

Chapter 1

“Helen! No!”

A frantic Mrs. Keller rushed toward six-year-old Helen as the furious girl grabbed the edge of her doll’s crib and rocked it violently. Helen had discovered her infant sister, Mildred, sleeping in the crib. Already jealous of the attention her mother had been giving the baby, Helen completely lost control. In the split second before Mildred went flying out of the crib, Mrs. Keller scooped up the infant.

Helen reached up and pulled at her mother’s skirt. When her mother ignored her, Helen growled in fury, grabbed a lamp on a nearby table, and threw it against the wall. The lamp shattered; the startled baby began howling. Helen’s hands reached toward an expensive vase, but as her fingers curled around it, she smelled the sweet scent of her favorite candy. Helen’s father, Captain Keller, gently wrapped his arms around his daughter and pressed a peppermint candy to her lips. With a greedy snap, Helen bit down on the candy and ran from the room.

“This can’t continue,” Captain Keller said in a strained, angry voice. “Things are getting worse with Helen. She could have killed Mildred!”

Mrs. Keller rocked and soothed the infant and shook her head. “I don’t know what to do,” she replied. “How can we make her understand? How can we reach her?”

“We can’t,” Captain Keller said with a frustrated frown as he began picking up the pieces of the broken lamp. “And we never will,” he added gloomily.

“I just can’t believe it’s completely hopeless,” Mrs. Keller said. She sighed as she smoothed Mildred’s hair and listened to the familiar sound of Helen repeatedly kicking a locked door somewhere in the house.

It hadn’t always been this way.

In 1880, Helen Adams Keller had been born a healthy, normal baby. In fact, as she grew, she seemed to be even brighter and more curious than most babies. At only six months, she asked for water by saying her first word—“wah-wah.” Bird songs attracted Helen, and she would gaze for long periods of time up into the branches of the old oak trees that grew in the front yard of the Keller home in Alabama. And bright dancing shadows of leaves on the kitchen floor excited Helen. Before she was one, she took her first steps as she tried to chase the shadows.

But then, when she was a year and a half old, Helen became extremely sick. In the 1800s, babies often died of illnesses that doctors didn't understand and couldn't treat. Baby Helen had a high fever, but other than that, the Keller family doctor had no idea what was wrong. Calling her illness "brain fever," the doctor told the Kellers to prepare for the worst. Helen would surely not make it through the night.

Mrs. Keller sat beside her baby's crib all night, putting her cool hand on Helen's forehead and singing gentle songs to her. Surprisingly, Helen's fever broke in the middle of that long night. In the morning, Mrs. Keller leaned over her baby's small bed and smiled with relief as dawn's pink sunlight streamed over Helen's face. But as the sunlight grew stronger, Mrs. Keller noticed something wrong. Why didn't Helen blink or turn away from the glare of the sun? Didn't the bright light hurt her eyes? Frightened, Mrs. Keller waved her hand in front of Helen's face. There was no response. She grabbed a lamp and pointed the light directly into Helen's eyes. Helen didn't even move. The terrible realization hit Mrs. Keller as she backed away from Helen's crib.

"Blind!" she cried out as she ran down the stairs in search of her husband. "Our baby is blind!"

But it was even worse than that.

Later that day, as Mrs. Keller held a napping Helen on the front porch, a loud bell rang at the edge of the house, indicating it was time for dinner. The clanging bell startled Mrs. Keller, but Helen continued sleeping peacefully.

“Helen?” Mrs. Keller said loudly.
“*HELEN!*”

In a panic, Mrs. Keller grabbed a can of stones that Helen used as a rattle and shook it right by Helen’s ear. The baby slept on.

“Deaf, too,” Mrs. Keller said quietly to herself as tears filled her eyes.

The Kellers watched Helen closely for several days, hoping that, perhaps, her eyesight and hearing would return once she was completely well. After all, neither they nor their doctor had ever heard of a child losing both her sight and hearing overnight. Was it even possible? The Kellers prayed that it was not.

And the Kellers wondered why Helen, if she could truly no longer see, wasn’t terrified and confused. She seemed so calm and slept as peacefully as ever. Years later, Helen would write, “I was too young to realize what had happened. When I awoke and found that all was dark and still, I suppose I thought it was night, and I must have wondered why day was so long in coming. Gradually, however, I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been day.”

Finally, the Kellers came to accept that an unheard-of tragedy had struck little Helen. She was both deaf and blind. The beautiful little girl with bright blue eyes, whose very name meant “light,” was living in complete darkness and silence.

Over the next few years, the Kellers traveled to many doctors and specialists. Couldn't anything be done? Doctor after doctor shook their heads and sent the Kellers away without hope. Helen was able to communicate in her own limited way. If she wanted her mother, she stroked her own cheek. If she wanted her father, she imitated putting on and taking off glasses. When she wanted ice cream on a hot summer day, she rubbed her arms and shivered. In all, Helen had about 60 signs she used to let her family know what she wanted. But these signs were not nearly enough.

By the time Helen was four years old, she knew she was different in ways that made no sense to her at all. Although she used signs, she realized that other people used their mouths to communicate. Helen often stood between her mother and father and touched their mouths as they spoke to each other. She felt them gesture with their hands while their mouths moved. What were they doing? Helen would move her lips and hands, but nothing would happen. No one seemed to understand her, even though they

seemed to understand each other. Sometimes this frustrated Helen so much that she would kick and scream until she wore herself out.

As Helen got older, her temper got much worse. She pinched and slapped strangers when they took her parents' attention away from her. Once, she pulled her grandmother's hair and then ran through the house shrieking and knocking things over when the elderly woman would not let her sit in her lap. And because the Kellers did not know how to teach Helen right from wrong, Helen began to get into all sorts of mischief and trouble. Mrs. Keller, in particular, was reluctant to punish Helen. For one thing, she didn't think Helen could understand what punishment was or why she was receiving it. In addition, Mrs. Keller had no idea how to discipline a deaf and blind child. But most of all, both Captain and Mrs. Keller knew that not letting Helen have her way would lead to an all-out temper tantrum that could last for hours. Helen would scream and kick until she literally collapsed from exhaustion. It was easier just to let Helen run wild.

But things were beginning to get just a little too wild.

One morning, Helen was playing with the Kellers' cook's daughter, Martha. Martha and Helen were about the same age, and because the two girls had grown up together, Martha understood Helen better than almost anyone

else. And she was usually happy to help Helen with her “pranks.” On this particular morning, Martha was helping Helen cut out paper dolls when Helen suddenly took her pair of scissors and began cutting Martha’s hair. Helen motioned for Martha to do the same, so Martha began snipping away at Helen’s long blonde curls. By the time the girls were discovered by a horrified Mrs. Keller, they were both nearly bald.

Not long after this, Helen figured out how to lock doors. One afternoon, Helen’s mother went into the pantry to get some sugar. Helen sneaked up behind her mother and slammed the door shut. Mrs. Keller didn’t think much of this until she heard Helen turn the key in the lock. Knowing that Helen couldn’t hear her yelling, Mrs. Keller banged and kicked the door, hoping that Helen would feel the vibrations and release her. For three hours, Mrs. Keller was locked in the pantry. When Captain Keller finally came home, he found Helen sitting outside the pantry door smiling, the key grasped in her hand. The heavier the kicks on the door, the wider her smile became.

These pranks were annoying, but when Helen nearly set herself on fire drying a skirt that had gotten wet in the rain, Captain and Mrs. Keller became worried. And when Helen tried to throw her sister out of the doll cradle, they knew something had to be done—quickly.

“Send her away to an institution,” several family members said. “She’s clearly got something wrong with her brain. You’ll never be able to teach her anything.”

Helen’s parents would not hear of “sending her away.” They knew what this meant. The type of “institution” family members were suggesting was for the mentally ill and the mentally handicapped. They were dreadful places whose residents were often mistreated and ignored. Helen’s life in an institution would be, at best, lonely, dull, and dark. It would barely be life at all.

The Kellers took one last chance on a doctor who had a reputation for curing “hopeless” cases of blindness. They had taken Helen to doctors throughout the South, but they made this trip by train all the way to Baltimore. The doctor carefully examined Helen, noticing the signs she made and her reactions to his presence.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor finally said. “I’m afraid Helen will be both deaf and blind for the rest of her life.”

“So there’s no hope?” Mrs. Keller asked in a shaking voice.

“Well, there’s still hope that Helen can be taught,” the doctor answered. “She seems unusually bright.”

“*Taught?*” Captain Keller asked doubtfully. “How on earth can a child who can’t see or hear be taught anything?”

“I’m not sure,” the doctor admitted. “But there’s a gentleman in Washington, D.C., who is an expert on the problems of deaf children. Perhaps he can help you find a teacher for Helen.”

The doctor wrote a name and address on a piece of paper. Captain Keller glanced at the name and looked back again in surprise. The name the doctor had written down was Alexander Graham Bell.

Although Bell was mostly famous for inventing the telephone in 1876, he was also a great friend to the deaf, and he was highly interested in developing ways for them to communicate. He had a personal reason for wanting to help those who could not hear—both his mother and his wife were deaf. When six-year-old Helen climbed up onto the famous inventor’s knee later that day, the two of them had an instant connection. Helen pulled at Bell’s long beard and played with his watch. Bell looked into the little girl’s face and felt a great sympathy for her. Her face was not the happy, innocent face of a little girl at all.

“It was chillingly empty,” Bell would later recall. There was nothing in Helen’s expression that suggested a personality.

“Send a letter to Michael Anagnos at the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Boston,” Alexander Graham Bell advised Captain and Mrs. Keller. “He’s the director there, and I think he can help you find a teacher for Helen.”

Perkins was a different kind of institution. It was nothing like the near-prisons that some of the Kellers' friends and families thought Helen should be sent to. Perkins was a school where the blind learned to communicate, read, and even teach. In fact, a young girl named Laura Bridgman, who was both deaf and blind, had been brought to Perkins 50 years earlier. She had learned to communicate—even to read and write.

Read and write! Mrs. Keller could not believe it! There was hope for her little girl after all. The moment the Kellers returned home to Alabama, they wrote to Mr. Anagnos at Perkins. Could he please send an experienced teacher to Alabama to help Helen? They would be willing to pay the teacher well. And they would be eternally thankful for a teacher who could open up Helen's world the same way Laura Bridgman's world had been opened.

In Boston, Michael Anagnos read the Kellers' letter and considered their request. It was not possible to send a teacher who was experienced in teaching blind *and* deaf children. In fact, Laura Bridgman was the only such child who had ever been taught to communicate. And that had been five decades earlier. Anagnos looked at a list of students who had recently graduated from Perkins, and his eye fell upon one student's name in particular. She had graduated at the top of the class. She was only 20 years old, and she was

known to have a temper and stubbornness that was matched only by her brilliance and kindness.

But would she be able to teach Helen? Anagnos wasn't sure. The young woman had learned how to communicate with a deaf child and with a blind child—but not a child that was both. Nevertheless, Anagnos spoke to the recent graduate about the job and encouraged her to take it.

“But I've never taught!” she said with a frown. “I'm not sure I'd even be any good at it.”

“I have every faith in you,” Anagnos replied. “You'll be wonderful.”

“I'll have to think about it,” the young woman said doubtfully.

Back in Alabama, Captain and Mrs. Keller waited impatiently for a letter from Mr. Anagnos. Finally, several months later, a reply came. A young teacher, a recent top graduate of Perkins, was on her way. Her name was Annie Sullivan.

“I had gotten used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different, until she came,” Helen later wrote. “My teacher—who was to set my spirit free.”