

# A Note from the Author

I was fourteen in 1977—the year that New York City went crazy.

I wore platform shoes and nursed an obsession with the *Soul Train* dancers. I dreamed of making out with Freddie Prinze, that Latin hunk. And like a lot of girls, I woke up to feminism. Birth control, equal pay, battered women—conversations that had previously been taboo were now at my fingertips thanks to the early organizers like Gloria Steinem and Bella Abzug.

But no one who lived in New York in 1977 can forget that the city was nearly bankrupt, race relations were volatile, and crime had ballooned, especially arson. Entire neighborhoods were torched, sometimes for insurance money, sometimes for kicks.

But the worst of that year really boiled down to a serial killer. Son of Sam prowled the streets, killing dark-haired teens and their dates and leaving taunting notes at the scene. Some of those attacks happened within blocks of where I lived. Even as disco and punk music pumped and TV ads implored us to love New York, young women panicked: dyeing their hair, calling hotlines to turn in boyfriends as suspects, and scanning every crowd for signs of someone with a .44-caliber revolver. As Son of Sam began his bizarre dialogue with police through the newspapers, it was as if he were talking to the whole city about our collective madness.

Everything finally boiled over in July when a lightning strike caused a massive blackout. With the killer still at large, and the city sweltering in an epic heat wave, we were suddenly plunged into total darkness. During the twenty-five-hour blackout, businesses were looted to the studs, more than 3,700 people were arrested, and more than 1,000 fires were reported.

*Burn Baby Burn* is a historical novel set in that awful time, but it speaks to issues that still surround young people: tense race relations, threats of senseless violence, corrupt leaders, and, worst of all, a sense that nothing will get better.

In so many ways, this is a novel about people at their absolute worst. It is a story of family pain and community pain and extreme violence. But for me, it's also a celebration of how young people—then and now—find their strength and voice even in the bleakest times.