been explained, never made sense.

And I’ve never asked.

I *couldn’t* ask.

So I’ve waited, hoping one day someone would tell me.

No one ever has.

Falon spoke true when he said they pulled me from a psychiatric institution. But I’m just as much a prisoner here as I was there — perhaps more so.

There, at least, I understood. By placing myself in that hospital, I locked myself away from the world. There, I knew the rules. But here? Two years, six months, fourteen days, and I still don’t know what game we’re playing, let alone whose rules I should follow. I am nothing more than a glass pawn in a black-and-white chess set: out of place and utterly breakable.

Falon releases a breath and wearily rubs a hand across his face. I'm not sure if it's a genuine display of fatigue or the gesture is all for show. He could just be trying to make me feel empathy. I have no idea why he would try to manipulate my reaction, though. I have no idea about anything when it comes to this man.

"I've decided that we're going to attempt something different with you, Jane. On a trial basis only. So far you've given us nothing to help further our goals, and I feel it prudent to warn that if you continue to resist the intentions of Lengard, I will have no choice but to eliminate you from the program. Do you understand what that means?"

Despite knowing nothing about this so-called program, I've always understood I would never be released back into the real world as a civilian. The one thing they did tell me, right at the beginning, was that Lengard must be kept secret from the general population ... and that the government would do whatever it must to ensure that remains the case.

Since I have no intention of walking free again, the threat has never alarmed me. I understand exactly what Falon is saying — that if I fail whatever this new trial is, that's it. Lengard will get rid of me ... and no one will even know that I'm gone.

I can see Falon is waiting for a response, and this time I must give it to him. I nod once, and his eyes light with approval at my gesture. Maybe he really did think I was insane, as Vanik likely suggested in his reports. Perhaps Falon wondered if I was just sitting here, an empty shell of a girl, unaware of his words. He can't possibly know that words are all I'm ever aware of. Every hour, every minute, I weigh them in my mind. Words are everything to me. They are life. They are death. They fill all the spaces in between.

"Good," Falon says. "Then you'll start working with Ward as of tomorrow. Your schedule will remain mostly the same,

and your evaluations with Dr. Manning, Lieutenant Enzo and Vanik will continue, but you'll no longer be moved from person to person in the afternoon. Those hours will be allocated solely to Ward. You will do what he says — *whatever* he says — and if he doesn't come to me with any indication of progress after one month, then you'll be evicted from the program. Do you agree to those terms?"

I nod again, because I know that's what he expects. I wonder who Ward is and what he'll do when he discovers for himself how apathetic I am. A month is a long time, but nothing he does can be worse than Vanik's experiments. And at least I now have a time frame. An expiry date.

It's best this way. I know it is. And yet ... now that I'm facing my end, I can't ignore the whisper of unease in the back of my mind. Because ... what if a month isn't long enough?

"We're done here, then," Falon says, standing.

I follow his cue and rise from my seat, resisting the urge to glance longingly down at it.

"I do hope you make the most out of Ward's training," he adds, then calls for the guards to escort me back to my cell. "Very few people are granted one-on-one time with him. Don't waste this opportunity. It may well be your last."

Message delivered, Director, I think. Then I'm again cuffed like the monster I am and manhandled back to my cell.