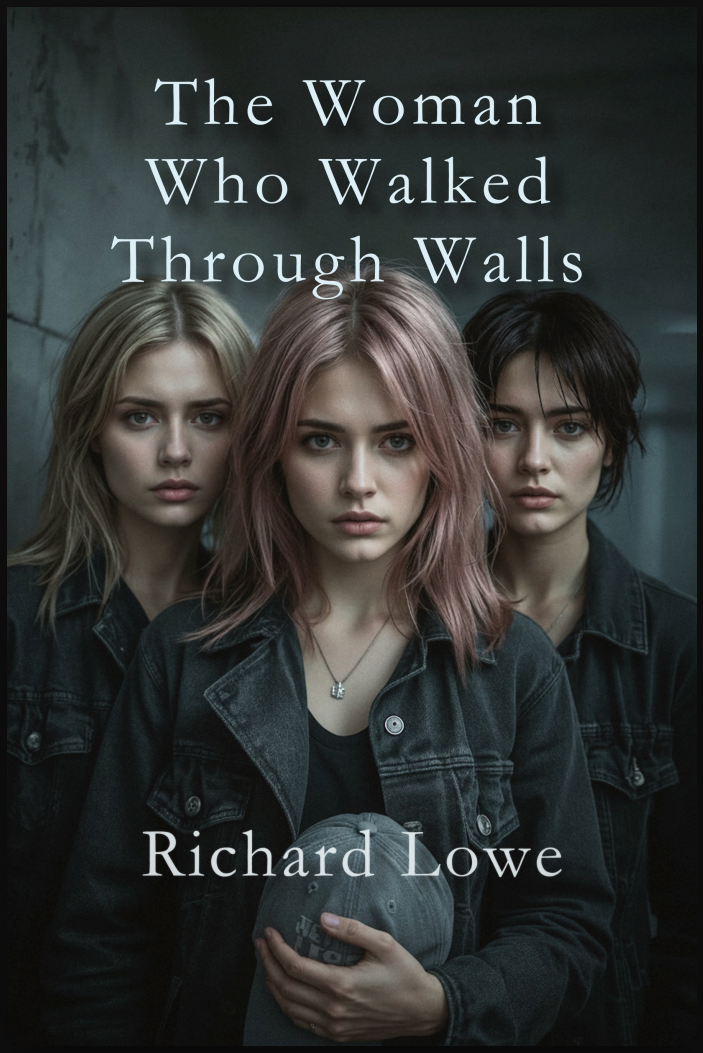
A FREE COMPANION TO THE WOMAN WHO WALKED THROUGH WALLS

Nobody Wrote Down the First One

Before she walked into the library, Jasmine spent eleven days alone with a warm phone, a stolen sandwich and a receipt full of shapes.



RICHARD LOWE

Nobody Wrote Down the First One

The phone was sitting on the concrete parking stop in front of space nineteen, and space nineteen was where I parked.

It was ten after nine. I had a trash bag in each hand and my backpack hanging off my right shoulder, because the left strap slides off if you look at it wrong, and I was wearing a smock that said HOPE CHEST THRIFT over the pocket in letters that had been through the wash more times than I had. The strip mall was closing down for the night around me: the nail place dark, the vape shop guy dragging his gate down, the old video store at the end so long FOR LEASE that the sign had faded to pink.

My Corolla was in nineteen like always. It had a coat hanger for an antenna and a dent in the back bumper from the dumpster I'd backed into in August. The phone sat on the parking stop right in front of my bumper, screen up, centered, like somebody had set a place for it at dinner.

I threw the bags in the dumpster and came back and looked at it.

The screen was doing a slow pattern, shapes folding into other shapes and opening out again. Over the pattern it said eleven missed calls. Every one of them was from Mom.

Eleven times. Pick up, whoever you are. That's your mom.

I picked it up, because that's what you do. It was warm.

It wasn't warm like my phone gets in my back pocket after a shift. It was warm like somebody had been holding it a second ago and had handed it to me and walked off. I turned all the way around in the lot and there was nobody, just the vape shop guy at the far end locking his padlock and not looking up.

My plan was easy. Find out whose it was, call the mom back, be a good person for thirty seconds, go home and eat cereal over the sink.

The lock screen wanted a code. I tried the lazy ones, four zeros, one two three four, the birth years people always use, because I've watched a whole summer of people punch their codes into our card reader and people are lazy. Nothing.

On the back there was a symbol set into the case, flush with it, inlaid, the same shapes that were moving on the screen.

I've been opening locks since I was sixteen. That was the year my mom worked doubles at the hospital laundry and I lost my house key three times in one month, and the third time I sat on our front steps in the cold for two hours waiting for her bus. The next week I had a pick set off the internet, and I practiced on our own door every night until I could do it with my eyes closed.

Every lock gives somewhere. You hold still and pay attention and it tells you where.

So I did what I'd do with any lock. I pressed the symbol with my thumb and held it and paid attention.

The phone pulled.

There's no other word for it. It leaned in my hand the way a dog leans into a leash, toward the back wall of the store, the cinderblock somebody had painted beige about ten years before I got there. The shapes on the screen sped up and spiraled in toward the middle, and I pointed it at the wall because it wanted me to, and that was the whole decision.

A dark round shape came off the front of the phone. I watched it cross six feet of air and hit the cinderblock with a wet little smack, and it spread out flat into the shape of a door. The air went sharp and electric, like the second before lightning, packed into one spot.

Through the door was the parking lot.

It was the same lot and the same strip mall, seen from behind, because I was looking through the back wall of my own store at the far side of it. Except the lines in that lot were freshly painted and every light pole worked. And in space nineteen there was a Corolla, red where mine was silver, with a back bumper nobody had ever put into a dumpster.

The edges of the door started pulling in.

My mom says I don't think about things first. She's right, and it's gotten me into trouble and out of it about the same number of times. My feet went and the rest of me went with them.

* * *

The world turned white and took the ground with it.

I didn't fall so much as get put down, hard, on both knees and then my face. The asphalt was cold and gritty against my cheek and I could not have told you which direction the sky was in. My stomach was somewhere behind me, back in the other lot, and I lay there making a noise I'd never made before and didn't like.

It took a while. When it stopped I sat up.

The back of the store was beige cinderblock. The door was gone. I put my hand flat on the wall where it had been and the wall was a wall, cold, a little damp, nothing.

I walked around front. The sign over my store said SLEEP WAREHOUSE, and through the glass there were mattresses in plastic on platforms, and a cardboard cutout of a man in pajamas giving me a thumbs up.

The nail place was a nail place. The video store was a video store, open, lit, with a kid behind the counter eating fries.

The red Corolla was locked. My key didn't go in.

The phone in my hand was dark. No pattern, no screen, nothing when I held the buttons, nothing when I pressed the symbol.

It was still warm, though, exactly as warm as when I'd picked it up off the parking stop, like warm was something it was and not something it did.

My own phone was a prepaid I'd bought at the dollar store and it said SIM NOT PROVISIONED, which I had never seen it say before.

Okay. Okay so. You walked through a wall.

I said it out loud in the lot, to the cardboard pajama man. It didn't sound any less stupid.

* * *

My apartment was twenty minutes on foot. My jacket was in my car, the silver one, in a different parking lot, so I walked it in a smock and a long sleeve shirt. October that night was the kind that waits until you're halfway somewhere to get serious.

The building was there, with the same brick, the same broken buzzer panel and the same smell of somebody's cabbage in the stairwell.

Our mailbox, 3C, said R. DELACROIX in a label maker font, and I stood in front of it until the stairwell light timed out.

I could have picked the door. I thought about it.

Then I thought about R. Delacroix asleep in there in my room, in a bed where my bed went, and somebody's eleven missed calls, and I went back down the stairs.

There was a laundromat on the corner of Ninth that was open all night in my world. It was open all night in this one too. That was the first good thing.

I slept on the plastic bench under the folding table, with my backpack under my head and the phone held against my stomach inside my smock, because it was warm and I was not. The dryers were running for somebody who'd never come back for their clothes. The noise was enormous and steady and I was out in about four minutes.

* * *

The woman who worked overnight at the laundromat was named Renata. She woke me at six by setting a coffee on the floor next to my face.

"You can't sleep here," she said. "That's the rule. You hum, you know that?"

"I don't hum."

"All night. Like a refrigerator." She went back behind the counter to her paperback, a romance with a man on the cover whose shirt had given up. "Drink the coffee and then you can't sleep here."

The coffee was terrible and I loved her for it.

I sat on the bench with the cup in one hand and the dead phone in the other and tried everything again: the buttons, held and pressed and held together, the symbol, and shaking it, which is not a technique, I know. Nothing happened.

So I went back to the lock. I held the phone flat in my palm with my thumb on the symbol and I didn't push. I held still and waited the way you wait on a pin that's almost set, when it's going to go or it isn't and forcing it only makes it bind.

It came on.

There was no pattern this time. A ring of light ran around the edge of the screen, with little marks on it like a clock or a dial, and a small window at the bottom showing a row of the same shapes that were on the back. When I touched the ring it turned under my finger and clicked like a combination lock.

At the top end of the dial there was writing in two kinds of script, neither of them any alphabet I'd seen, the letters crowded together and bunched up against the end of the ring the way people write when they're yelling.

I didn't know what it said. I knew what it was. I've seen enough signs on enough fences.

"What's that?" Renata said from the counter.

"My friend's phone," I said. "It's broken."

"Looks broken," she agreed, and turned a page.

* * *

I went back to the strip mall that morning and stood behind SLEEP WAREHOUSE and pointed the phone at the cinderblock.

I'd left the dial where it was when it woke up, near the middle. I figured that was where it had been when I came through, so that was the way back.

That's how a lock works. You undo what you did.

The door opened. I went through and landed on my hands this time instead of my face, which felt like progress, and I lay on the asphalt with my eyes shut until the world agreed to stay one world.

It was Hope Chest Thrift, HOPE CHEST in the blue letters with the same crack in the S.

I made a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob, and I ran around to the front of the building.

My car wasn't in nineteen. Nineteen was empty. The handwritten sign in our window said BAG SALE SATURDAY in Dolores's handwriting, except it was green marker, and Dolores only ever uses red because she says green looks like a bank.

That's nothing. That's a marker. She ran out of red.

The schedule taped inside the front door had my name on it. Thursday, three to close. It had a name next to mine I'd never seen in my life.

I went back behind the store.

* * *

By the end of the second day I had a system. People think I don't make systems because I don't make them out loud. Car first, because I could see nineteen from the back corner, then the crack in the S, then the marker, then the schedule.

Every time, most of it was right and one thing was wrong.

Nineteen had my car in it, my actual car, the dent, the coat hanger, and the window had a parking ticket under the wiper for an address I'd never lived at. The sign was red marker, and the store was a Hope Chest with a pet grooming place where the nail salon should be. The schedule was right, and my name was on it, and next to my name in Dolores's red marker it said NO CALL NO SHOW with two lines under it.

That one I stood and looked at for a while.

Somewhere around the ninth time, I went through too fast. The door after a door closes quicker, I'd figured that out by then, the way a second cup from the same pot is always weaker. I was moving before I'd decided to, same as always, and the edge came in on me while my backpack was still on the wrong side.

It didn't hurt. That's the part that got me later. It was cold, cold in a way that wasn't about temperature, a pressure along my shoulder blade like somebody had pressed a ruler there hard, and then I was on the ground and it was over.

I sat up and checked my arms, my hands and the back of my neck.

The black cat pin on my left strap was gone. I'd had it since ninth grade, from the only concert I ever went to that I paid for myself, and it was gone the way a word goes when you forget it.

There was no pin back, no bent metal, no thread pulled in the strap. There was only a little round patch where the nylon was brighter because the pin had been covering it for five years.

I put my thumb on the bright patch. Nothing was cut. The strap was just a strap that had never had a pin on it, except for the color.

Okay. Don't ever do that with your face.

I waited four minutes before the next one. I counted them out loud.

* * *

The receipt was an accident.

I had a golf pencil in my smock pocket, the kind we use at the register to write prices on tags, and I had a receipt from the last sale I'd rung up before I took out the trash. Two dresses, a lamp and a puzzle with the pieces counted, seventeen dollars and forty cents, thank you for shopping Hope Chest.

A woman named Gloria had bought the puzzle. I'd counted the pieces for her myself.

I copy things when I'm nervous. Some people click pens, and I copy whatever's in front of me, the ingredients on a cereal box, the fine print on a parking ticket. Every time I landed and the screen came

back, I'd copied the row of shapes out of the little window onto the back of Gloria's receipt and written a word next to it so my hands had something to do.

LAUNDROMAT, the first one said, from the morning on Renata's bench. GREEN MARKER. NO CALL NO SHOW.

The third morning I was sitting on a curb behind a version of my store that sold vacuum cleaners, and I looked at what I'd written. Every row was different from every other row. I'd been looking at that little window for two days without seeing it, the way you look at the clock on the wall at work.

I wrote VACUUMS under the last row. Then I jumped again and wrote BAD PIZZA, because that one had a pizza place where the nail salon went and it smelled like somebody had burned the cheese on purpose.

Then I tried it the other way. I turned the dial until the window matched the first row on the receipt, the one from Renata's bench, and I held the phone up to the back wall of the pizza place.

I landed on my hands and lay there and smelled it before I saw it. It was hot lint and dryer sheets and somebody's cigarette from the alley, and it was the laundromat on Ninth.

I walked in at eight at night and Renata looked up from a different romance and said, "You again," and it was the best thing anybody had ever said to me.

* * *

That night on the bench, which I was not allowed to sleep on, I figured out the rest of it.

I had the receipt on my knee and I was going down the rows with my finger: laundromat, vacuums, bad pizza, green marker, no call no show.

Every place I'd been since the first morning, I could go back to. All of them. I'd been carrying a map around in my smock pocket and I hadn't even known it was a map.

My finger got to the top of the receipt and stopped.

There was no row for home, and there couldn't be, because home was before. I'd picked the phone up off the parking stop and pressed the symbol and pointed it at the wall, and whatever the window said in that second, I hadn't been looking at it.

Nobody had been looking at it. The only row that mattered was the one nobody had written down.

The closer ones get closer. They don't get there.

I knew that already. I'd known it since the green marker. I just hadn't had the reason, and now I had the reason, and the reason sat on my knee in my own handwriting on the back of a receipt for a puzzle.

The dryers ran. Renata turned a page. I folded the receipt in half along the crease it already had and put it in my pocket and held my hand over it.

* * *

Money went on the fourth day.

I'd had fifty-two dollars when I came through the wall, my whole cash share of the last paycheck, because my mom says a bank is a place that charges you to hold your own money. It went on coffee, a toothbrush, and a bus pass I bought before I worked out that the buses went to the same places and none of them were mine. It went on two slices of the bad pizza, which was a mistake I made twice because I didn't believe it the first time.

On the fourth night I had a dollar and eleven cents. I was standing in a gas station on Route 9 in front of the sandwich cooler, and I was so hungry my hands were cold.

I've stolen before. I'm not going to pretend I haven't.

I took a lip gloss in eighth grade, because Kara Whitfield had one and I wanted to know what it felt like to be Kara Whitfield for a day, and it felt exactly like being me with a lip gloss. But I'd never stolen because I needed to.

The clerk was watching a game on his phone with the sound turned up. I picked up a turkey sandwich and a bag of almonds and a bottle of water, and I put the almonds and the water on the counter and the sandwich inside my smock.

"That it?" he said.

"That's it."

He rang the almonds and the water. I gave him the dollar and eleven cents and I was four cents short and he waved it off without looking away from his game.

I ate the sandwich standing behind the gas station, next to the ice machine, in about six bites. I'd been braced for it to feel bad.

It didn't feel like much of anything. It felt like a sandwich.

That was the part I kept chewing on after the sandwich was gone. I'd gotten away with it so easily, and I'd been so good at it, and in this world it didn't even count.

Nobody here knew me. The clerk was going to come up a sandwich short at the end of his shift, and nobody would ever look at the tape and see my face, because my face didn't belong to anybody who lived here.

It's one sandwich. You were hungry. Shut up.

I went back inside and bought nothing and used their bathroom and washed my face in the sink. The girl in the mirror had a smudge of asphalt on her cheekbone that I'd been carrying around for two days.

She had the scar over her left eyebrow from the hill on Creekside Road, the one Dad told me not to go down, the year before he left. I'd always kind of liked that scar.

* * *

On the fifth night I broke into my own store.

It was the green marker world, because I knew it. I knew the back door. It has a cheap knob lock that Dolores keeps saying she's going to replace, and she has been saying so since before I was hired, and in that world she was still saying it.

My hair kept falling in my eyes while I worked. I'd been meaning to get it cut.

I'd been meaning to get it cut since August, and since I'd come through the wall it had decided to grow straight at my face, and I had to hold it back with one hand and work the pick with the other, which is not how you're supposed to do it. It took me four minutes on a lock I can do in forty seconds.

Inside, it smelled like home. That's the stupid part. It was old paper and mothballs and somebody's grandma's perfume coming out of the coats, and the furnace that ticks.

There's a couch in the back room that came in as a donation in June and never sold, because it's orange. I slept on it. I slept on it like I'd been shot.

In the morning, before anybody came, I went through the donation bins. I'm not proud of this, but I'm not ashamed of it either, because I've seen what's in those bins and half of it ends up in a dumpster I take out myself.

I found a men's canvas jacket, a size too big, with a flannel lining that was mostly still there. On the bottom of the hats bin there was a gray baseball cap with no logo on it at all.

I put the cap on and tugged it down to where it held my hair back. I tried a few angles in the mirror by the dressing room. There's one angle where it sits right, a little down on the left, and the hair stays put, and when I found it I left it there.

Then I put the couch cushions back the way Dolores likes them, with the zipper sides down. I don't know why I did that.

On my way out I saw the schedule on the door. Jasmine, Thursday, three to close.

It was in red marker in that world, it turned out. Dolores had found the red.

Somebody named Jasmine would be there at three, and it wouldn't be me.

I went out the back and locked it behind me with the pick, because she was going to have to work there.

* * *

I called my mom on the seventh night.

She wasn't my mom. I knew that while I was dialing.

Renata's laundromat had a payphone on the wall by the soap machine, the old kind that somebody forgot to rip out, and I'd been walking past it for a week. It took coins, and I had three quarters from a dryer that had coughed up somebody else's change.

I knew it wasn't her. I just wanted to hear it.

It rang twice.

"Hello?"

It was my mom's voice, the tired one she has at the end of a double, the one that sounds like it's coming from the bottom of a bathtub.

"Mom?"

"Jazz?" She sounded confused. "You just left, baby. You forget something?"

I put my hand on the wall next to the phone. The paint was greasy from a thousand other hands.

She just left. She's walking to the bus right now. She's in my jacket.

"Yeah," I said. "My charger."

"Again?" She laughed, the short one through her nose. "It's on the counter. I'll leave it by the door so you see it."

"Okay."

"You sound funny. You been crying?"

"Allergies."

"Since when do you have allergies?"

"Since tonight."

She laughed again, the real one this time, and my chest folded up small and went somewhere I couldn't reach.

"Go to sleep," she said. "I love you. Call me Sunday."

"I love you," I said. "I will."

I hung up before she did. I'd never done that in my life. I stood there with my hand on the receiver and the quarters gone and the dryers going behind me and Renata reading her book, and I didn't move until a dryer buzzed.

When I sat down on the bench, I took the warm phone out of my jacket and looked at the screen. The pattern was back. Over it were the missed calls.

It said twelve now. One more since I'd picked it up off the parking stop a week ago.

Somebody's mom was still calling. Some girl somewhere had picked up a phone like this one, and pressed the back, and walked through a wall, and she wasn't going to call her back either.

"You're humming again," Renata said, without looking up.

"Sorry."

"I didn't say stop." She turned a page. "It's a nice one. What is it?"

It was the sound my mom makes over the dishes, low, no tune to it, the sound of somebody thinking with her hands busy.

"Just a thing," I said.

I stopped trying to get home that night.

I don't mean I gave up. Giving up is loud. You cry, you throw a cup, you call somebody.

This was more like the night you find out the bus doesn't run on Sundays. You stand there at the stop for a minute feeling stupid, and then you start walking, because you still have to get where you're going and the bus not running is a fact about the bus.

* * *

The phone started pulling again on the ninth day.

It didn't lean at a wall, and that's how I knew it was different. I was eating a bag of almonds on a bench in a park in the bad pizza world, and the phone in my jacket leaned.

It didn't lean toward anything in the park. It leaned one direction, northeast, the way your ears go to a sound before you know there's a sound.

I took it out. The shapes on the screen were moving faster than they did at rest, not spiraling to the middle like they did for a wall, more like they were looking around.

I stood up and turned in a slow circle. The pull stayed northeast. I walked a block that way and it got a tiny bit stronger, and I walked a block back and it got a tiny bit weaker.

It's a game. It's hot and cold. It's playing hot and cold with me.

I'd been alone for nine days. I would have followed a stray cat if it had looked at me with any kind of intention.

So I played. Every jump, I lay on the ground until I could stand, and then I stood and held the phone out flat and waited for it to lean.

Strong got an arrow pointing up next to its row on the receipt. Weak got an arrow pointing down, and nothing at all got an X.

It was more like tuning a radio than working a lock. You go past the station and you hear it go by, and you come back slower.

The receipt filled up. Gloria's puzzle had been seventeen dollars and forty cents and now its back side was covered edge to edge in shapes and arrows and words in pencil that was smearing from being folded and unfolded.

Laundromat, vacuums, bad pizza, green marker, no call no show. Big arrow, bigger arrow, X, X, X.

I slept on the orange couch one more time, in the green marker world, and put the cushions back, zipper side down.

* * *

On the tenth night I went to Renata's to say goodbye, though I didn't tell her that was what it was.

She was on a new book. The man on this cover had lost his shirt entirely and was standing on a cliff about it. I bought a coffee from the machine with dryer quarters and sat on the bench I wasn't allowed to sleep on and drank it slow.

“You're leaving,” she said, without looking up.

“How do you know?”

“You've got your bag on.” She turned a page. “Eleven years on nights. People sit different when they're going.”

I didn't have anything to say to that. I drank the coffee.

When I stood up she reached under the counter and came out with a paperback and held it across to me. It was the one with the man whose shirt had given up, from the first morning. The corners were soft and somebody had spilled tea on the top edge before she ever got it.

“I read it twice,” she said. “It's dumb. You'll like it.”

“I can't bring it back.”

“Did I say bring it back?”

I put it in the front pocket of my backpack. I said thank you, and she said don't sleep on my bench, and that was the last time I saw her. I read it on a bus bench that night under a streetlight, all of it, and she was right on both counts.

* * *

On the eleventh day the arrow went off the edge of the receipt.

I landed on grass. That was new.

I'd done every jump so far off the back of some version of my store, and this time I'd done it off the side of a library in a world that was all big arrows, and the grass on the other side was wet and smelled like somebody had mowed it yesterday. I lay there on my back with the cap over my eyes and waited for up to come back.

When I sat up there was a campus around me.

There were brick buildings and old trees with the leaves going, and a fountain with nothing in it but dead leaves. Kids walked past with headphones in, nobody looking at me, which is the one thing a college campus is good for. A boy with a frisbee was out on the grass alone, throwing it straight up and catching it.

I'd gotten into a school like this. I'd never told anybody that, not even my mom. The letter came the spring of senior year with a number at the bottom that we were supposed to pay, and the number was more than my mom made in a year and a half, and I'd put the letter in the drawer with the takeout menus.

The phone was pulling so hard it hurt my wrist.

I followed it across the quad, past the dry fountain, past a girl reading on the steps of a building, toward the biggest building on the campus.

It was the library. I could tell from the windows, tall ones, the kind they make so the light comes in at an angle and lands on the tables like it's important.

I stopped on the library steps.

I hadn't eaten since the almonds the day before. I was wearing a men's canvas jacket that was too big for me and a smock with HOPE CHEST on it under the jacket, and jeans I'd been wearing for eleven days, and the boots I'd had resoled twice because boots are expensive and resoling isn't. I had slept the night before on a bus bench and had about three hours of real sleep in me.

You look like hell. Whatever's in there, you look like hell for it.

I went in anyway, because the phone was in my hand like a hand holding mine.

* * *

The library smelled like paper and that dry air they pump in to keep the books from rotting. I walked past the circulation desk, a cart of returned books and a poster for some lecture about memory.

Nothing in it was for me. The phone was leaning toward the back, toward a section with a sign that said REFERENCE, where the tables were farther apart and quieter.

There were two of them at a table by the wall.

I saw the back of a head first. Her hair was blonde, which mine has never been, and pulled back the way I'd pull mine back if it were long enough. She was bent over a notepad with the pen moving fast, and there were papers spread across two of the empty chairs so nobody would sit there.

Across from her was another girl with my face.

She had my face: the nose, the chin, the way she was sitting, one foot hooked behind the chair leg, which I do and my mom yells at me for because it scratches the floor. She had a better haircut than me and a sweater that had never been in anybody's donation bin. She was reading something, and her hand came up to her temple and stayed there, and I knew that move because I was looking at my own hand.

On the table between them there were two phones like mine.

Their screens were lit, and when I got closer the shapes on them changed and started answering each other.

One of theirs moved, and mine answered a half-beat later, and the third found a line that fit between them, like the parts in a song.

I stood about six feet back and didn't know how to start.

What do you say. What do you even say. Hi, I'm you, I'm sorry about the smock.

I couldn't use my name. Jasmine was mine, my mom gave it to me for a flower she couldn't afford to grow, and these two had other names, probably, names somebody else's mom had picked. But there was one name I hated that I was pretty sure all of us had.

It was the one in the middle, the one on every form, and every report card, and every time a substitute teacher read the roll and got it wrong, and every time I'd crossed it out and written J instead.

If these girls were me, they'd hated it too. They'd answer to it anyway.

The blonde with the notepad was still writing. I took a breath, and I could smell the paper and the dry air and my own jacket, and I tugged the cap to its angle.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Brittany?”

The World of The Woman Who Walked Through Walls

A short guide to the people, rules and early weeks of The Woman Who Walked Through Walls. Nothing here gives away where Brit's plans lead or how the book ends.

The People

The three of them

- **Brit.** Eighteen, a college freshman on a full scholarship that covers tuition, room and board and nothing else. Blonde, with a scar over her left eyebrow from going over her handlebars in August of third grade on the Creekside Road hill her dad told her not to go down. Her winter coat is held shut with a safety pin, her phone screen is cracked, and she has eleven hundred followers she hopes to turn into two thousand by December. She tells the story. She is the one who plans, and she writes everything down in a notepad.
- **Aubrey.** Brit's face, raised with money. Her parents expected everything to work, not almost work. She checks the exits of every room she walks into without knowing she does it, carries a first aid kit, brings back croissants and reads economics. She found her phone on the bench outside her student union nine days before Brit stepped through a wall onto her campus.
- **Jasmine.** Brit's face again, with natural dark hair cut short on the sides, thrift store clothes and boots resoled at least twice. She grew up broke, has been picking locks since she was sixteen, hums without knowing it when she thinks and wears a gray baseball cap tugged to one exact angle. She found her phone in the parking lot outside her work and was on her own with it before she walked into the library.

All three share a middle name, Brittany, and all three have always hated it. They share a coffee order too: a medium vanilla latte with extra foam and a shot of caramel.

Around them

- **Kaylee.** Brit's roommate back home. In the near copy of Brit's world where Brit and Aubrey end up squatting, another Kaylee has the other bed. She has never met Brit and has decided, as a matter of personal philosophy, not to ask.
- **Sheila.** A classmate with champagne luggage, a measured rug and a yellow convertible, who gives Brit a ride on the first day of college.
- **Brit's mom.** Gets up at five for work, worries about drinking and keeps asking Brit to call.
- **Geoff.** The RA on the fourth floor of the squat, who has chosen the path of least resistance and notices nothing.
- **Gerald.** Brit's succulent, named after an RA whose suggestions she ignored.
- **Marguerite.** Runs the corner patisserie in one of the trio's regular worlds. Butter and warm flour through the door.
- **Lena.** The name above Mom in the missed calls on the phone Brit picks up. Mom has called it fourteen times in three weeks.

How the Phones Work

Nobody knows who made the phones. What Brit, Aubrey and Jasmine learn, they learn from a manual that opens in the air above a screen and by throwing themselves through walls.

TERM	WHAT IT MEANS
The warmth	Every phone is warm from the moment it is picked up, the warmth of something just held. It never changes, through use, crossings or a dead screen.
The symbol	A set of geometric shapes inlaid in the back of the case, matching the pattern on the screen. Holding it and concentrating on a surface directs the phone.
The hole	A dark shape the phone ejects at a flat, solid surface. It sticks, spreads into a door and smells of ozone, and on the far side is another version of the same place.
Eight seconds	How long a door stays open. Not a countdown but a limit, the same every time.
Sequential use	Each door opened soon after another closes faster than the last. Four minutes between crossings feels right.
The dial	Sets the variance. Low barely moves you. Middle gives navigable worlds with recognizable buildings. High carries warning text in two scripts nobody can read.
The landing	A whiteout, the inner ear quitting, and about thirty seconds flat on the ground at middle settings. Hands down before feet helps. Closed eyes help.
Floors and ceilings	Both work. Landing is worse, like jumping off a counter while your brain briefly quits.
The edge	Whatever is on the wrong side when a door closes is gone. Kaylee's cactus came back with seven spines instead of nine.
Proximity	When phones are close together their patterns stop acting alone and start answering each other, a half-beat apart.
Home	You can go back to anywhere you wrote down. Nobody wrote down the first one.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
September	Brit's first day of college, four percent battery and a ride in Sheila's yellow convertible.
Nine days before Brit crosses	Aubrey finds her phone on the bench outside her student union.
Seven weeks into term	Brit finds a warm phone on the bench outside her union, takes it home, and that evening points it at the brick wall of the science building and steps through.
That evening	A latte in the chest. Then Aubrey, the shoebox of family photos and the second phone.

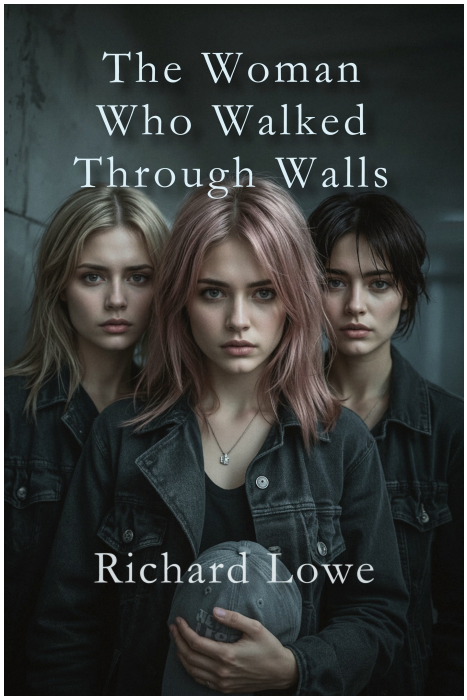
The next day	The manual opens. The first test crossing, through Aubrey's plaster wall.
The day after	Ten attempts to find Brit's room back home. The last is perfect except for a textbook one edition newer.
Three days in the squat	Brit and Aubrey move into the room two doors down, with Kaylee and a sleeping bag from the outdoor lending library.
Brit's sixth day	Jasmine walks into the reference section of the library and asks for Brittany.
The next afternoon	Forty-three jumps in one dorm room, eleven pages of notes, a sore ankle, a two-spine cactus and Kaylee knocking.
Day nine	The ramen runs out. The answer is a richer world, their own money and lip gloss at Beautique.
Three weeks after	Small jobs, croissants, books and lock picks, while Brit studies bank floor plans for no reason.

Places

- **Millfield University.** The campus Aubrey comes from, where Brit lands after her first crossing: brighter brick, deliberate trees, a sculpture by the union and vending machines of a brand she has never seen.
- **Aubrey's building.** A marble lobby, live plants and an elevator that comes right away, where Brit's building has vinyl tile and a dying ficus.
- **The squat.** A fourth floor dorm room in a world that is almost Brit's, two doors down from the room that was almost hers, one bed empty since September.
- **The reference section.** A library table against a wall with a working outlet, four chairs, papers spread on two of them to keep people away.
- **Beautique.** A cosmetics store with marble floors in a richer version of the mall, where Brit buys foundation in her actual shade.
- **The bakery world.** Marguerite's patisserie, a bookstore with a nameless cat and a coffee shop where Brit sits and thinks about her mother.

Read the Novel

Jasmine learned the hard way that you can go back to anywhere you wrote down. In The Woman Who Walked Through Walls she hands that rule to Brit and Aubrey in a college library, and the three of them start using it, first for lip gloss on a richer self's card and then for things none of them planned. Brit, the one who writes everything down, tells it.



The Woman Who Walked Through Walls

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