

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a woman's face, looking upwards. Her hair is dark and voluminous, framing her face. The entire scene is bathed in a fiery, orange and yellow light, suggesting she is surrounded by flames. The background is a textured, glowing fire.

BURNER

A NOVEL BY
ROBERT FORD

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This book is a work of fiction. Characters, places and events described are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

This book is dedicated to Tod Clark.

May the Long Pig Saloon never run dry.

PREFACE

The topic matter of this novel is the most terrifying thing I've considered in my life—as a husband, a father, a friend, and a man.

No writer wants to cause true emotional trauma to a reader, but the terrible truth is life doesn't provide trigger warnings. The evening news and social media don't come with them either. Real life hits you with a sledgehammer when you least expect it.

But unlike those examples, the novel you hold in your hands is not a surprise. It's a known thing, at least to me, and any opportunity to avoid additional mental pain should be taken—and more importantly, offered.

This book deals with brutal material. It is violent. There are drug and rape references. This was not an easy book to research, because, the more facts I uncovered, the more difficult it became to accept this is an actual reality in the world.

You can choose to avoid these kinds of things—in both fiction and the daily news—but to ignore them, to turn away and pretend they don't exist in the world we live in, is akin to sticking your head in the sand.

Whether we decide to look or not, these things still exist, even if only in the shadows.

This novel has to do with guilt. With redemption. With how pain and experience change you. It has to do with action as well as inaction. Because seeing something wrong and doing nothing—nothing at all—is the worst kind of evil there is.

Evil is unspectacular and always human,
and shares our bed and eats at our own table.

—W.H. Auden

You can choose to look the other way,
but you can never again say that you did not know.

—William Wilberforce

CHAPTER ONE

IRIS: now

“This is *not* an interrogation.”

“I know, Doc.” The detective put his hands on his hips, pushing his suit jacket back to expose the badge clipped to his belt. “The District Attorney wants me here to make sure all the I’s are dotted and the T’s are all crossed.”

“You’re here for observation only.” The man flipped through a thick stack of papers in a manila folder, pausing to scan details. He spoke without looking up. “*I* run the room. If I feel you’re a distraction to a proper evaluation—”

“*I said*, I know.” There was an edge to the detective’s voice—the tone of someone familiar with power. “Look, I get you wantin’ to be all professional about this for the courts, okay? *I get* it, but come on, Doc. Even *you* have to admit this is some pretty fucked up shit.”

It wasn’t the first time the doctor had been called in to do a psychiatric evaluation for the Harrisburg Bureau of Police, but it was the first time he had been called in on anything like *this*. He closed the folder and hefted it out in front of him. “This everything?”

“Including her report cards from grade school.” A prideful smirk decorated the detective’s expression. He turned away to look at the two-way mirror set into the wall before them. “Some twisted shit, Doc. Some really twisted...”

The doctor sighed, and matched the detective’s gaze. Behind the mirror, a woman sat at a metal table in a small room. She wore a short sleeve, orange jumpsuit with Dauphin County Prison stenciled across the back, and a gray long-sleeved thermal shirt beneath it. Her straight, light-brown hair was limp and her bangs hung down over the right side of her face to reach her shoulders. She sat, unmoving, with both feet on the floor and her arms crossed in front of her.

Taking a deep breath, the doctor exhaled slowly, and then opened the door. The detective followed, closing the door behind them.

The room was simple and functional. The walls were painted eggshell white, with no artwork to convey a comfortable setting. A water cooler in the corner, a table with two chairs, and a cheap, wheeled office chair by the doorway were the grand sum of the room's contents.

"My name is Dr. Walker." The doctor pulled the empty chair away from the metal table on the opposite side of the woman. He put the manila folder down, sat, and scooted the chair farther away to give him room.

The woman glanced at him, but didn't speak.

Dr. Walker shifted the folder to reveal a cloth case beneath it. He unsnapped a catch and exposed an iPad, and then crossed his legs, propping the device against his knee. He woke the device from sleep and maneuvered through the icons on the screen.

"Mind if I smoke?" A crinkled pack of Winstons lay on the table in front of her.

The man continued on his tablet without looking up. "I'd prefer you didn't, but—"

The woman cut off the rest of his reply with the sound of a lighter being flicked and a sharp inhale.

Dr. Walker turned to the man sitting in the wheeled chair he had moved to the corner of the room. The detective stood and walked toward the water cooler, retrieved a metallic silver ashtray resting on top, and then set the ashtray on the table.

"Miss Sanders, do you know why we're here?"

The woman snickered, making the hair covering the right side of her face ripple with motion. "Because of what I did."

The doctor adjusted himself straighter in his chair. "Yes, of course, but we're here to do a psychiatric evaluation to determine—"

"What's that?" The woman took another drag from her cigarette.

Dr. Walker nodded understandingly, a slight smile on his face. "Sometimes a psychiatric evaluation is done when—"

"I received a medical degree from the University of Maryland and graduated fourth in my class." The woman glared with her one visible eye. "I know what the fuck a psych eval is, *Doctor*."

Dr. Walker cleared his throat and reached for the manila

folder again. He flipped through the paperwork, pausing on several sheets. “Yes.” He closed it again and put the file back on the table. “Yes, I suppose you would.”

The detective snorted from his chair in the corner. Barely above a whisper, he shook his head and spoke to himself. “Ted Bundy was smart, too.”

The doctor turned back to his iPad and jotted notes with a stylus. His gaze remained focused on the screen as he casually spoke. “Please leave the room, Detective.”

The man exhaled sharply and stiffened in the chair.

“I’m sure you have other I’s to dot and T’s to cross somewhere else.” Dr. Walker lifted his head and looked at the other man.

The Detective’s face flushed. He nodded and made a frustrated grunt as he sucked against his teeth, but he stood from the chair and walked from the room.

The woman reached forward to flick ash from her cigarette into the tray. The long sleeve shirt pulled from her left wrist and the motion caught Dr. Walker’s attention. The flesh of the woman’s entire hand was covered in burn scars, but a deep, healed, furrow was along the outer ridge, leading from her wrist to the first knuckle of her little finger—a different kind of wound.

Sliding the ashtray closer, she pulled the fabric of her sleeve down further. Her gaze remained locked on his eyes.

“Let me save you some time and trouble, Doctor. Yes, I am mentally competent. I am *very* mentally competent.” She glanced at his tablet and motioned to it with her hand holding the cigarette. “I’m sure you’re recording all of this, so *yes*, I did it. Yes, I planned it, and yes, I’m guilty.” The woman took a hard drag off the Winston. “I’m fully aware of what I did and I’d fucking do it again.”

The woman looked down at her lap and then her focus returned to the doctor’s face. “The only thing I feel remorse for is not having the discipline to make it last longer.”