

A lush forest scene featuring a stream flowing over mossy rocks. The scene is filled with numerous glowing yellow fireflies, creating a magical atmosphere. The background is dark green foliage, and the foreground shows large, moss-covered rocks.

the  
**LAST SIN EATER**

A NOVEL

FRANCINE  
**RIVERS**

INTERNATIONALLY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *REDEEMING LOVE*

# THE LAST SIN EATER

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**LAST  
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FRANCINE  
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## Author's Note

**THE SIN EATER** was a person who was paid a fee or given food to take upon himself the moral trespasses of the deceased and their consequences in the afterlife. Sin eaters were common in the early nineteenth century in England, the Lowlands of Scotland, and the Welsh border district. This custom was carried over by immigrants to the Americas and practiced in remote areas of the Appalachian Mountains.

This is a purely fictional story of one such person.



## CHAPTER 1



### GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS, MID-1850s

The first time I saw the sin eater was the night Granny Forbes was carried to her grave. I was very young and Granny my dearest companion, and I was greatly troubled in my mind.

“Dunna look at the sin eater, Cadi,” I’d been told by my pa. “And no be asking why.”

Being so grievously forewarned, I tried to obey. Mama said I was accurst with curiosity. Papa said it was pure, cussed nosiness. Only Granny, with her tender spot for me, had understood.

Even the simplest queries were met with resistance. “*When you’re older. . . .*” “*It’s none of your business. . . .*” “*Why are you asking such a fool question?*” The summer before Granny died, I had stopped asking questions of anyone. I reckoned if I were ever going to find answers, I’d have to go looking for myself.

Granny was the only one who seemed to understand my mind. She always said I had Ian Forbes's questing spirit. He was my grandfather, and Granny said that spirit drove him across the sea. Then again, maybe that was not the whole truth because she said another time it was the Scotland clearances that did it.

Papa agreed about that, telling me Grandfather was driven off his land and herded onto a boat to America so sheep could have pasture. Or so he was told, though I could never make sense of it. How could animals have more value than men? As for Granny, she was the fourth daughter of a poor Welsh tinker and had no prospects. Coming to America wasn't a matter of choice. It was one of necessity. When she first come, she worked for a wealthy gentleman in a grand house in Charleston, tending the pretty, frail wife he had met, married, and brought over from Caerdydd.

It was the wife who took such a liking to Granny. As a Welshwoman herself, the young missus was longing for home. Granny was young then, seventeen to her recollection. Unfortunately, she didn't work for them long, as the lady died in childbirth and took her wee babe with her. The gentleman didn't have further need of a lady's maid—and what services he did want rendered Granny refused to provide. She'd never say what they were, only that the man released her from her contract and left Granny to her own devices in the dead of winter.

Times were very hard. She took whatever work she could find to keep body and soul together and met my grandfather while doing so. She married Ian Forbes "despite his disposition." Never having met my grandfather, I couldn't judge her remark on his behalf, but I heard my uncles laughing once about his high temper. Uncle Robert said Grandfather stood on the front porch and shot at Papa, not once, but twice in

quick succession. Fortunately, he had been drunk at the time and Papa quick on his feet, or I never would have been born.

Grandfather Forbes died of a winter long before I was born. A heavy storm had come, and he lost his way home. Where he had been, Granny didn't say. It was one of the things that frustrated me most, only hearing part of the story and not the whole. It was left to me to piece it all together and took years in the doing. Some of it is best not told.

When asked why she had married such a fierce man, Granny said, "He had eyes blue as a dusky sky, dearie. You have 'em, Cadi, my love, same as your papa does. And you've Ian's soul hunger, God help you."

Granny was ever saying things beyond my ken. "Papa says I take after you."

She rubbed her knuckles lightly against my cheek. "You do, well enow." Her smile had been sad. "Hopefully not in all ways." She would say no more on the subject. Seemed some questions didn't bear answering.

The morning she died, we were just sitting and looking out over the hollow. She had leaned back in her chair, rubbing her arm as though it was paining her. Mama was moving around inside the house. Granny drew in her breath with a grimace and then looked at me. "Give your mama time."

How four words could hurt. They brought to mind all that had been before and what had caused the wall between Mama and me. Some things can't be changed or undone.

Even at my young age, after a mere ten years of living, the future stretched bleakly out ahead of me. Resting my head against Granny's knee, I said nothing and took what solace I could in her sweet presence, not guessing that even that would soon be taken from me. And if I could go back now and change things so that I would not have lived through such a time of desolation, would I? No. For God

had His hand upon me before I knew who He was or even that He was.

In the last year I had learned tears did no good. Some pain is just too deep. Grief can't be dissolved like rain washing dust off a roof. Sorrow knows no washing away, no easing . . . no end of time.

Granny laid her hand upon my head and began stroking me like I was one of the hounds that slept under our porch. I liked it. Some days I wished I was one of them hounds Papa loved so much. Mama never touched me anymore, nor Papa either. They didn't speak much to one another, and even less to me. Only my brother, Iwan, showed me affection, though not often. He had too much to do helping Papa with the farm. What little time he had left over was spent in mooning over Cluny Byrnes.

Granny was my only hope, and she was slipping away.

"I love you, my dear. You remember that when winter comes and everything seems cold and dead. It won't stay that way forever."

Winter had come upon Mama's heart last summer, and she was still a frozen wasteland where I was concerned.

"Spring beauties used to grow like a lavender blanket at Bearwallow. If I could wish for one thing, it would be for a bouquet of spring beauties."

Granny was ever saying the same thing: "*If I could wish for one thing . . .*" Her wishes kept me busy, not that I did not delight in them. She was too old to go far afield. Furthest I ever seen Granny walk was to Elda Kendric's house, she being our closest neighbor and near as old as Granny herself. Yet Granny's mind could travel across oceans and over mountains and valleys, and often did so for my sake. It was Granny who pointed me to forgotten paths and treasured haunts it would have taken me longer to discover on me own. It was

for her pleasure I hunted hither and yon in our high mountains to collect her precious bits of memories. And it got me away from the house—and Mama's grief and rejection of me.

It was Granny who put me on the path to Bloomfield in springtime so that I could bring back a basket full of mountain daisies and bluets. She taught me how to make a wreath of them and put it on my head. She told me about Dragon's Tooth, where green rock grew just like the backbone of Ian Forbes's Scotland, or so he'd said.

More than once I'd gone there. It took all day for me to climb the mountain to bring back a chunk of that green stone for her. I traipsed to ponds filled with sunfish and hollows warm with frog song. I even found the oak tree she said must be old as time itself—or at least as old as she.

Granny was full of stories. She always took her leisure, pouring out words like honey on a cool morning, sweet and heavy. She knew everyone who came to settle into the palisades, runs, and hollows of our uptilted land. We Forbeses came early to these great smoky highlands, wanting land and possibilities. The mountains reminded Grandfather of Scotland. Laochailand Kai led them here, along with others. Elda Kendric came with her husband, dead and gone now so long that Granny forgot his name. Even Miz Elda might have forgotten it, for she was ever saying she didn't want to talk about him. Then came the Odaras and Trents and Sayres and Kents. The Connors and Byrneses and Smiths cleared land as well. Granny said if Grandfather Ian hadn't died, he would have moved the family further east to Kantuckee.

They all helped one another when they could and held together against nature and God Himself to build places for themselves. And they was ever on the lookout for Indians to come and murder 'em. Those that didn't stand with the others stood alone and most often died. A few married come

later, marrying in until we were a mingled lot, castoffs and cutaways and best-forgottens.

“We all got our reasons, some better than most, for sinking roots into these mountains and pulling the mists over our heads,” Granny said once. Some came to build. Some came to hide. All of them did what they knew to survive.

That morning—the morning Granny died—I went to Bearwallow for spring beauties. She longed for them, and that was reason enough for me to go. The flowers did grow like a lavender blanket, just like Granny said she remembered. I picked a basketful and brought them back for her. She was asleep in her porch chair, or so I thought until I came close. She was white as a dogwood blossom, her mouth and eyes wide open. When I placed the flowers in her lap, she didn’t move or blink.

I knew she was gone from me.

It is an awful thing for a child to understand death in such fullness. I had already had one taste of it. This time it was a long drink of desolation that went down and spread into my very bones.

Something had departed from Granny or been stolen away in my absence. Her eyes stirred not a flicker; not a breath of air came from her parted lips. And she didn’t look herself, but rather like a shriveled husk propped up in a willow chair—a likeness of Granny Forbes, but not Granny at all. She was gone already without a by-your-leave. I understood too much and not enough in that moment, and what I knew hurt so deep inside me I thought I’d die of it. For a while I did. Or at least I let go of what faint hope had survived the summer before.

Mama stopped the clock on the mantel and covered the mirror, as was our highland custom. Papa rang the passing bell. Eighty-seven times he rung it, one for each year of

Granny's life. My brother, Iwan, was sent to tell our relatives the sorrowful news. By the next day, most of the clan of Forbeses and offshoots and graft-ins would gather to carry Granny to her final resting place on the mountainside.

Gervase Odara, the healer, was the first to come, bringing with her Elda Kendric, now the oldest woman in our highlands. Papa took the door off the hinges and set it up between two chairs. Granny was laid out on it. First the women removed her clothes, and Gervase Odara took them outside to wash. Water was warmed over the fire inside. Mama ladled some into a basin and used it to wash Granny's body.

"Gorawen," Elda Kendric said, brushing Granny's long white hair. "Ye've left me last of the first."

Mama didn't say anything. She and Elda Kendric went on working in silence. The old woman would look at Mama, but Mama never once raised her head from what she was doing or said a word to anyone. When Gervase Odara came back inside, she helped Mama.

"She told me not more'n a few days ago that she had heard the mighty voice calling to her from the mountain." Gervase Odara waited, glancing at Mama. When she still said nothing, the healer said, "She told me it was for Cadi she tarried."

Mama's head came up then, and she stared hard at Gervase Odara. "I hurt enough without you tearing open the wound."

"Sometimes it does good to let it draw."

"This isna the time."

"When better, Fia?"

Mama turned slightly, and I felt her looking for me. I withdrew as far as I could into the corner shadows, hoping she wouldn't blame me for the women tormenting her. I bowed my head, pulling my knees tight against my chest, wishing myself smaller or invisible.

But I was neither. Mama fixed her gaze on me. “Go outside, Cadi. This is no place for you.”

“Fia . . . ,” Gervase Odara began.

I didn’t wait to hear what she would say but cried out, “Leave her be!” for I couldn’t bear the look in my mother’s eyes. She was like a trapped and wounded animal. “Leave her be!” I cried again; then jumping up, I ran out the door.

Some of the clan was yet to be gathered, for which I was thankful. Had they been, I would have run into the lot of them staring and whispering. I looked for Papa and found him chopping down a cedar some distance away. I stood behind a tree watching him for a long while. It struck me how long it had been since I heard him laugh. His countenance was grim as he worked. He paused once and wiped the sweat from his brow. Turning, he looked straight at me. “Mama send you out of the house?”

I nodded.

Papa lifted his ax again and made another deep notch in the tree. “Get the bucket and collect the chips. Carry ’em back to her. It’ll cut the stench in the house.”

The women had already seen to that, for the doors and windows were open, a breeze carrying in the scent of spring in the mountains that married with the camphor they had rubbed on Granny’s body. A tin cup of salt sat on the window-sill, tiny white granules blowing onto the floor like sand.

Mama was kneading bread dough as I came in. When she didn’t look up, Gervase Odara took the bucket of cedar chips.

“Thank you, Cadi.” She began to sprinkle a handful alongside Granny, who was clothed again in a black wool dress. Her long white hair was cut off and coiled neatly on the table to be braided into the mourning jewelry. Perhaps Mama would add a white braid to the red-gold one she wore. Granny’s poor shorn head had been covered with a white

cloth looped beneath her chin. Her mouth was closed, her lips silenced forever. A second white strip of cloth had been tied around her ankles, a third around her knees. Her hands, so thin and worn with calluses, lay one over the other on her chest. Two shiny copper pennies lay upon her eyelids.

“Come tomorrow or the next day around nightfall, the sin eater will come, Cadi Forbes,” Elda Kendric said to me. “When he does, ye’ll take yer place beside yer mother. Yer Aunt Winnie will carry the tray with the bread and the mazer of elderberry wine. The sin eater will follow us to the cemetery and then eat and drink all yer granny’s sins so she wilna walk these hills no more.”

My heart shuddered inside me at the thought.

That night I didn’t sleep much, so I lay there, listening to the hoot of the owl outside. “Whooo?” *Who is the sin eater?* “Whooo?” *Who will Granny see first now she’s gone to the hereafter?* “Whooo?” *Who would come take my sins away?*

The next day was no better as I watched everyone gather. Three uncles and their wives and Aunt Winnie and her husband had arrived. The cousins wanted to play, but I had no heart for it. I hid myself in the shadows of the house and kept vigil over Granny. When they finally laid her in her grave, I wouldn’t see her anymore. Leastwise, not until I met my Maker.

Mama didn’t send me out again, but she sat in the spring sunshine with the aunts. Jillian O’Shea had a new girl baby at her breast, and most were gratified that the babe’s given name was Gorawen. I heard someone say it was God’s way to give and to take away. A Gorawen comes and a Gorawen goes.

I took no comfort in those words.

From my dim corner, I saw every member of Granny’s family and all her friends come to pay respect to her. And they all brought something to share with the others, be it

whiskey, sweet potatoes for roasting, corn cakes, molasses sweet bread, or salted pork for the stew pot burbling over the fire.

“You’ve got to eat summat, child,” Gervase Odara said to me halfway through the second day. I put my head on my arms, refusing to look at her or answer. It didn’t seem right to me that life should go on. My granny lay dead, dressed in her finest clothes, ready for burial, but people talked and walked and ate as always.

“Cadi, my dear,” Gervase Odara said. “Your granny had a long living.”

Not long enough, to my way of thinking.

I wondered if I would’ve felt better if Granny had told me herself what was to come. Thinking back, I figure she knew. Leastwise, I think she prayed for the end to come like it did, with me somewheres else. Instead of saying she was dying, she sent me chasing after spring beauties and departed this life while I was gone.

Only Iwan seemed to understand my hurt. He came inside and sat with me on Granny’s cot. He didn’t try to get me to eat or talk. He didn’t say Granny was old and it was her time to die. He didn’t say time would heal my wounds. He just took my hand and held it, stroking it in silence. After a while, he got up and left again.

The Kai family came the second day. I could hear the father, Brogan Kai, outside, his voice deep and commanding. The mother, Iona, and her children came in to pay their respects to Mama and my other relatives. Iona Kai’s son Fagan entered and went no further than Granny, viewing her solemnly in all her finery. He was the same age as Iwan, near fifteen, but seemed even older with his quiet demeanor and grim countenance. His mother had brought corn cakes and some jars of watermelon pickles to share. She gave them

to one of my aunts and sat for a few minutes with Mama, speaking quietly to her.

As the sun went down, people spoke more and more quietly until no one spoke at all. I felt the difference in the house. The quiet apprehension had given way to a darkness heavier to bear. Granny's death had brought something into the house no words could describe. I could feel it gathering and closing in around us like the night, tighter and tighter as the day died.

Fear, it was.

Papa came to the open doorway. "It's time."

Gervase Odara came to me and hunkered down, taking my hands firmly in hers. "Cadi, you must listen. Do not look at the sin eater. Do you understand me, child? He has taken all manner of terrible things unto himself. If you look at him, he'll give you the evil eye, and some of the sin he carries might spill over onto you."

I looked up at Mama. She stood in the lamplight, her face strained, her eyes closed. She would not look at me even then.

Gervase Odara took my chin and tipped my face so I had to look her in the eyes again. "Do you understand me, Cadi?"

What good would it do now? I wanted to say. Granny was already gone. It was cold flesh that remained, not the part of her that mattered. All anyone had to do was look at her to know her soul had departed. How could anyone come now and make things right? It was done. Finished. She was gone.

But Gervase Odara persisted until I nodded. I didn't understand anything then, and the reckoning didn't come until a long time later. Yet, the healer's manner sapped my courage. Besides, I had learned better than to ask for explanations by then. I had heard of the sin eater, though in no great detail. One did not speak often or long of the most dreaded of mankind.

“He will take your granny’s sins away, and she will rest in peace,” Elda Kendric said from close by.

And would he come and take my sins away? Or was it to be my fate to take them with me to my grave, tormented in hell for what my mean spirit had caused?

My throat closed hot and tight.

Whatever secret sins had burdened Granny were betwixt her and the sin eater, who would take them from her. There would never be rest for me. There was not a soul present who did not know what I’d done. Or thought they did.

“Stand with your mother, child,” my father told me. I did so and felt the slightest touch of her hand. When I looked up with a longing so deep my heart ached, she spoke softly and broke off a sprig of the rosemary she carried.

“Toss this into the grave when the service is done,” she said without looking at me.

Four men lifted Granny and carried her out the door. Papa carried a torch and led the procession up the path to the mountainside cemetery. The night air seemed colder than usual, and I shivered walking alongside my mother. Her face was still and bleak, her eyes dry. Others carried torches to light our way. A full moon was up, though it was obscured by a thick layer of mist seeping in through the notch in the mountains. It looked like dead-white fingers reaching for us. Dark shadows danced between the trees as we passed, and my heart thumped madly, gooseflesh rising when I felt another presence join our procession.

The sin eater was there, like a cold breath of wind on the back of my neck.

Papa and his brothers had built a fence around the cemetery to keep wolves and other critters from digging. Granny once told me she liked the ground Papa had selected. It was

a high place where those laid to rest would be dry and safe and have a grand view of the cove below and heaven above.

I entered the gate just after my mother and took my place at her side. My aunt Winnie carried the tray on which was the bread Mama had baked and the mazer of elderberry wine. A long, deep hole had been dug and the earth piled up. Granny, laid out on her bier, was placed upon that mound of red-brown, rocky soil. Aunt Cora spread a white cloth over Granny, and Aunt Winnie stepped forward and placed the tray upon the body.

A stillness fell upon the congregation, taking such firm hold that even the crickets and frogs were silent.

No one moved.

No one breathed.

I looked up and saw Mama's face glowing red-gold in the torchlight, her eyes shut tight. When the gate clicked, those gathered turned away from Granny, keeping their backs to her. I did the same, the hair on my head prickling as I heard the soft footfall of the sin eater.

It was so quiet, I heard the bread tear. I heard him gulp the wine. Was it hunger for sin that made him eat like a starving animal? Or was he as eager to have done with his terrible duty and be gone from this place as were those who stood with their backs turned and eyes tight shut in fear of looking into his evil eyes?

Silence followed his hasty meal, and then he gave a shuddering sigh. "I give easement and rest now to thee, Gorawen Forbes, dear woman, that ye walk not over fields nor mountains nor along pathways. And for thy peace I pawn my own soul."

I couldn't help it. His voice was so deep and tender and sorrowful, I turned, my heart aching. For the briefest instant our eyes met, and then I shut mine at the strange and

terrifying sight of him. Yet time enough had passed to change everything from that day forward.

Nothing would ever be the same again.

“No harm done,” he said softly. His quiet footfall died away as he went out the gate. I looked toward it, but darkness had already swallowed him.

Crickets chirped again, and somewhere close by the owl hooted. “Whooo?” *Who is the sin eater?* “Whooo?” *Who is he?* “Whooo?”

Everyone breathed again, like a collective sigh of relief and thanksgiving that it was over now and Granny would rest in peace. Mama began to cry loudly—deep wrenching sobs of inconsolable grief. I knew it wasn’t just Granny she was grieving over. Others cried with her as the prayers were said. Granny was lowered into her resting place. Loved ones came forward one by one and threw in sprigs of rosemary. When everything was said and done, Papa scooped Mama up in his arms and carried her from the graveyard.

Lingering behind, I watched two men shovel dirt on top of Granny. Each thud of earth made a cold thud inside me. One man looked up from his work. “Go on now, girl. Go on back to the house with the others.”

As I left by the gate, I turned for a moment, my gaze traveling over the others laid to rest in the cemetery. My grandfather Ian Forbes had been first, followed by a son who had died of a Thursday after complaining of terrible stomach pains. Three cousins and an aunt had died in a week of fever. And then there was the stone for Elen.

Halfway home, I looked down at the sprig of rosemary Mama had given me. I’d forgotten to throw it into the grave. Rubbing it between my palms, I crushed the small silvery leaves, releasing the scent. Putting my hands over my face, I breathed it in and wept. I stood like that, alone in the dark-

ness, until Iwan came back for me. He held me close for a while, saying nothing. Then he took my hand and squeezed it. “Mama was worrying about you.”

He meant to comfort, but I knew it was a lie. In truth, we both knew it.

I stayed outside on the far end of the porch, my legs dangling over the edge. Leaning on the lower railing, I laid my head down in my arms and listened to Aunt Winnie sing a Welsh hymn Granny had taught her. Others joined in. Papa and the other men were drinking whiskey, little interested in the food the women had prepared.

“What’d he mean, ‘no harm done’?” someone asked.

“Maybe he meant Gorawen Forbes didn’t have as many sins as she might have after such a long living.”

“And maybe he’s taken on so many in the past twenty years, hers wilna make much difference.”

“Leave off talking about the man,” Brogan Kai said sternly. “He done his duty and he’s gone. Forget him.”

No one mentioned the sin eater again, not for the rest of that evening while the grieving was open and unashamed.

Weary in body and spirit, I went inside and curled up on Granny’s cot. Pulling her blanket over me, I closed my eyes, consoled. I could still smell the scent of her mingling with the rosemary on my palms. For a few minutes I pretended she was still alive and well, sitting in her chair on the porch listening to everyone tell stories about her and Grandfather and countless others they’d loved. Then I got to thinking of Granny lying deep in that grave, covered over by the red-brown mountain soil. She would not rise to walk these hills again because someone had come and taken her sins away.

Or had he?

Somewhere out there in the wilderness, all alone, was the

sin eater. Only he knew if he had accomplished what he had come to do.

And yet, I could not help wondering. Why had he come at all? Why hadn't he hidden himself away, pretending not to hear the passing bell echoing in the mountains? Were not the sins of one life enough to bear without taking on those of everyone that lived and died in the hollows and coves of our mountains? Why would he do it? Why would he carry so many burdens, knowing he would burn in hell for people who feared and despised him, who would never even look him in the face?

And why did my heart ache so at the thought of him?

Even at my tender age, I knew.

Seventy to eighty years stretched out before me, long years of living ahead if I had Granny's constitution. Years to live with what I had done.

Unless . . .

"*Forget him,*" Brogan Kai had commanded.

Yet a quiet voice whispered in my ear, "*Seek and ye shall find, my dear. Ask and the answer will be given. . . .*"

And I knew I would, whatever came of it.