



One

June

Come help us, *mamm!*” The excited voice of six-year-old Laura floated across the lawn. Abby grinned, watching her daughter and four-year-old son, Jake, chase lightning bugs through the grass with open jelly jars in hand. Despite the industrious efforts of the *kinner*, the fireflies successfully evaded capture to blink and glow another night.

“Why are you two off the porch? You both were already washed for bed.” Abby walked back from the barn with her palms perched on her hips.

She glanced up as a squeak from the screen door signaled the arrival of the final Graber family member, her *ehemann* of ten years. “I thought you were reading them a story,” she said with a sly smile.

Daniel slicked a hand through his thick hair, his hat nowhere in sight. Then he braced calloused palms against the porch rail. “Relax, wife. That grass looks pretty clean from where I’m standing. You won’t

have to start from scratch. Didn't it rain just the other day?" His smile deepened the lines around his eyes. With the setting sun glinting off his sun-burnished nose, he looked as mischievous as one of their children.

Abby watched the warm summer night unfold around her family with no desire to scold. The young ones would have the rest of their lives to have perfectly clean feet, but the summers of childhood were numbered. Besides, it was too nice an evening for anyone to go to bed on time. Walking up the porch steps, she stepped easily into Daniel's strong arms and rested her head against his shoulder. Within his embrace, and with her two healthy offspring darting about like honeybees in spring clover, she savored the almost-longest day of the year.

Swifts and swallows made their final canvass above the meadow before settling for the night in barn rafter nests or in the hollows of dead trees. Upon their exit from the sky, bats would take their place, swooping and soaring on wind currents, gobbling pesky mosquitoes. The breeze, scented with the last of the lilacs and the first of the honeysuckle, felt cool on her overheated skin.

"Everything all charged up for the night?" he asked close to her ear.

Daniel's question, the same one he asked nearly every night since she'd become a midwife, broke the idyllic trance she had wandered into—the all's-well-with-the-world feeling one gets after a satisfying day. "*Jah*," she murmured. "I ran the generator long enough to charge my battery packs. And I put a fresh battery in my cell phone for tonight, but I don't expect any middle-of-the-night calls. After yesterday's delivery, no babies are expected for several weeks."

"Hmm," he concluded, nuzzling the top of her head. "We both know how well babies stick to doctors' timetables. I'm fixing a cup of tea and heading upstairs. Yours will be cooling on the table for whenever you're ready." He brushed his lips across the top of her *kapp* before going inside, the screen door slamming behind him.

The nice thing about being married for ten years is that a person gets to know someone very well. Daniel Graber knew she enjoyed her beverages at room temperature—not too hot and not too cold. And she knew he needed to take mental inventory before going to bed to

make sure the family's ducks were all in a row. So she didn't mind being asked about her cell phone charger each evening.

After all, a midwife, even an Amish midwife, needed to be accessible twenty-four hours a day. The *Ordnung*, or rules that governed their Old Order district, didn't stipulate how Amish wives had their babies. A woman could have an obstetrician deliver at an English hospital, or she could go to a birthing center where a specially trained, certified nurse-midwife would bring her baby into the world. But many Old Order Amish preferred to have their babies at home, the center of their rural lives. Unlike their English counterparts, they usually continued to work during labor—washing dishes, picking beans in the garden, even giving the porch rocker a fresh coat of paint—until the baby made its grand entrance.

At thirty, Abigail Graber was an experienced midwife, having assisted the local physician or nurse-midwife in hundreds of deliveries. She'd received training and apprenticed with a nurse-midwife for several years, but she'd never set foot in college because she was Amish like her patients. And though her time-honored vocation allowed Abigail to witness the miracle of creation firsthand, even without advanced education she understood how quickly things could go wrong for either mother or child.

Ohio and Pennsylvania, the two states with the highest population of Amish families, didn't license midwives who weren't registered nurses under current guidelines. Therefore, Abby's duties generally involved preparing the mother—and the father—for the baby's arrival. She would give the women back massages to loosen tight muscles or have them soak in warm tubs to speed the delivery. Because their rural doctor refused to sit around people's kitchens waiting for babies to be born, Abigail would monitor the mother's contractions to keep him informed. Abby loved the waiting time while fathers debated possible names and mothers crocheted last-minute socks. Dr. Weller would usually arrive just in time to deliver the infant, and then he returned to his office patients or his own warm bed. Abby would remain to wash the new mother, bathe the infant in the kitchen sink, and finish the

paperwork at the table. She never left a home until the newborn was comfortably nursing at the mother's breast.

Home births were solely for healthy women with low-risk pregnancies and not for women with diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, or if a previous birth had been difficult. Patients were to receive regular prenatal care in the doctor's office to monitor their medical condition and the baby's development. For that reason, Abby knew none of the doctor's patients was due any time soon. But, as Daniel aptly pointed out, babies didn't listen very well.

And God often had other plans when a woman grew too comfortable, too placid in the sheer flawlessness of her life. On that June evening, as her own two healthy children scrambled up the steps to bed, their feet surprisingly clean, Abby almost felt smug in her contentment. She rocked in the porch swing, sipping tea and contemplating the planet Venus as it sat low and bright on the horizon.

The ring of her cell phone jarred her senses. "Hello. Graber residence."

"Abigail Graber?" asked an unfamiliar voice. "This is Nathan Fisher. Ruth and I rented the Levi Yoder place here in Shreve after the elder Mr. Yoder passed on. I'm calling you from the neighbor's house."

Silence ensued as Abby wracked her brain. Fisher was a very common name, but she didn't recall meeting someone named Ruth Fisher in Dr. Weller's office. "What can I do for you, Mr. Fisher?" She finished her tea in one long swallow.

"My wife wants you to come see her. She said that I should call you and nobody else. She got your number from one of the gals in our district."

Abby frowned, feeling annoyance snake up her spine. Her Plain brethren maintained the old-fashioned habit of never referring to a pregnancy directly, as though babies arrived under blessed but unknown circumstances. "I take it your wife is expecting a *boppli*? She needs to contact the doctor's office for an appointment and then be examined by him before—"

"No, you need to come over right now. She's crying out and is in a lot of pain."

Abby's annoyance changed to fear. "Are you saying your wife is in labor right *now*?" She tried unsuccessfully to keep her voice calm as she stepped onto the back porch. No sense in waking the rest of the family. Her *kinner* had probably just fallen asleep.

"*Jah*, she is." His three succinct words conveyed none of the same apprehension that tightened her stomach into a knot.

"Who has she been seeing? Who is her doctor?"

"Nobody. She saw a lady doctor back in Indiana, but then we moved here so I could find work. She heard at preaching service that the doctor who makes house calls in these parts was a man." Nathan Fisher stated these facts conversationally.

Abby's knuckles went white from gripping the porch rail. "There are plenty of *lady* doctors at the clinic in Wooster, plus they have a van that would pick your wife up and bring her home afterward for a nominal charge." Daniel slipped out the door behind her and put a reassuring arm around her shoulders.

"I'll debate what my wife should or shouldn't have done with you another day, Mrs. Graber, but right now she is having a baby."

Despite the joyous connotation those last five words usually contained, Abby's gut clenched with dread. "I want you to call an ambulance, Mr. Fisher. Or, if you prefer, I'd be happy to call one for you."

"My wife said she won't go to a hospital, so don't call any ambulance." His tone brooked no further discussion on the matter. "If you don't want to help us, then don't come. But you have no right telling us our business."

Abby breathed in and out several times as though she were in labor, but it took her no time whatsoever to make up her mind. "Give me your address and specific directions on how to find your house." She stumbled back inside the kitchen for pencil and paper. Despite having lived in Wayne County her entire life, she didn't know the whereabouts of the Levi Yoder farm.

Nathan spoke slowly while Abby scribbled notes on the pad. He

recited a complete description of road landmarks to find his farm. “So you’ll come?”

“*Jah*, I’ll be there as soon as possible. Go back and tend to your wife. Do everything she tells you to do, and don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not afraid, Mrs. Graber.” Nathan’s voice lifted with renewed excitement. “Even though this will be our first baby. *Danki* very much.” He hung up without another word.

Her first pregnancy, and she’s probably had no prenatal care, Abby thought. She sent up a silent prayer.

“I’ll hitch up your buggy while you gather your supplies.” Daniel had followed her back into the kitchen and leaned against the sink with his arms crossed over his chest. “Don’t worry, Abby. It’s probably not as bad as it sounds. You know how green most first-timers are, especially if the woman doesn’t have her *mamm* and sisters living nearby to give advice.”

“It sounds as though they just moved here from Indiana.” Abby covered her face with her hands and rubbed away her sleepiness, and then she headed to the sink to wash. She would scrub her hands, arms, and under her nails for five minutes, even though she would do it again once she arrived at the Fisher home.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Daniel asked. “We could take Laura and Jake along and they can sleep in the back of the buggy.”

His question took her by surprise as she collected supplies and checked the first aid kit for things she might need. Daniel never offered to accompany her. If there was one job he considered “woman’s work,” this was it.

She emerged from the bathroom and found him where she’d left him, looking even more exhausted. He had been cutting hay that day from sunup until sundown. “Oh, no,” she said. “You go up to bed after I leave. Make sure our two little ones are under the covers and not still playing. Tomorrow morning you’ll have to get up with the chickens, but I’ll be able to sleep in.”

He flashed her a smile, and then he loped out the door to hitch up their fastest standardbred horse and attach several battery-powered

lights on her open buggy. Abby changed clothes and carried out a case of bottled water along with her medical supplies.

After she climbed into the buggy, Daniel gave her a quick good night kiss and then sent her off with his usual jest. "Let's hope it's either a girl or a boy this time." He slapped the mare's hindquarter to get her moving.

Abby waved before tightening her grip on the reins. It was a silly thing to say, but Daniel's joke never failed to bring a smile to her face.

It would be the last happy expression she would wear that night... or for many nights to come.



During the four-mile drive, she punched in the doctor's speed dial button on her phone. Typically at ten o'clock at night his answering service would pick up. This time was no exception. "Doctor Gerald Weller's answering service," came a perfunctory voice after the third ring.

"Janice? This is Abigail Graber over in Shreve. I'm on my way to the Nathan Fisher residence. Mrs. Fisher is in labor. I don't think she's a patient of the doctor's. At least I know I've never met her. She might not be a patient of anyone." Just voicing those words sent a chill up the midwife's spine. Most of the things that can go wrong during delivery could be avoided if the medical history of the woman was known and the baby's development had been tracked. "Apparently, they just moved here from out of state. Please ask Dr. Weller to meet me there. Tell him I'm sorry to get him up if he's already gone to bed—"

The woman on the other end cut her short. "He's not home, Abby. He was called down to Ashland. There was a multicar pileup on the interstate. Fortunately, no fatalities have been reported, but a tanker of chemicals overturned and dumped its contents. Ashland asked for all medical personnel in the surrounding area to treat possible respiratory distress from toxic exposure. He will be tied up in that mess at

the emergency room all night. You'll have to call the paramedics for Mrs. Fisher."

"That's what I plan to do." Despite the cool evening breeze, Abby's back began to perspire. "Their farm is in sight. Let me give you the address and directions of where I'll be in case something changes with Dr. Weller." She recited the exact description Nathan had provided as her mare trotted up the loose-stoned driveway.

The Levi Yoder farmstead was one of the few that didn't conform to the usual standard of Amish orderliness, but probably not from lack of trying on the part of the young couple. After a certain number of years, paint and caulk cannot repair old, dry-rotted wood or crumbling foundations. However, she wasn't here to take photographs for *Country Living* magazine. She had a job to do.

As the buggy rolled to a stop and she set the brake, Nathan Fisher came running from the house. He bounded down the sagging steps and grabbed her horse's bridle. "Please go on inside. I'll tend to your horse. My wife's hurting real bad."

Even before she heard the ominous words his blanched complexion terrified Abby. "Just turn my mare out into your paddock and don't fuss with her because I might need you. And bring in the case of bottled water when you come." She hefted her bag of supplies out of the buggy and ran to the house.

Abby set the bag on the table and punched 9-1-1 into her cell phone. When the dispatcher came on the line, she identified herself, gave the address and explicit directions, and stated that a woman in labor needed an ambulance. Her hands shook as she held the phone next to her ear. If the situation beyond the closed door turned out to be anything less than an emergency, she would take the blame for the call. The dispatcher repeated the information, stated that an ambulance was on the way, and, blessedly, allowed her to hang up instead of keeping her tied up with unnecessary details. The dispatcher offered no approximation of the estimated time of arrival. Next, Abby scrubbed her hands and arms at the sink as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Drying her hands on a paper towel, she glanced around the Fisher

kitchen. Vandals wreaking mischief or a storybook cyclone usually caused such havoc. Cupboards stood open, water had been spilled between the sink and the stove, soiled linens lay in a heap near the steps to the cellar, and someone had knocked over a box of Cheerios across the counter. Never had she seen spilled food in an Amish home that hadn't immediately been cleaned up.

For a moment her eyes locked on the cereal with bizarre fascination. Then the piercing wail of a woman broke her paralysis, and she grabbed her bag and ran in the direction of the sobs. Inside the bedroom she found a woman in advanced stages of labor. Sweat ran down the woman's nose and cheeks like spring rain. The room, hot and airless, held the coppery sweet scent of blood.

"I'm the midwife, Abigail Graber. What's your given name, Mrs. Fisher?" she asked, trying to engage the woman in conversation.

The woman's complexion was the color of skim milk, her *kapp* was on the floor, and her damp hair clung to her scalp like a helmet. "Ruth," she managed to say between clenched teeth.

"I called the doctor, but he's at an emergency in Ashland, so then I called the paramedics—no arguments. I'm not licensed to deliver babies by my lonesome." While Abby rattled on, she pulled off the quilts and sheets that were covering Mrs. Fisher, as though keeping her warm was of chief importance. Once Abby had stripped off the layers down to the woman's nightgown, her words and breath froze in her throat.

There was a lot of blood—too much. It pooled on the sodden sheet, trapped by the protective plastic sheeting Ruth probably placed atop the mattress cover when her labor first began.

Ruth dug her fingernails into the bed with the next contraction, while Abby sped back to the kitchen, pressing the redial button on her cell phone.

Nathan Fisher was just walking into the kitchen carrying the bottled water. She thrust the phone toward him. "When they answer, tell them we need that ambulance *right now*. Give them the address again and tell them that your wife is hemorrhaging. Then bring the phone back into the bedroom."

“Will do,” he said with a shaky voice. All color drained from his face. He dropped the case on the counter and grabbed for her phone.

Abby ran back to the bedroom. Ruth lay back against the pillows. Her dark eyes seemed to have sunk lower in her pale face. “I’m going to examine you now,” Abby said, forcing a pleasant smile. “We need to deliver this baby sooner rather than later.” She went about her routine—one used hundreds of times—and tried to maintain professional control. Panicking this woman further would solve no purpose.

Despite the feigned attempt at reassurance, Ruth Fisher had not been fooled. After Abby checked to make sure the baby wasn’t in a breech position, Ruth grabbed her arm. “Save my baby. Don’t worry about me.” Her words were little more than a hoarse whisper. “This was my choice and I have no regrets. But save my baby so it wasn’t all for naught.”

This was no time to decipher cryptic messages. If the placenta tore away from the uterine wall in just the right place at just the right time, a woman could lose enough blood within fifteen minutes to die. Abby believed that was what was happening. Anxiety constricted her chest so that her breathing were almost as difficult as Ruth’s. “This baby must come now, Ruth, so I want you to push with all your might.”

She did as she was told, somehow mustering enough energy to send the infant into the world. Abby caught the baby and lifted him away from the sodden sheets. Miraculously, he breathed on his own and squalled with strong lungs the moment she cleaned the mucus from his nose and mouth. “A healthy baby boy, Ruth. You have a son.”

Abby held the boy where Ruth could see, and for a fleeting moment a smile flickered across the woman’s face. Then her complexion blanched to the color of ash, and she lapsed into unconsciousness. There was no request to cradle her son or comments about his size or boisterous cries. Ruth’s breathing grew thin and raspy while her blood continued to pool.

Wrapping a receiving blanket around the infant, she passed him to Nathan, who stood helplessly in the doorway. “Will my wife be all right?” he gasped.

Abby couldn't meet his gaze. "I'm going to stay with her. You make sure the baby keeps warm. Watch for the ambulance at the front window and holler when you see them pull into the driveway." He hurried away, carrying the baby like a fragile porcelain ornament while Abby returned to Ruth's side.

Without hesitation she pulled out a prefilled syringe from her bag and injected Ruth with a powerful drug to stop hemorrhaging...a drug she wasn't supposed to have. But if anything could save this thin, dark-haired woman's life, it would be the medicine in the syringe, entrusted to her by the retiring nurse-midwife. And then she prayed. She prayed God would save this young woman with every ounce of faith she possessed.

Abby tried everything she could to stem the tide, but God had His own plans for Ruth Fisher and her son—and for Abigail Graber, for that matter. By the time the paramedics arrived ten minutes later, she could no longer discern a pulse or even a wisp of breath. They flew into the room and went to work with clamps, defibrillators, and powerful drugs. One of the paramedics came to the kitchen to check the baby's lungs, heart rate, and airways and pronounced him sound. Then Abby bathed the infant at the kitchen sink and wrapped him in a clean blanket, while Nathan stood by helplessly as the medical personnel exhausted every heroic avenue to save his wife. Finally, a paramedic exited the bedroom with an expression that required few words. "We're sorry, Mr. Fisher. We did everything we could, but she's gone. We're going to call the sheriff's department now."

Nathan looked almost as pale as his wife. "May I sit with her?"

After a moment's hesitation, the paramedic nodded. "Of course. Go on in, sir. We're very sorry for your loss."

Later, Abby sat at the scarred oak table with the new father and filled out the birth certificate. Ruth had selected the name Rachel for a girl and Andrew for a boy, but Nathan said he favored Abraham—the patriarch of the Jewish people. "It is a strong name, and a boy without a *mamm* will need to be strong, so it is fitting," he declared.

Someone from the sheriff's department and the coroner arrived to

ask questions and to fill out more paperwork. Abby provided whatever information she knew about the Fisher situation, which was a hair more than nothing. Nathan, in stupefied shock, answered the deputy's questions using one- or two-word responses. They had to ask him twice if he wished to ride to the hospital with his wife—his late wife—to have the baby examined. At first he refused, but then it occurred to him that the midwife would soon leave, and he would be left alone in the house with a hungry infant. In the end he agreed to ride to the hospital and allow his son to be admitted for observation. Before he left, he wrote down the name and address of his aunt, his closest relative in their new community, and handed it to Abby. She assured him she would explain to her what had happened, and also inform the bishop of his district, because the Fisher farm lay just beyond the boundary line in a different district from hers. Nathan would need help during the coming days and weeks with both his home and with young Abraham.

Abby couldn't have agreed more with his name selection. The seven-pound boy had fought his way into the world with a strong heart and good set of lungs. He might have been born with poor color, showing little enthusiasm to breathe, but Abraham Fisher hadn't needed the paramedic's bag of oxygen. His face had scrunched up and released a howl at birth, and he wailed while being prepared for transport to the hospital. She had expected Nathan to fawn and pat and utter soothing baby talk while the EMTs were hooking up monitors, but he did none of that. The man was in shock, pure and simple. He'd changed from a proud, expectant father to a widower and sole parent within a of couple hours.

Abby washed up, changed into the clean dress she always kept with her supplies, and wrapped her soiled smock to throw on the burn pile back home. Before leaving she swept up the spilled Cheerios so they wouldn't draw ants in Nathan's absence. On legs turned to rubber, she found her horse in the paddock and hitched her to the buggy. Then she drove to visit Nathan's aunt.

Iris Fisher turned out to be a kindly soul—a widow with several

grown and married sons. Without hesitation the woman said she would pack a bag and move to Nathan's home to prepare for the baby's return from the hospital. She assured Abby she would stay as long as needed.

"That might be quite some time," Abby said impulsively.

"*Jah*, I suppose so. My nephew has only his cousins and me in the area for family. We'll do everything we can for him and his son."

"*Danki*," said Abby, for lack of something better.

The aunt offered a weak smile. "Thank you, Abigail." Iris walked Abby to the door but caught her arm before she could leave. "Do you know what? I never met Nathan's wife. They moved here several months ago, but she never seemed to be home when I stopped by to visit. Or, at least, that's what he told me. I couldn't attend their wedding in Indiana, so if I ever do meet Ruth Fisher, it will be in the hereafter."

Abby stood in the doorway and blinked twice. She couldn't remember a member of the Plain community ever expressing doubt that a person had been untruthful, but she was too tired to consider the matter. She was too tired to think about anything. With a nod and mumbled, "*Gut nacht*," she left the woman's farm and headed home. It would soon be dawn...the beginning of a new day. For Abraham Fisher, it would be his first day as a child of God, and as a child without a mother. Abby stared mindlessly at the road ahead, praying during the entire drive while her horse found the way on her own. She prayed for the baby and his distraught father and for Iris Fisher. As she prayed, tears filled her eyes and ran unchecked down her cheeks.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take. As her favorite passage from the book of Proverbs filled her mind, Abby wondered if that's what she had done or if she'd acted on her own.

Save my baby. Don't worry about me. This was my choice and I have no regrets. Ruth's words had etched themselves into her brain like an over-exposed photograph. By the time her mare clip-clopped up the driveway, Abby felt physically and emotionally drained.

Daniel had heard the approach of her buggy and left milking his

cows to come greet her. With one glance at her face, he grabbed the horse's bridle with a strong hand. "Whoa," he commanded. "What happened?"

She stepped down on wobbly legs and threw herself into his arms, forgetting about her bag of supplies and her clothes for the burn pile. "Oh, Daniel, I did everything I could. I did *more* than I should have, but we lost her...we lost the mother, Mrs. Fisher."

"And the baby? How's the child?"

"The baby is fine, but they waited too long to call an ambulance. I told Nathan Fisher to do so on the phone, but he refused. So I called 9-1-1, but because of the pileup on the interstate, they arrived too late to save her." Gulps and shallow breaths punctuated her words.

He pressed a finger to her lips to stem her rambling. "Easy now. Take a deep breath."

After she complied, gasping and hiccupping, he said, "You go take a hot shower and crawl into bed. You look faint from exhaustion. Anything more you want to tell me can wait until tomorrow...later on today, actually." The pink sun rising over the eastern fields heralded more good weather for Wayne County farmers. Without another word, she allowed herself to be led into the house.

Abby stood under the shower spray until the moist heat relieved her sore muscles and made her so drowsy she fell asleep with a bath towel still wrapped around her wet hair.

And, blessedly, she dreamed of nothing at all.