

Never Cease

By Sue Dent

PROLOGUE

She was finally alone, all alone. Merideth had taken all six children with him, and she wouldn't see them again until much later, after the church service Merideth was leading ended. The weathered, horse-drawn wagon had never looked so full, and for a brief moment, Julia wanted to go along, too. Holding back tears as they pulled away wasn't easy. Yet when she could no longer hear the wagon wheels creaking along, or the steady plod of their mare pulling it, she regrouped. They would be back soon enough, and until then, she should enjoy this free time. After all, Merideth had planned this time alone for her. Julia wouldn't spoil it by being sad.

She would work in the garden. No, she would *sit* in her garden, and absolutely no one would bother her. But first, she must tidy up. *Yes*, she thought. *I will tidy up, then relax.*

She started in the small kitchen, but only had to spend a little time there. Her two daughters had cleaned it before they left. She moved on. Instinctively, she kept looking for a child to come darting out, a daughter or a son, calling to her for one thing or another. She paused, fought back another tear. Even when they weren't there, they were. She went along, picked up a shirt and scolded the child who had left it, though the child was nowhere around to be affected by her words. This time Julia laughed, realized how ridiculous she sounded. *I've been a mother far too long!* But she wouldn't have it any other way.

Julia didn't look at all like someone's mother. After six children, she still looked very much like an older sister. She and Merideth married young and had gotten started early. She hadn't had time to think about growing old and, consequently, it didn't seem she had. Her face was smooth, not one line or blemish, and only seemed to attract more attention than when she was younger. Men took notice, but she wanted none but Meri. He doted on her, took care of her and loved her like no other could.

Meri was a fine catch in his own right: a man of God, strong and humble, captivating and caring. She smiled knowingly, then carried the shirt she had collected from the floor back to where it belonged, all while thinking of the one person she could never get enough of.

In the small room where the boys slept, she placed the shirt on the bed closest to the door. But just as she began turning around to leave, a shadow overtook hers, a much larger one.

"Who's there?" she said, rattled. "What do you want?" But she got no answer.

She turned slowly, and stifled her scream. The man was much too close, blocking her way out of the room.

She would go. She would run. He would never catch her. "If . . . If you're here to see Mer— my husband . . . he's just out back. I'll go and get him."

But he grabbed her arm tight when she tried to get by.

"Husband not here. Children not here. Julia all alone. Julia woman of Go—" He stopped, placed the palm of his free hand against his forehead, as though trying to force some unimaginable pain away. After a moment, he spoke again. "Want Julia and husband to leave."

Why was he talking like that? What was wrong with him and how did he know her name?

The questions came to her at once. She didn't care about the answers though; she just wanted to leave. She pulled again. "Please, let me go."

But he didn't. Instead, he led her outside, took her into the woods that thickened just past the garden, and handed her off to another man whose grip was just as firm.

"No words," the first man said. "No kill."

A feeling of dread overcame her as she watched the first man leave, then turned to face the one who now held her. She'd seen his lustful smile before. When Meri couldn't accompany her on her errands in town, she got those looks sometimes. They always made her feel awkward, uneasy. But not terrified, as she was now.

The remainder of that time was a blur as Julia forced herself not to think about what the man was doing as he forced himself on her. Finally it was over, and he left.

Julia felt sick, rolled over onto her side and took deep breaths. A twig snapped behind her. She started, managed to get to her feet but froze in fear. *Why won't they just leave me alone?*

The first man was back, moved toward her cowering form and spoke. "Julia not forget this day. Julia never forget. Tell husband to go. Only evil will stand here."

What happened next, Julia was sure no one would ever believe. Right before her eyes, the man turned into a wolf. The wolf came at her, tore his claws at her right side.

She managed to get to a tree and hid behind it, certain the wolf would come after her and kill her. She waited, eyes screwed shut, but nothing happened. Long moments passed, and she finally opened her eyes to see that the wolf was once again the man.

"Leave," he grunted at her.

Holding her bleeding side with her hands, she pushed through the pain and ran—stumbling, falling to her knees more than once—but eventually making it back to the house. The door was still open, she noticed, and, with what energy she had left, she stumbled inside, bolted the door and collapsed. When she was able, she tore at her already-ripped blouse to make long strips. Using them as bandages, she dressed the wound.

As she worked, the room became steadily darker; the sun was setting, her family would be home soon. She did what she could to pull herself together for their sakes. They couldn't know. No one could know. No one could ever, ever know!

When her family returned, they found her sitting in the tiny parlor, sewing.

She fumbled through the next few days. When emotion overwhelmed her, she simply went to her room. One morning her oldest son questioned her. She told him it was nothing, but his face told her he didn't believe her. She knew he'd go to his father, but no longer cared.

* * *

The garden was where Julia went often to seek solace, and she was there when Merideth found her that afternoon, sitting and staring vacantly at her favorite rosebush, the one he gave her on her birthday: the one she nurtured like her seventh child.

In May of 1785, Merideth answered the call of God to go to Llandyfan, Wales. He took Bibles, medicines, his wife and small son. To the Baptists, who had established themselves in this new territory, Merideth was a Godsend. To the evil that had taken root all around, he was an adversary. Merideth won many souls over. For him and his family, it was a new beginning, something they were looking forward to. But now, his dear wife was troubled, and that troubled him mightily.

"And what thought has you staring so intently?" Merideth asked, his kind voice offset by his worry.

Julia broke herself from her trance, shook her head. "Nothing, Meri." She tried but failed to smile.

Merideth took a few steps closer, sat on his heels next to where she'd settled on a small wooden bench, one he'd made for her so she could sit while tending to her roses. "Our oldest son has come to me with concerns about his mother. I have been far too busy, I should have seen. You haven't been yourself, and I do so miss that. What is troubling you?"

She wanted to tell him but her words caught in her throat. The memory of that horrid day was still too fresh. All at once she felt the man's hands on her again, could hear him breathing close to her ear, smell the earth as he pinned her to the ground. She stared at Merideth, tried to push the memories away, but they couldn't be stopped. Tears threatened.

Merideth, seeing this, attempted to pull her toward him with gentle hands. But all Julia could see was the man in the woods. "No," she said, and flung her hands in front of her.

His alarm grew. "Julia, please, I just— If I have done something, please tell me."

She was staring at the ground when she spoke. "It is not you, it is me. I . . . I have shamed you."

"Shamed me?" he sputtered. "What are you saying? You could *never* shame me."

She took a wavering breath. "Two days ago, there was a man. When you took the children with you. He—He came into the house while I was alone— I tried to run, Meri, but he grabbed me and took me to the woods . . . to where another man waited and—"

"Julia," Merideth said, his breath going out of him, and then again, "Julia."

He took her by her shoulders this time, and Julia froze. After a second, though, she realized this was Meri, *her* Meri, and not some terrible memory. Seconds later, she relaxed, allowed him to hold her close, drew from his strength.

"I can't believe you kept this from me," he said, his voice catching. "I can't believe you—that you didn't say something sooner. Right away."

"I . . . I didn't want to upset the children."

In awe, Merideth held her at arms' length. "The children? Julia, what about *you*? What did you think would happen if you kept this inside?"

"I also didn't want to lose you. I couldn't bear it."

"As if I would ever consider leaving you!"

A tiny wave of relief washed over her.

"You are my life, Julia. My world." He pulled her close again. "We'll get through this. God will help us."

"There's more, Meri," Julia said, pushing herself farther away on the bench. "The man . . . the first man, he—he came back after the other man had . . . had—"

Merideth put a finger to her lips before she could finish. "None of it matters."

"But it's not what you think." She wanted to get the words out before fear overwhelmed her. "The first man, he . . . he talked about your mission, about the work you do." The words rushed out now. "He said we should leave this place and never come back. Said there was no room for good here, that evil prevailed. He then said . . ." she took a deep breath, "if we didn't leave, he would come back for the children and—"

She couldn't finish, and he wouldn't make her. Neither did he hesitate to respond. "Then we shall move—as soon as possible. We will leave this place."

"But Meri, this is where you felt the Lord leading you! You have sacrificed so much, worked so hard—it would be like giving up." She was remembering the stir he'd caused when he started baptizing. Immersion in water wasn't something familiar to anyone in the area then.

"The Lord will understand," he said without compromise. "I must protect you . . . our children."

"But you have done so much good here. If only I could have gotten away—"

"Listen to me, Julia! This was not your fault. It was a terrible thing that happened to you, but we will get through it."

"But Meri . . . I fear . . . I fear I am with child. *His* child."

Meri's eyes widened, but held none of the censure Julia had dreaded. "You really believe you are with child?" he said, wiping a wayward tear from her face. "His child?"

She could only nod.

"But it has only been two days, how can you—? The midwife was certain you could bear no more. We have tried, and—"

At last, her eyes met his. “I know how it must sound, and I don’t want to believe it either. But I’ve had six. I . . . I know how it feels. All six times, I felt like I do now.”

A long pause later, Meri said, “Then we will have another child—another blessing.”

The words sounded harsh to Julia. No, they sounded foolish. How could this child ever be a blessing? “Not like this, Meri,” she said, more tears breaking free. “Not like this.”

“It will be fine, Julia. You’ll see. We will call it a miracle. The children will be overjoyed. No one will know the truth but us . . . and we will never tell.”

“You could love this child?” she said, not believing.

“As if it were my own. I love you, Julia and if this child is yours, then it is mine and it always will be.”

“Meri . . . there is one other thing.” Because of the bizarre nature of what she was about to say, she didn’t wait for him to ask. “Before the man left—the first man, the one who led me into the woods, he . . . he turned into a wolf.”

For the first time, she saw disbelief pass over his face—and something else.

“Perhaps you were just overwhelmed by what happened,” he said. “Delirious. It-It must have been horrible.”

Julia eased up her blouse, carefully removed the strips of cloth she kept over her wounds and revealed what was beneath. The marks were deep and still looked fresh. “He told me . . . before he changed . . . you might need proof.”

Her tears returned, but Merideth could only stare glassy-eyed. He had seen marks such as these before. A young boy and two men from his last mission. All three had died after being attacked by a wolf. All three bore marks identical to the ones his wife was showing him now. And all three had given him a message before they breathed their last breath. They had told him to leave and never come back.

“Did he bite you?” he asked awkwardly. “When he was the wolf, I mean.”

Julie shook her head. “No. Just left these scratches.” She had a hard time figuring out why he asked something so odd. “Is there a reason why you need to know that? Would-Would it make matters worse?”

“Just different,” Merideth said, and reached out to help her ease her shirt back down. “Now, let’s go have those scratches looked at.”

* * *

As he left with her, the two responsible looked on from behind thick bushes. One was a man, the other . . . not quite. He’d been cursed centuries ago, his soul held captive by his own evil. He had cursed many, and would therefore remain cursed forever.

“All right,” the one beside him said. “I did what you asked. Yet I still don’t understand why you couldn’t have done it yourself.” He gave the same leering smile that had so frightened Julia. “You might have enjoyed it. I rather did.”

The man listening wasn’t bothered by the comment. His curse lessened his desire to indulge in the act the other man referred to, even made it difficult. Even if he had been able to, there was no way for him to do what the other man had done. The act, yes, but his seed wouldn’t yield any offspring. He had tried many times before without success.

“Just seems odd to me you wouldn’t want her for yourself.”

The man gave a distant nod, but said nothing. He had other ways of getting pleasure. Spreading his curse was one of those. But since this interfering minister had come to live in the town, pleasure was hard to come by. It wasn’t easy to get close to people who forever had a prayer on their lips or a cross around their neck.

He had to get rid of the minister . . . make an example of him so others wouldn’t feel inclined to take up his cause. This was his territory. He was here first, and the minister was in the way.

“So when do I get the money you promised?” his companion said. “I need to be on my way.” He gave a furtive grin. “Or maybe I’ll just visit Julia again.”

He put a hand to the talkative man’s throat and squeezed. “Julia with child. No touch Julia!”

“Why would you care?” the man croaked. “It’s not your child, but mine.”

The accusation was true, to a point. Yet the scratches he’d left for the minister to see were potent enough to affect the child. Perhaps it would develop keen hearing or an enhanced sense of smell. He’d heard of a similar attack, which yielded a boy-child who could pick up a scent as quick as any dog. When the child was old enough, weaned from its mother’s breast, the attacker, the one who’d done the scratching, took the child from his parents. In the same way, Julia’s child would be his child. When the time was right.

Gasping sounds brought his attention back to the one at the end of his arm, and he loosened his grip slightly.

“All right,” the man sputtered. “I won’t touch her. Just give me my money and I’ll be on my way.”

He might have screamed if he’d known what was coming, but he was dead the second the canine-like fangs pierced the large vein in his neck. He never felt his mutilated body being dragged, then dropped near the spot where Julia’s attack occurred.

* * *

The gravedigger stood knee-deep in what he’d already dug out and shoveled a little longer, his task not far from done. The man’s remains lay, covered, a few feet away.

There were no mourners.

Merideth was there to read last rites at the request of another who’d had other obligations, and Julia had come along with him. She often did when she could arrange to be away from the children. And Merideth had said the one they were burying had no family, no friends anyone knew of, and this bothered her. Julia believed everyone deserved a proper burial, so she stood by the grave of someone she didn’t know, face veiled and head bowed, to pay her respects.

The gravedigger worked a little longer, then climbed out, plunged his shovel into the fresh pile of dirt and stepped far back, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead. “Whenever you’re ready, Minister.”

Merideth nodded, clutched his Bible, and knelt beside the body. When the gravedigger bowed his head, Julia raised hers, and when Merideth lifted the shroud covering the man’s face, as he typically did to begin the service, Julia gasped, “It’s him!”

Stunned, Merideth looked back toward Julia, turned slightly to the gravedigger. When it was clear the man hadn’t heard her, he turned back to Julia. “You’re sure?” he whispered.

She brought a shaky hand to her mouth and nodded. Merideth got up and went to his wife, pulled her close, noting her rapid breathing.

“I’m taking you home,” he said, lifting her up to carry her back to their horse-drawn wagon.

The gravedigger was paying attention now, and looked confused. “But what about your duty?” he called after them.

Merideth’s words were hard. “You shall have to find the Devil himself to bury that one.”

A week after, Merideth and his family loaded their possessions and moved on.



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