

THE SINFUL LIFE OF

*Lucy Burns*

Elizabeth Leiknes



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This novel is meant for older readers. It's a morality tale that highlights the ever-present good and evil around us. If you, as a parent or an adult, know an advanced reader (15 and up) who shows interest in the novel, it is, of course, up to you, but it would probably be best if you previewed the book first. —Elizabeth Leiknes, Author, and Bruce L. Bortz, Publisher

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**For Hardy and Hatcher**



# Prologue

July 1976

*“Your blood looks funny.”*

*“Shut up, Lucy. We’re from the same bloodline, retard. Insulting my blood’s like insulting yours.”*

*Ellen and I had read about becoming Blood Sisters in Superteen Magazine, so we smudged our combined blood on page 37 and repeated the oath, customizing it to give it some personal flair:*

I, Ellen/Lucy, promise to be a good Blood Sister (and a good Real Sister) by always telling the other if she has a booger hanging from her nose, by letting her borrow my jeans and/or roller skates at a moment’s notice, and by doing anything, ANYTHING, necessary to keep her from harm.

*With one last pinky swear, it was official.*

*“I promise.”*

*“I promise.”*



*Three months later, the night before my eleventh birthday, Ellen was hit by a big red truck on Highway 71 during our after-dinner bike ride. She died for exactly two minutes, thirty-three seconds, and then was revived.*

*“Coma.”*

*That word, somehow dirtier than death itself, hung in the sterile air as uniformed people with sorry faces scurried down the hospital hall.*

*“Honey,” my mother said with a forced smile and tearful eyes, “we’re staying with your sister while she sleeps. Carol here is going to take you home and stay with you tonight.” (Carol was our next door neighbor.)*

*Later that night, I snuck outside in my flannel nightgown to make a wish in the backyard. A harvest moon flooded the October sky as I tiptoed down the sidewalk, past our big oak to our pretend mailbox, which stuck out of the Indiana soil in front of our playhouse.*

*We had a real mailbox in the front yard, but this one was for kids. It was a monstrosity of donated parts—a dented, metal body from the Johnsons; a wooden post from Mrs. Clark; and a red signal flag from the abandoned school.*

*We delivered “Dear Santa” letters every Christmas to our magic mailbox, which transcended space and time. Deep down, I doubted the validity of our special delivery system, but Ellen believed in it. “You never know,” she said.*

*So while she lay in the hospital, I stared in hope at the metal box perched on a crooked post and read my letter one last time.*

To Whom It May Concern:

I know I’ve asked for things in the past that I said were really important, but this time I’m not lying. I swear I’ll never ask for anything else if you make this one wish come true. Make Ellen wake up and I’ll be forever in your debt.

Sincerely,

Lucy Burns

*All I heard that night was wind sweeping through the oak tree*

*branches outside my bedroom window.*

*I tried to sleep while keeping my fingers crossed.*

*When I awoke the next morning, I heard my parents in the kitchen telling Carol the incredible news. Ellen had woken in the night asking for two things: butter-brickle ice cream and me.*

*Mother cried and hugged me tight. "It's a miracle, Lucy. God's given us back our Ellen."*

*Embarrassed that I'd chosen to put my faith elsewhere, I ran to destroy any evidence of my desperation. I opened the dilapidated mailbox, but the letter was gone. In its place was a small folded note.*

Dear Lucy,

It's a deal. Happy birthday. I'll be in touch.

Sincerely,

"To Whom It May Concern"





# Chapter One

October 30, 2008



I recently turned twenty-nine—again.

When I looked in the mirror that day, I saw my birthday self. My face, youthful in an unexpected way, was dewy-pink and firm. My eyes, bright and clear, lied about how I felt on the inside.

From a chain around my neck hung a silver letter “F,” curvy like a Laverne and Shirley monogram. When the light hit, it at first shimmered, then glared. The reflection looking back at me said *beautiful*. It said *perfect*. And I was growing tired of it.

It was three in the afternoon, but I still had my pajamas on—a silk, black, baby-doll chemise, which came to a flirty halt just below my panties. On my feet, I wore my birthday wish from two years ago—Dolce Gabbana’s special edition high-heeled slippers for people who have everything. What really sold me on them were three lavender flowers that looked like dainty crystallized iris petals. Five-hundred-and-sixty-dollar shoes can make you feel like a woman no matter what time of day it is.

I love things like sexy shoes and beautiful lingerie now. I didn’t always; I used to be awkward, plain. As a kid, I had the same appeal as elevator music—infectious yet unsavory. One on one, people liked me, but I wasn’t cool enough for them to admit it in public. Giving me a high-five at a party was the equivalent of getting caught tapping your fingers to a Pat Boone tune or belting out a Neil Sedaka ditty in

the shower.

But when He began granting me birthday wishes, I started asking for changes. Over a three-year period, I became a different person, soon possessing a body most girls would die for—tall, mostly legs, and real breasts a normal person would have to buy. And He'd arranged for me to remain young and beautiful—forever.

I was a dream, or that's what I'd been told.

So, on my usual re-birthday, He called for my wish. I asked for Johnny Depp to install my cable—not the 1980s Brat Pack Johnny Depp with the Flock of Seagulls bangs and Viper Room scowl, but the recently oh-so French, pirate Johnny Depp with long silky hair and smart glasses that say “I vote even though I'm married to a super-model.”

Then I changed my mind when I thought of another possibility: a sweaty, shirtless Johnny Depp trimming my hedges. So I requested Johnny Depp to be my new lawn boy, but He reminded me of the rule—birthday wishes can't involve anything sexual.

“Complicated,” He once said.

I knew what He meant. It would distract me from my work, the job I was groomed for. I was only supposed to attract men, not court them.

So I ended up asking for the return of an old friend I'd abandoned in a thrift store more than a decade earlier. By the time the phone call ended, my friend had arrived—six of him, to be exact. Propped up against the wooden post of my mailbox were six vintage albums featuring the greatest easy-listening pop idol who ever lived—my one and only, Teddy Nightingale.

Teddy Nightingale was his stage name. His real name, Craig Larson, didn't live up to his musical genius, and as I stared at his six albums on my front lawn, I saw him in all his glitz and grandeur, and recognized each album cover right away. The first one featured a colossal-sized Teddy atop a snowy mountain, armed with a clunky, super-shiny microphone. The cardboard cover was faded and had a chewed-off corner

thanks to Muffin, our childhood dog. I flipped through the six-gifts-in-one until I found le crème de la crème—Teddy’s first live album. And there he was at center stage—a heavenly, spotlighted Teddy looking to the sky with outstretched arms in a perfect purple-and-silver spandex jumpsuit.

I brought all six albums into the house to help me celebrate, and lined them up on my kitchen table next to my chocolate fudge birthday cake. For breakfast, I’d eaten the whole cake, except for one saved piece. Last year’s birthday wish was to be able to eat unlimited and varied forms of chocolate, but not gain weight. Chocolate in ridiculous doses is no worse for my ass than a platter of broccoli.

So, as I’d done so many times before, I sat alone in front of a makeshift shrine dedicated to a misunderstood ’70s icon. Being with him again was like wearing my oldest sneakers. I made a martini, lit a skinny pink candle, and made a secret wish.

I fondly remembered past birthdays when my whole family was in attendance. Since college, I’d spent all my birthdays alone, but a birthday never seemed like a birthday without my sister (and blood buddy) Ellen. For lots of reasons, both complicated and painful, I wasn’t supposed to have Ellen’s family life. I was married to my work.

I hadn’t seen Ellen for over twenty years.

I missed her.

After my solo birthday party, I replaced the Tony Bennett CD with a Teddy Nightingale record. I’d never gotten used to the modern technology. CDs are just mini-records, but what I most hate about them is how perfectly boring they are—shiny, compact, indestructible, crystal clear. One of the most beautiful sounds in the world is the static-crackle that accompanies a vinyl record—even one that skips is cherished. It’s a sign that it’s played a lot, and loved.

I fired up my computer for the day, but was interrupted by four deliberate knocks.

“It’s the police.”

I took another sip of my drink, put on my slippers, and took one last glance at my computer screen. *Your numbers are down.* The software program keeps track of such things.

It usually took me a few seconds to figure out if my visitors were simply random guests, or if they were there because of my job. I turned the volume down on Teddy and went to see what type of company I'd be dealing with.

I tucked my hair behind my ears as I always do when I'm curious, and approached the peephole in my front door. It was a crisp October afternoon, almost dusk. The leaves had completed their transformation from lush green to fiery orange, which reminded me I needed to rake my lawn, and the cold air slapped my exposed skin.

Two police officers greeted me when I opened the door. My shiny dark hair cascaded over my shoulders and covered just enough of my breasts to hide my goose bumps.

They both tried not to react when they saw me, but the one on the left stared hard at my thighs. He was the typical sheriff-looking kind—his belt, riding way below his bulging belly, looked like it needed rescuing.

*Frank Webster. Right on time.*

The average person never would've guessed he was two years behind on child support, or that he regularly molested Jessica Daniels, the eight-year-old girl who lived next door to him, but it was evident to me. I had the special talent of seeing people for who they really were.

It was part of my job.

Frank was restless. He placed his hand on his nightstick as if he might have to use it. *Good luck, Frank.*

The other officer, younger and leaner—"Collins," his name-tag said—was much more relaxed. His dark hair was all messed up from the brisk autumn breeze.

"Afternoon, ma'am," he said. "Are you Lucille Burns?"

"Yes, I'm Lucy Burns." I smiled.

“We’re sorry to bother you, ma’am, but we have a few questions. May we come in?” His voice, deep and resonant, matched the rest of him. I imagined a taut, strong body. What a nice surprise.

“Sure. Come in.” I turned to the side and invited them into my home. That was always the first step. *Check*.

The cute one ducked his head to avoid hitting the doorframe. They both walked through the threshold and took off their hats.

“Here. Let me take those for you. I’ll put them with all the other ones,” I laughed.

“No. That’s fine,” they muttered in unison while looking at what appeared to be a fairly normal house. As good cops should, they took a mental inventory of my belongings. Seeing no obvious signs of illegal activity, they relaxed a little and began to walk around the living room.

The handsome one touched the arm of my couch and absorbed the surroundings. With a curious look in his eye, he thumbed through Dante’s *Commedia Divino* and *The Ultimate Baby Name Book*, both of which were sitting on my coffee table.

“You expecting, ma’am?” he asked as he pointed to the baby book.

“No. Wishful thinking.”

On the wall directly to the left of the front door was a painting, Fragonard’s *The Swing*. A young lady flew through the air on a swing, kicking off her slipper as her lover admired the view from below.

Officer Collins walked over to the painting, then looked at me. “I love this one.”

A bit surprised that a cop could appreciate art, I responded, “Quite sensual, don’t you think?”

He blushed while his partner, Officer Webster, rolled his eyes. The only art “Fatty” was familiar with were the cartoons in *Jugs*.

“Yeah, *very* sensual. Do you paint?”

“No. But I think it’s captivating how so much emotion can come from a simple picture.” We walked over to another painting on the wall

and left the very nervous Officer Webster by the door. “For example, take this one.” We both gazed deep into de Chirico’s *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*, trying to figure out what the other one was going to say.

It was an eerie sight—somber colors, harsh lights, and foreboding shadows. A lone girl shared a deserted square with a gypsy wagon, and a mysterious figure cast a long shadow.

“She’s afraid of the shadow,” he said, then waited for my approval.

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “She’s not afraid at all. She’s oblivious. That’s what’s so scary.”

Officer Webster, annoyed at the attention Officer Collins was paying me, looked at his watch. “Miss Burns,” he said, “we’re here because the police department has some concerns about the amount of thermal energy being emitted from your home.”

“Thermal *what*?!” I had feigned the same ignorance many times before.

“Yes, ma’am. Heat. We’re talking about heat coming from your house.”

“Since when does generating an absurd amount of heat qualify as a crime, Officer?” I asked with a smirk.

“Well, ma’am, with all due respect, it qualifies as a crime if you also happen to be using high-powered lamps and growing enough marijuana in your house to supply all of northern Nevada.”

“Marijuana!” I cackled, then repeated “marijuana” in a softer voice and pulled back the curtain to see if the nosy neighbors across the street were observing the police visit. “I don’t know the first thing about marijuana.”

I moved forward and touched Officer Collins’s arm. As I gripped it, my talon-like nails caught skin. He knew he should remove my hand, but instead, much to his own surprise, he allowed me to keep touching him, and felt the need to explain his arrival at my residence.

“Sometimes the heat sensors in the helicopter are inaccurate.” A

pause. “Maybe there’s been a mistake.”

His partner raised his eyebrows. “Mistake? Officer Collins, can I talk to you a minute?”

Officer Collins ignored him.

“Wow. That’s a new one,” I said. “Since when do helicopters have heat sensors?”

“Just procedure, ma’am,” Officer Collins explained, smiling and fidgeting with his hands. Considering he was a follow-the-rules kind of guy, it was bizarre behavior, but there was something special about me and he knew it.

I mesmerized him.

He extended his hand. “I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Officer Collins. You can call me John. This is my partner, Officer Webster.”

By now, Frank Webster was feeling out of sorts, and I began to see the telltale signs. Nervousness. Flushed face. Sweating. That paranoid look of impending doom. Yep, he was the one, all right.

He was a caged rat trying to find an escape route. His chubby, hairy fingers fondled his belt buckle because he didn’t know what to do with his nervous energy. It’s funny how they always try to control the situation. This guy, for instance, was trying to hurry up, so he could get out of the house. But you can’t outsmart fate. It just doesn’t work that way.

“Jesus Christ, it’s a hundred degrees in here,” he said under his breath. “She must have one damn big furnace.”

I whispered, “The biggest, Frank.”

Officer Webster grew pale, but Officer Collins remained unsuspecting. “You’ll have to excuse my partner, here. He’s just a little edgy today. Ma’am, I think we’d better go ahead and do what we came here to do. Let you get on with your day.”

He looked at Frank Webster, who was now drenched in sweat. “You check the basement, Frank. Why don’t I take a look around up here?”

And then we'd better get back to the station."

"Good idea!" I said. "Come with me, Frank." I walked him over to the basement door, put one arm around his shoulder, and placed my other hand on his arm, squeezing it and winking.

He stared at the basement door. He was surprised to see it, and rightly so. Basements are rare in Nevada. Something about the water table. The door was enormous, and resembled one from sixteenth century Spain. Unlike the other doors in the house, this one was a giant slab of oak hung on black iron hinges, and it did not open or close easily. Right in front of the door stood my chocolate labrador, Pluto. He sniffed Officer Webster's pant leg, then moved out of his way. Frank Webster looked to me for help, but there would be no rescue.

I delivered the bad news. "He's funny about strangers. Guess he's giving you the go-ahead, Frank."

Frank Webster took his first step down the stairs. When his right leg started to shake in uncontrollable spasms, he stopped. He turned his head around to see me standing next to Pluto, who was now more beast than dog.

I continued to control him. "Go on, Frank."

The shaking of his leg ceased, and Frank proceeded down.

One step.

Two.

Three.

"Is this . . ."

"Yes, Frank."

From above, I gave him one last scorching look and shut the door.

*Check.*

Relieved, I skipped back to the living room to talk with my new friend. Officer Collins walked around the room, making eye contact with everything but me. I continued to follow him, mimicking his every move like a shadow. Little did he know that while he was checking my house for drug paraphernalia, I was imagining what it would be like to



seduce him right there in the living room. I followed so closely behind him that, when he turned around, he smacked right into me. My slippers slid on the hardwood floor, and with great momentum I crashed, almost hitting my head on the coffee table.

It took me a moment to realize he had a direct view of my thigh and sheer black panties. *Perfect.*

“All right?” he asked with an embarrassed chuckle. He crouched down and held out his hand—half-tentative, half-excited. When he helped me to my feet, our eyes locked. At that very moment, he felt the urge to go check on his partner, but I held him in place. He could not take his eyes off me. He knew he should behave like a professional, but I took away his ability to be rational.

He broke the tension. “Do you work out of your home?”

“Yes.” I sat down on the couch and motioned for him to sit next to me.

He sat down and peered into my eyes. “What exactly do you do?”

“I’m in . . . personnel.”

“Do you own your own business, or do you have a boss like the rest of us poor souls?”

“Got a boss, and he’s a real devil. Took me nine years to get promoted.”

“Been working my ass off to make detective but feel like I’m getting nowhere,” he said. He moved closer.

“Well, my boss has such a giant operation going, he gets bogged down with all his employees. It’s my job to keep track of all the comings and goings.”

John Collins leaned forward. “Sounds like you have a lot of responsibility.”

I smiled, and when I took one of his big hands in mine, I explained how much I was enjoying his visit. It had been forever since I’d had a visitor like him—a man worth my interest. I took in all of him. His sweet, boyish smile coupled with his strong, masculine body highlight-

ed what he really was—a fine specimen of a man capable of helping me create benevolent and beautiful offspring. Averting my eyes for a moment, I spotted *The Ultimate Baby Name Book* on my coffee table, and I was reminded of my true goal. A peaceful, contented warmth consumed me when I thought of loving and protecting a child of my own.

I now ran my tongue over my lips, and he moved in closer. I made no attempt to tease him. It had been too long.

His warm hand reached the bottom of my chemise, so he slowly walked his fingers across the silk. Our breathing became louder, slower, synchronized. In a one-handed swipe, he enclosed both of my wrists in a tight grip, then lifted them above my head. With my arms held hostage, his lips and his free arm moved in for further investigation.

He smelled like Altoids and chocolate, and it made me want to eat his tongue. John Collins was the birthday present I'd forgotten I wanted. *Arrest me. Arrest me. Oh, God, please arrest me.*

And then my body began to tremble. This time, the focus was less about desire and more about purpose.

His touch was both gentle and confident, and it made me want to follow him. Taking baby steps together, we inched our way toward the couch, but during the excitement, we knocked over the vase of red Gerber daisies on my sideboard. The water seemed to trickle onto the floor in slow motion, or maybe we were moving in fast forward.

Either way, I found myself easing up on the mind control, which was a mistake. There was something about the way he touched my hair and called me Lucy that made me let down my guard.

Just when I did, we both heard a scream from the basement. John Collins broke his gaze and jumped up. “What was that?” he said, reaching for his pants. “Frank!” he yelled.

I sighed and followed him over to the basement door. Blocking the doorway, I wondered if I'd be able to diffuse the moment that was to come. Pluto let out a fierce growl and tugged at Officer Collins's pant

leg. “See? Pluto doesn’t want you to go down there, either.”

“Ma’am! Step away!” He pushed me back into the kitchen.

I felt nauseated.

“It’s not your place to help,” I insisted. “There’s nothing you can do for him. I have strict orders to only let certain people down there, and you’re not one of them!”

I’d barely finished my sentence before he flung the door open and was halfway down the stairs. John Collins disappeared in darkness and all I heard were screams, which were strong at first and then got quieter with each second. I shut the door and puked in my kitchen sink.

“Shit.”

Pouring myself another martini, I went back into my office to re-open the appropriate file. The program would update the numbers, but I needed to document the specifics. It was part of my job.

I typed in the technical details about the two cops, and then felt compelled to add a couple of pages expressing my feelings about the cute one. I knew it wouldn’t be appreciated. I was a mere facilitator.

*October 11, 3:42 p.m.*

*One—Frank Webster. Status: Expected.*

I paused for a moment, feeling a wave of guilt and disappointment.

*Two—John Collins. Status: Unexpected.*