

CHAPTER ONE

THE GIRL WHO DISAPPEARED

In the days immediately following Sara Jane Moore's attempt to assassinate President Gerald R. Ford on September 22, 1975, the press scrambled to find any information at all about this woman who had appeared out of nowhere. Both the San Francisco Chronicle and the New York Times ran front page stories the next day, describing her as stemming from an impoverished neighborhood in Charleston, West Virginia. The accounts also repeated Sara Jane's claim, told to one of the police officers detaining her, that she was descended from a West Virginia oil and timber baron. Neither description was accurate. In fact, the only correct information about her early background in either account was the identity of her home state, West Virginia, where she was born Sara Jane Kahn, the second daughter of Olaf and Ruth Kahn, on February 15, 1930.

At a glance the Kahns presented a picture-perfect image of a twentieth-century middle-class American family: three brothers, two sisters, and their parents lived in the hilltop house at the north edge of Charleston, West Virginia, nestled in the lush Appalachian Mountains and overlooking the Kanawha River. The neighbors immediately to the south of the Kahn house were set on ten acres and had six milk cows; they used part of their land for pasture, and part was planted with corn, beans, tomatoes, and several acres of green onions. Several other small farms were also nearby. The semi-rural neighborhood, a community of several hundred homes, had a small town feel, and it was built around family and the local schools.

Neighbors were close by and they often observed birthdays and holidays at home with family and friends. It was a perfect neighborhood for children. The five Kahn children had plenty of room to run and play. Home was a two-story log structure with covered porches running the length of the house, set on five sloping acres. A thicket of woods reached right up to the back of the house. In the long daylight hours of the summer season and on weekends well into the fall, the Kahn family would tend their vegetable garden. Ruth canned tomatoes,

as well as applesauce, peaches, and pears. Eggs gathered from their chickens, and sometimes the chickens themselves, fed the family; the Kahns also sold chickens and eggs as a supplemental source of income. The house had two stone fireplaces, one in the living room and one in the parlor. Although each fireplace was sixty inches long and thirty inches deep, Olaf—mindful of the hard times of the 1930s—built a gas heater into each fireplace, knowing the family

would get more economical and efficient heat that way. Olaf Kahn had grown up on a small rural farm in Flatbrookville, in eastern New Jersey, where his parents had moved after emigrating from Germany just before the turn of the century.

He became a U.S. marine in 1917 after graduating from high school and served in France during World War I. Like his future wife, Ruth, Olaf was an accomplished violinist, until he injured his right hand in the service. His hand healed, but his days as a violinist were over. Following his injury, the Marines sent Olaf to

Charleston, West Virginia, as part of a group sent to help clean up a chlorine spill. While serving on that detail, Olaf began to interact with engineers at the DuPont plant, and he was quickly recognized for his contributions to their work.

He settled in Charleston when he was mustered out of the service, and was immediately hired to work as a mechanical engineer by DuPont. Olaf would eventually become superintendent at the Belle plant site, eight miles east of Charleston on the Kanawha River. A trim six feet tall with sandy hair, high cheekbones, and a pleasant face, Olaf earned an annual salary of \$10,000, a very respectable income during the Great Depression.

Ruth Moore Kahn was ten years younger than her husband. She stood about five feet two inches tall and had curly red hair. Ruth was a violinist with the Charleston Symphony Orchestra, and music was one of the special bonds that she and Olaf shared.

She was just twenty years old and newly married when her first daughter, Ruth Ann, was born. Sara Jane arrived three years later. Olaf II came along in 1932 and was nicknamed Skippy early on. Another son, Paul, was born in 1935, but survived for only five days before succumbing to lung congestion and other developmental

disabilities. Ruth became pregnant again just over a year later, and son Dana joined the family in 1937. Charles, the youngest, was born in 1941.

Ruth Kahn was more vivacious than the solid and dependable Olaf, but she too was a hard worker, forever cleaning and picking up after the kids; she kept the Kahn home white-glove clean. She dressed her daughters in the latest fashions, from their Shirley Temple hairdos to their patent leather shoes. She was an expert seamstress, and made many of their dresses herself without commercial patterns—right down to impeccably smocked bodices. A former neighbor said Ruth Kahn could “smock a dress like nobody’s business” for her own or a neighbor’s daughter, and she knew at least eight different smocking stitches.

“She was known as the neighborhood mom,” recalled Bob Turkelson, a neighbor of Sara Jane’s, in a personal interview. “Ruth was the person to go to if you had a problem, no matter who you were.”

Bob shared a story about a time he came home from school to find his mother was not at home and the family doctor was waiting for him. The doctor took ten-year-old Bob by the hand and walked him up the street to the Kahn’s house. When they went inside, Bob saw his mother collapsed in the arms of Ruth Kahn, crying. Bob’s older brother had died in an automobile accident.

Ruth loved her family and worked hard to turn the holidays into festive occasions, not only for her own children, but for the neighbors’ kids, too. At Halloween she carved pumpkins and set up an elaborate horror house designed to scare and delight the children—complete with spooky noises, cobwebs, and peeled grapes as eyes for the blindfolded guests to touch. She was famous in the neighborhood for baking birthday cakes with buttercream frosting. This was unusual during the Depression because of the scarcity of many food items, but somehow Ruth Kahn always had plenty of butter, milk, eggs, and sugar for a birthday cake. Neighbors and friends of the Kahn children never missed one of their birthday parties.

Ruth’s earnings from the symphony orchestra and the chicken-and-egg money supplemented Olaf’s salary. All of the children took music and dance lessons;

every family member played at least one instrument. Ruth Ann, a bright girl who grew into a tall young woman with an ethereal look, played the flute. Sara Jane played the violin, although she frequently complained about the drudgery of practicing. Often, the family would gather with their instruments, accompanied by Olaf at the old upright piano.

Mornings in the Kahn household were hectic as adults and kids poured out of the four upstairs bedrooms. In the afternoons, one or two of the kids were always at Ruth's kitchen table, doing homework or snacking before chores. In the evenings, the family would gather for dinner, and Olaf demanded that the children behave during the meal. After dinner, the kids cleared the table and then worked on homework or practiced their instruments. As Ruth fussed in the kitchen, Olaf would remove his suit jacket and settle into his upholstered easy chair in the living room. The radio console played classical music softly in the background, and a lit cigarette dangled between his long fingers as he read the Charleston

Daily Mail. Skip told me that he rarely saw his father dressed in anything but a three-piece suit. "Every morning, at breakfast and at dinner, my father was dressed properly in one of his three-piece suits, his shirts perfectly starched," Skip said. He recalled that the only times his father did not wear a suit were the rare occasions when he went out in the field to sow corn.

A closer look at this idyllic picture of the Kahn family reveals some cracks. Ruth was a solid neighborhood mom, but she was also a perfectionist; she was rarely satisfied with her children's efforts.

She held herself and her children to very high standards; when Ruth Ann or Sara Jane finished a chore, Ruth would inspect their work. More often than not, she'd declare the job not good enough and redo it herself.

Olaf, too, had very strict limits and a cutting tongue that could slice through his children's self-confidence. His after-dinner ritual, for example, was not to be interrupted for any reason. In the rare instance when a child actually summoned the courage to walk into the living room to ask a question about a homework assignment, Olaf's response was cold. Raising his eyebrows, he would fix one eye on the child and stare through the curling smoke of his cigarette.

In a firm, flat monotone, he would say, “If I told you, you wouldn’t understand anyway.” Most of the children never made that mistake twice, son Skip said.¹ Olaf was an old-fashioned patriarch who kept his personal struggles to himself.

Further examination of the Kahn family would also reveal that at least one member of the family did not seem to fit in. Early photos of Sara Jane show a slight girl with shoulder-length brown hair, sad blue eyes, and a delicate but impenetrable air. In the midst of her family, Sara Jane stood just outside the circle of brothers and sisters. Ruth Ann, two years older, was formidable in her religious devotion. She found her escape immediately after college by marrying a minister and never moving back home. The three boys, Skip, Dana, and Charles, formed a boisterous familial bond as teenagers.

High school sports defined the relationships among the boys both at home and with their many friends. In their routine there was no room for sisters.

Sara Jane excelled academically. She was bright and curious, a straight “A” student (she even skipped a grade in elementary school), an accomplished violinist, a ballet student, an excellent seamstress like her mother, and a talented actor and artist. Yet something was clearly amiss, and most people who came into contact

with her sensed it. One of Sara Jane’s junior high school teachers delicately described her as “a little odd.” The oddity was her lack of connectedness with her teachers and other students. She isolated herself from them and found escape and satisfaction in acting class, submerging herself in different roles. A ballet-school classmate recalled that at age thirteen, “She was always making up something bizarre. She would come in and tell the craziest stories about her family being descendents of royalty.”

Neighbors from Woodward Drive and her classmates from Stonewall Jackson High remember Sara Jane as “aloof” but “intense,” “unfriendly” but “looking for the limelight”—and, always, “a little odd.” Adults in the neighborhood tried hard to make sure the other children did not exclude her. “Be nice to Sara Jane, even

though she seems hard to get to know,” her Girl Scout troop leader instructed the other girls more than once. But it didn’t help, a troop member said. “Even if you were nice to her, she never reciprocated. She never tried to really be a part of anything, even when we tried to bring her in. She never had any friends.”

Paradoxically, Sara Jane often demanded that she be the center of attention no matter how uncomfortable that might make others.

One former neighbor remembered attending Sara Jane’s thirteenth birthday party; Ruth had invited the neighborhood kids. They may not have been fond of Sara Jane, but the promise of one of Ruth’s delicious cakes probably clinched the deal for most of them. When the kids arrived at the party, however, Sara Jane insisted that they all had to sit and listen to her perform a violin recital before the cake was served. Sara Jane found a new way to capture the limelight at

Charleston’s Stonewall Jackson High School, where her studies began in 1944. She had joined Thespians, the drama club. Although she was still not sought after as a friend, she was respected as an actor and was considered intensely dedicated to the art. Early on, it was clear that Sara Jane was adept at role-playing. She auditioned for the lead in every new production and won roles in several plays, including *Why the Chimes Rang* and *The Late Christopher Bean*. As one of her classmates told me, “It seemed as though she was clearly headed for an acting career.”

She also joined the Spanish club, where she soon acquired a reputation as a fluent Spanish speaker. According to a fellow Spanish club member, Sara Jane was “studying Spanish as though she were going to Spain.”

Sara Jane did nothing at half speed. She prided herself in being an excellent student, and found no academic challenge too difficult or intimidating. She had such confidence in her intellect that she felt nothing she attempted was unachievable. Her school report on *Ivanhoe* was expertly prepared. She labored over the manuscript for hours, carefully hand-printing the text as through it were typeset and adding beautifully executed drawings. Her violin playing approached concert quality.

The centrally located Diamond Department Store, downtown at Capital and Washington Streets, was the social extension of several generations of Charleston students. They flowed into the store's coffee, Coke, and sandwich shop after school and on Saturdays to hang out. Young girls sat on high stools at the wide marble counter of the soda fountain, legs crossed demurely, giggling with their friends. Couples going steady snuggled close at the small round wire-legged tables, drinking from a single soda with two straws. On Friday and Saturday nights, boys slouched outside the front door while girls walked down the street with their friends, flirting and pretending to ignore them. It was an American ritual.

But Sara Jane was not to be found with the other teens at the Diamond. Her interactions were reserved for responding eagerly to teachers' questions. Instead of flirting with the boys or laughing with her girlfriends, she moved purposefully from class to class, a stack of books in her arms and a very serious expression on her face. Her arena for social acceptance was limited to clubs focused on a goal. If she could not compete socially, then she would compete academically. Sara, her brother Skip said, was very proud of her academic achievements.

Along with many teens, women, and men who were too old for the armed services, Sara Jane spent the final years of World War II as an active member of Charleston's Civil Air Patrol (CAP).² The CAP, an organization that began as a volunteer force of civilian pilots in World War II patrolling the American coastline and bombing German U-boats, encouraged students to learn about aviation, weapons, and leadership in a military setting. One of the few girls in the CAP, Sara Jane excelled in the program. She was quick to learn the instruments when the group was taken on an orientation flight in a Cessna 310. She may also have had some initial familiarization with weapons. Sara Jane wore her uniform with pride.

Her family and friends assumed that Sara Jane was headed for some sort of conventional career—perhaps as an actress or a Spanish teacher or a musician. Perhaps, despite her social awkwardness, she would fall in love and start a family. Then, she began what would turn into a lifelong pattern: She disappeared.

One day in the fall of 1946, when Sara Jane was sixteen, she left home for school but never showed up. That evening she didn't return home. She hadn't left a

note, and she hadn't mentioned to anyone that she was going anywhere. Her parents were frantic.

Her schoolmates were questioned, along with teachers, drama tutors, and members of the Spanish club and of the CAP. No one knew of any school-related activities or of possible relationships that would have called her away.

Ruth and Olaf mounted a full search, but they could find no sign of their daughter. Finally, they reported her disappearance to the police. The police could find no trace of her. Three days later, just as suddenly as she had disappeared, Sara Jane returned. She looked exactly as she had when she left for school. Where had she been? She offered no explanation. She refused to talk to anyone about it. Ruth, thinking she might have been abducted and sexually assaulted, had her daughter examined by the family doctor, who reported no signs of "abuse." Sara Jane was not injured, did not appear traumatized, and apparently had not been kidnapped. Eventually, Ruth chose to explain her child's disappearance as "amnesia," and left it at that. Sara Jane remained silent.

Sara Jane resumed her life at school without a word of explanation. Then, in a sudden show of independence, Sara Jane announced that she would get a job so she could have her own money to do with as she pleased. Her brother Skip had a morning paper route, delivering the Charleston Daily Mail. Sara Jane secured the delivery job for the afternoon paper, the Charleston Gazette.

"I think Sara was the only girl I knew with a paper route," her brother Skip told me. "She always liked to do things her own way."

Once she made a decision, Sara Jane was steadfast in her position. On a Sunday morning, as the family prepared to go to the Baptist church, Sara Jane announced she would attend the Methodist church instead.

Skip said it would do no good to argue with his sister. "If she had a belief in something, she pursued it. Whatever Sara became interested in she would research it. She could always back up her beliefs."

Upon graduation in 1947, Sara stayed at home and decided to pursue a career in medicine, which, at a time when few women even contemplated becoming doctors, meant becoming a nurse. She was easily admitted to Charleston's St. Francis Hospital School of Nursing, where she soon earned a record as a top-notch student nurse.

The nursing school administrators gave her glowing reports. Of course, nothing less than perfection was acceptable to young Sara Jane Kahn. However, as soon as she got within arm's reach of the brass ring, she drew back and went in search of something else.

At the end of a semester in nursing school, instead of signing up for classes for the following term, she abruptly dropped out and joined the Women's Army Corps (WAC). The WAC was formed by Congress in 1942 to allow women to enter the military in noncombat positions. Her parents were puzzled by this sudden change of heart, but Sara Jane gave no explanation.

When Sara joined, service in the WAC consisted of relieving thousands of men of their clerical assignments. The WAC women performed jobs such as radio operator, electrician, and air traffic controller. After the war, the army continued to use these women to staff army hospitals and administrative centers.

After basic training, Private First Class Sara Kahn was assigned to a unit in the Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania, and she left Charleston forever. She had traded in her starched white nurse's uniform for military khakis, and a brand-new persona appeared.

Sara Jane, striving as always for maximum achievement, told her family that her goal was to qualify for Officers Candidate School (OCS). After scoring top grades on the written qualifying test and performing all military details—including firearms training—with excellence, she was duly selected for OCS.³

Attending OCS was Sara Jane's opportunity to become a commissioned officer in the WAC. She would have gone to Fort Benning, Georgia, for training that started with an initial twelve-week session to evaluate leadership strengths. Upon graduation from the training, she would have become a second lieutenant.

Almost immediately, however, she embarked on two ventures that ensured she would never be an officer. The first was the building of a record at the Carlisle Barracks of what the military described as a recurring series of fainting spells. The second was her marriage to Marine Staff Sergeant Wallace E. Anderson, a noncommissioned officer at Carlisle. Sara Jane married him in spite of the fact that marriage would bar her from OCS.

The fainting spells culminated on a beautiful spring day in 1950. The National Mall in Washington, D.C. was aglow with cherry blossoms. Twenty-year-old Sara Jane, alone and out of uniform in a neatly tailored light pastel spring suit, had joined a public tour of the accessible part of the White House. At the end of the tour, she walked slowly away from the tour group and across the White House lawn—and dropped to the ground, apparently in a dead faint. Bystanders and Secret Service agents rushed to her assistance. When she regained consciousness, she claimed not to know who or where she was. Finding no identification papers of any kind on her person, the Secret Service agents took her to Walter Reed Army Hospital for assessment. As the nurses there undressed her for bed, they discovered something odd: a small folio of photos stuffed up under the bodice of her dress. All the pictures were of Sara Jane.

The newspapers published several of her photographs, alongside inquiries as to whether anyone could identify her. They didn't have to wait long: Her mother in Charleston and her husband in Pennsylvania both saw the photos and rushed to Sara Jane's hospital bedside to identify her. Her memory soon returned, but the FBI was suspicious. Their investigation concluded that Sara Jane had purposely left all of her identification behind.

Chapter TWO

THE UNHAPPY HOUSEWIFE

Soon after the fainting incident, Sara Jane made two changes in her life: She divorced her Marine Corps husband, Wally Anderson, and she left the WACs. Only a few months later, in November 1950, Sara Jane married another military man—Sydney Lewis Manning, an air force captain. Syd, a career officer originally from Los Angeles and some seventeen years older than Sara Jane, had worked his

way up through the ranks. He had served twenty years in the air force, having joined up right out of high school, and planned to retire from the service in 1951, still a relatively young man. But his half pension would not have stretched far enough to support Sara Jane and the family they planned to have, so Syd returned to active duty. The couple was billeted to Davis-Monthan Air Force Base adjacent to Tucson, Arizona.

World War II was six years in the past, and the Cold War was in its first phase. Earlier that same year, Senator Joseph McCarthy had asserted that Communist spies had infiltrated the U.S. Department, perhaps at the highest levels. The American celebration that had followed the end of World War II had been quickly replaced by a pervasive feeling of unease and the suspicion that Communists were hiding under every bed. The 43rd Air Refueling Squadron, headquartered at Davis-Monthan, stood ready to defend the nation if called upon. All Sara Jane wanted now was to pursue her interests without interference out west in Arizona with her flyboy husband. Instead, she ended up in the drab, cookie-cutter housing projects provided by the air force. The only difference from one house to the next was the shade of green paint—slightly lighter or darker. Sara Jane, being her mother's daughter, would have wasted no time in using her creativity to make her home stand out from all the others and reflect her personal sense of style.

Most days, she would have been left to fend for herself while Syd went on extended temporary duty assignments away from Arizona. The lives of air force wives revolved around house visits for coffee and cards, with a special fuss made whenever one of them became pregnant. Sara Jane would likely have received such attention when she became pregnant with her first child. Sydney Jr. was born in 1951.¹ When Ruth, Olaf, and Sara's brother Charles visited Sara Jane and the baby during the holidays that year, they immediately saw that the young mother was overwhelmed by the task of maintaining feeding schedules and keeping Sydney Jr. clean and neat. Ever the perfectionist, Ruth was particularly critical of Sara Jane's efforts to manage the house and the baby. To Ruth, no house was ever as clean as she thought it should be, and Sara Jane was just not cutting it. Skip, her oldest brother, remembered his mother's distress after the visit. To her way of thinking, the baby was never changed fast enough, laundry

was not done often enough, and dinners were not timely enough.

Sara Jane was a dismal failure as a housewife, according to her mother's standards.

By Christmas 1952 Sara Jane was already expecting her second child. It looked like she might well be on her way to a life as a stay-at-home mother and homemaker. However, she must have been deeply uncomfortable with that lifestyle, with groups of what she surely deemed to be superficial women gathering to gossip and watch their children play. The early 1950s were a relatively apolitical era of disinterest in idealistic causes. Recovering from World War II, people were serene and uninvolved; there was little attention to or concern for social issues. The nation at large accepted without question the traditional American values of work, order, and patriotism. When her daughter Janet was born in 1953, Sara Jane was confirmed in the one role that she was not prepared for: full-time motherhood. To her, the 1950s Ozzie and Harriet role model of the stay-at-home mom in high heels, apron permanently tied with a bow, and complete contentment as the happy housekeeper seemed more like homemaker hell. With each addition to the family, Sara Jane and Syd grew further apart; eventually they barely spoke. Syd accepted more overseas assignments and saw little of his children.

Ruth called Sara Jane daily and became more distressed with each conversation. She concluded that her daughter was becoming increasingly dysfunctional as a wife and mother. She took comfort in the fact that Sara Jane was not neglecting her children outright, but she worried that her daughter did not take any joy in them either.

Sara Jane, as a wife and mother, did what she thought she should do, all the while resenting her role. When Syd was home, his interactions with Sara Jane grew increasingly unpleasant. He could no longer tolerate his wife's behavior and filed for divorce. His reasons included accusations that she was an extremely poor mother and wife. On October 7, 1954, Syd and Sara Jane's divorce became official. Almost immediately, however, he had second thoughts; he missed his family, and the couple reconciled and remarried in November of the same year.

Syd was soon reassigned to Los Angeles, and the reconnected family moved to southern California, where Syd had been raised. His home town was Cardiff, located fifty miles north of San Diego.

Once Sara Jane was settled in, despite having to care for two toddlers, she somehow managed to meet and mingle with a small circle of Hollywood actors and directors. How she met these people is unclear, but she attended several Hollywood parties while her husband was away on military duty.

While Sara Jane was pregnant with her third child, she had an unannounced visitor. On a warm day late in the spring of 1954, Sara Jane answered a knock at her apartment door. A tall, handsome air force lieutenant whom she didn't recognize stood in front of her. At first, she thought he was a friend of her husband's, but then she saw a funny and somewhat familiar grin on his face.

"Hey, Sis, don't you know your own brother?" It was Skip, stopping by for a surprise visit, hoping to meet Syd and the kids.

After two days he had a pretty good picture of Sara Jane's life. She seemed to be taking care of the family, Skip told me. Sydney Jr. and Janet were clean and neat; but Sara Jane seemed distant from them. "There was just something odd, but I couldn't tell you exactly what it was."

"I do know she was sewing a lot," Skip said. "It is something I'll just never forget. It was as though she had got a great bargain on a bolt of blue gingham. Her entire apartment was a vision in blue gingham: Sara Jane had sewn curtains, tablecloths, napkins, a maternity dress, an apron, and little Sydney's sun suit all out of the same material."

Melissa was born in Los Angeles on October 30, 1954, and was severely disabled from birth. She was institutionalized directly from the hospital, and was eventually taken in and raised by a family that offered foster care to mentally handicapped children.

Sara Jane let her mother handle all the details regarding her infant daughter, and once Melissa was tucked away in an institution, Sara Jane dismissed her from her life. According to Skip, Ruth took on the responsibility of checking regularly on Melissa's welfare.

Ruth, meanwhile, was enjoying her middle years. With most of her children grown and out of the house, she was spending more and more time on her church work. But she was losing sleep about Sara Jane and the grandchildren because of what she had heard from Skip.

Her observations during her earlier visit had both puzzled and frightened her: Sara Jane was an indifferent and irresponsible mother. She was not paying enough attention to her young children, and that was cause for concern. So, in the spring of 1955, Ruth flew out to Los Angeles to see if she could provide some hands-on help. When she arrived, things were worse than she had imagined. Sara Jane was clearly not coping very well, and was certainly not fulfilled by motherhood. In fact, nothing seemed to be working: The kids were fed on an erratic schedule, and the chaotic household never settled into the warmth of a home. During her ten-day visit, Ruth simply took over and ran things, cleaning the house, cooking, and ensuring that the children had proper meals at regular times. Sara Jane was frustrated about being in Los Angeles saddled with two young children and a mostly absent husband.

This life had none of the allure of nearby Hollywood and the acting career her Stonewall classmates had thought was her destiny. So when Ruth offered to take the two children back to Charleston for a visit that summer, Sara Jane quickly and gratefully accepted.

Sydney Jr. and Janet flew back with Ruth to West Virginia. They spent a month and a half with the members of the Kahn family, all of whom did their best to help Ruth. Brothers Dana and Charles, still at home, would frequently take one or both of the children out to play. They went on park outings, story sessions at the library, visits to the zoo, and occasionally a children's movie matinee. Everyone hoped that giving Sara Jane a chance to rest up and have some time to herself would recharge her batteries and rebuild the energy she needed to be a better mother.

Finally, the two children returned to California. The atmosphere at "home" with their mother was very different from the love and warmth they had found with their aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents in West Virginia.

Sara Jane and Syd's second marriage lasted little more than a year. This time, in October 1955, it was Sara Jane—pregnant again—who filed for divorce, claiming irreconcilable differences.

Christopher, soon nicknamed Chris, was born in 1955.³ Sara Jane was now alone in Los Angeles with three children under the age of six. As most people would be under the circumstances, she was likely tired, unable to remember the last time she had slept through the night. There would have been incessant demands on her, day in and day out, and never any relief from the chores and the noise and the diapers and the shopping and the feedings and the laundry. This could not have been what Sara Jane had envisioned for her life, and apparently she was finding it increasingly difficult to cope.

Late in 1956, Sara Jane made one of her very rare calls to her mother. She was clearly upset. She needed to have some time back home in West Virginia, she explained, and was going to bring the children for an extended visit. She booked a direct flight from Los Angeles to Columbus, Ohio, and as her brother Dana told me, he drove up from Charleston to collect Sara Jane and the kids at the airport.

The plane landed just before sunset, and Dana stood watching the ground crew roll a staircase up to the door just behind the gleaming wings. The door opened, and the first of a hundred passengers began to deplane. He said he watched them walk off, one after the other, into the waiting arms of friends and relatives.

But where was Sara Jane? Finally, after all of the other passengers had left, little Sydney Jr., four years old, carefully walked down the steps, holding tight to the railing with one hand and grasping the hand of his three-year-old sister, Janet, in the other.

Right behind him was a stewardess, holding nine-month-old baby Christopher in her arms. Dana watched, puzzled. Sara Jane was not with them.

The Kahns were shocked beyond belief. They were sure that something terrible had happened to Sara Jane. They called the airline, the hospitals, and the police. They called her home phone, but it had been disconnected. As the days went by

with no call from Sara Jane, they even called Syd at his air base. He had no idea of his ex-wife's whereabouts, and he was not free to go searching. Finally,

Ruth and Olaf realized that she was not hurt or sick. Sara Jane had carefully planned this maneuver, effectively abandoning her children to her mother's care.

Two and a half months passed before Sara Jane called home, collect, from a pay phone. Her parents begged her to come home and care for her three youngsters, pleading that her children needed their mother. Sara Jane promised to come home—she just needed a little more time. This scene was replayed several times over the next two months, with Sara Jane calling collect and promising

to “come home soon.” But she never did, and three months later, the calls stopped altogether.

After nearly a year, desperate, worn out, hurt beyond words, and hot with anger that their own child could behave in such a callous way, the Kahns tried to have Sara Jane arrested for failure to support her children. But even the police could not find her. Sara Jane had really disappeared this time.

Sydney Jr., Janet, and baby Christopher had landed on the Kahn's doorstep with a couple of shirts, some pants, one set of diapers, and a teddy bear. At age five, little Syd had some memory of leaving his mom in California and flying to West Virginia to live with his grandparents the year before. But for Janet and Chris, their grandparents were their family. By now, only one of the Kahn children was living at home, fifteen-year-old Charlie. He would always be Uncle Charlie to the kids.

Ruth was forty-seven when the children arrived, and Olaf was fifty-seven and looking forward to retirement. They had college tuition for their own older children to think about, and raising three youngsters was a significant hardship. But Ruth and Olaf were the kind of people who did the right thing.

The Kahn home was still filled with books and music, but Ruth and Olaf raised their grandchildren just as they had raised their children: with little hugging and a lot of expectations. You had to obey all the rules or face the consequences. Ruth believed in a clean home and good manners. Olaf had high standards in terms of education, good behavior, and doing one's part. The dread of disapproval

weighed on the children as they struggled to please their grandparents.

“We lived in the world with permission and had to behave the way others expected us to behave,” Chris told me. “We were taught to defer to everyone around us.”

Ruth had become a strict Baptist and began attending Starcher Baptist Church on Twenty-sixth Street in Charleston. Starcher was part of the American Baptist Church, which has a history of opposing slavery and alcohol.

As Ruth became more involved with her church activities, Olaf continued on with DuPont, having reached a comfortable managerial position. He was at DuPont long enough to see projects he had contributed to, such as his work on glycolic acid, make it all the way into the medical industry for use in helping to heal burn patients.

In the meantime, out of concern for the future of their grandchildren, Olaf and Ruth had filed to legally adopt Sydney Jr., Janet, and Christopher. They published an announcement of the intended adoption in the vain hope that being faced with the formal loss of her children might flush out Sara Jane. Sara Jane’s ex-husband, the children’s father, had disappeared from their lives soon after the divorce and did not contest the adoption. The adoption also served the practical purpose of making the children eligible for Social Security survivors’ benefits, to help meet the mounting expenses of raising three growing children if Olaf should die.

Olaf’s career came to an unexpected halt when he suffered a nonfatal heart attack on the job in April 1964. As soon as he was well enough, Olaf applied for retirement, and within a month he was retired. Later that year, Olaf’s heart finally gave out completely.

Skip told me his father was never one to sit around. The family had been growing corn in Saint Alban’s, West Virginia, fifteen miles west of Charleston on the Kanawha River. “Dad was plowing the corn on a small Gravelly tractor that had a vertical rotating plow,” Skip told me in a conversation. “A neighbor to the farm said he saw Dad plowing. When he looked over later he heard the tractor running but it wasn’t moving.” The neighbor went to see what was going on.

“He said he found my Dad lying on the ground, not breathing. He called the police or the life squad, but Dad was dead.” Ruth, at fifty-eight, was left to raise a second family of three children, then aged thirteen, eleven, and eight.⁴ Ruth clung to the church even more as an anchor by which to stabilize her life. She did not enforce discipline with anger; rather, she turned to the Bible and the fear of God as a way to control Syd, Janet, and Chris.

She dominated her grandchildren in a way she could not dominate her own five children. Ruth, ever thinking ahead, moved with her grandchildren to Ohio to establish residency. The schools were better and she could be sure the kids would qualify to attend the state-funded Ohio state colleges.

The new family arrangement worked for a while with Janet and Chris. Syd, older when he arrived, maintained a certain amount of independence and managed to deflect Ruth’s aim, but Janet became a devout Baptist while living at home, and Chris held on to the faith until high school. Chris, however, felt threatened by an angry God. “I was always afraid I was going to make Jesus mad,” he told me. Ruth controlled the children by reminding them that Jesus was watching, so they had better behave.

Rather than cling to each other for support, Sara Jane’s three children distanced themselves from each other, vying for approval within their new family. They each fought for parental favor for fear of losing their home again, and being cast out if they were not good enough.

Even so, Ruth and Olaf provided a refuge for their grandchildren and gave them a new family. But what they could never do was erase the rejection that the children would never understand.

When the kids were in their early twenties, their mythical mother blasted back into their lives from the radio, television, and newspapers as the woman who tried to kill the president.

The scars from those early years have never healed. One of the children told me, “We are all broken.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE DOCTOR'S WIFE

Sara Jane drove away from the airport after seeing her children off to their new lives in West Virginia and shrugged off her past like an old coat. When she disappeared from her family's lives, she created a new life for herself, and possibly even a new identity. Attempts to find documentation on the decade that followed this event were futile. Although she seems to have remained in Los Angeles from 1956 to 1966, only Sara Jane knows what she really did after she shipped her children off to live with her parents. She covered her tracks well as she hid from her family, and law enforcement could do little to help locate her. It is possible that she used aliases, and there is reason to believe that she used different Social Security numbers at various times.

It is during the period from 1956 to 1963 that Sara Jane presumably went to school to study accounting, and worked to support herself. The details of this are unknown to me, but in trying to picture her in her late twenties, in the Los Angeles of the late 1950s, it is easy to envision a powerful young woman who was adept at making her own way in the world—charming, well-spoken, classy, and likely to impress a potential employer.

Sara Jane was familiar with the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) campus, as well as the streets of Westwood, and the location of the running track. Apparently, she took accounting classes at UCLA. I was unable to locate any records; but it is possible she registered under a different name. Sara Jane had her high school transcript sent to UCLA in 1950, and again in 1970. In a 1995 letter to me, she wrote: "When I was studying at UC there was a program that permitted one to start on graduate work while still an undergraduate."

She went on to say in the letter that she had, in fact, begun work on her master's degree in just such a program while still an undergraduate. She loved to tell me stories about "running laps around the UCLA track and chatting" with Hollywood stars. The FBI reported that Sara Jane had almost completed a master's in business, but did not indicate at which school. The Office of the Registrar

at UCLA found no records of Sara Jane Moore (or Kahn, or Manning, or Aalberg) ever completing a degree at UCLA.

With the onset of the sixties, Sara Jane found herself in a vastly changed world from the one in which she had abandoned her children. The cultural evolution from the conformist fifties to the authority-challenging new decade was dramatic. The bland Eisenhower era that she had lived in had crumbled. In 1963, civil rights worker Medgar Evers was murdered, and four little black girls died in a church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. What was left of the fifties mind-set blew up completely in November of that year with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in

Dallas. But even before that, things were changing—and the signs were evident all over the country. Men no longer felt the need to wear fedoras. Women wore capri pants, and little girls wore pedal pushers. Small, foreign economy vehicles, such as Volkswagen Beetles and tiny Renault Dauphines, were slowly starting to replace some of the large, dependable American gas-guzzlers. In 1964, the Beatles led the British invasion in American music, displacing Elvis, the King, from his musical throne.

When the University of California at Berkeley added a new student union building to its campus in 1964, it not only changed the geography of the campus, but, in a series of almost accidental events, triggered the beginning of a movement that would capture the imagination of a generation.

Prior to the construction of the new building, Telegraph Avenue extended through the campus up to Sather Gate. Information tables with political position papers were stationed along Telegraph Avenue and often rallies were held there. Students handed out literature, sought signatures for petitions, and engaged in debate.

With the construction of the Student Union building, however, Telegraph Avenue was truncated just east of the campus, at Bancroft Way. The traditional activities continued at this new gate to the campus.

The adjacent sidewalks on Bancroft and Telegraph were generally regarded as city property. Groups received table permits from the city of Berkeley authorities.

When there were questions about student activities on Telegraph Avenue, the Dean's Office referred them to the city police department. After the Student Union was built, the university changed its position and informed the heads of all student organizations that the Bancroft and Telegraph sidewalks were in fact university property and that all university rules would henceforth be applied. That meant no tables or speeches and only informational literature could be distributed; no advocacy was allowed.

Immediately the students asked the school to reconsider and make the area available to the public rather than campus space.

Tension between the school administration and students grew. On December 2, 1964, the Associated Students of the University of California passed a "demonstration resolution." When their demands were not answered, students organized a sit-in and began

pouring into Sproul Hall overnight. More than fifty on- and off campus

organizations banded together in joint protest of the Bancroft and Telegraph table ban.

Campus police showed up early on the morning of December 3 to try to restore order. In response, graduate student Mario Savio—who had just returned from civil rights actions in Selma, Alabama, and was still enraged by the injustices he had witnessed as a Freedom Rider—jumped on top of the police cruiser and gave an impromptu and impassioned speech: "There's a time," he said, "when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part. And you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to indicate to the people who own it that unless you're free, the machines will be prevented from working at all."

The students who had gathered in Berkeley that day began the Free Speech Movement, an explosion of political activism that tore through California and moved quickly across the country. In a show of support, Free Speech rallies occurred on university campuses less than a week later at Columbia University, City College, and Queens College in New York, as well as at Harvard University

and the University of Michigan. The Movement set off a decade of challenges and rage that rattled the so-called establishment and gave rise to new role models for American youth. It put the concepts of equal rights, civil rights, and racial equality on everyone's lips and fostered a general contempt for anything standing in the way of peace and freedom.

Just as the country was going through a drastic transformation, this was also the case for Sara Jane. No longer a nurse, soldier, or housewife, in the early sixties Sara Jane drew on her accounting training and skills to reinvent herself as a bookkeeper at RKO studios

in Hollywood. It was while working at RKO that she met John Aalberg, "Big John," as she called him, the man she later described as "the love of my life."

John O. Aalberg was born in Chicago in 1897,⁴ the only son of Scandinavian immigrant parents. Sara Jane told everyone she met that he was a "heavyweight" in Hollywood; she called him "Big John" for many reasons. He was tall, a bit over six feet, with a welcoming face and a genuine smile that softened the hardest heart. A pair of tortoiseshell glasses were forever slipping down his nose, and instead of pushing them up with one finger, he would adjust the pesky frames from the side, giving him a refined air. When Sara Jane first met John, he had a full head of white hair, which was in stark contrast to his youthful face and buoyant style.

Professionally, Aalberg was a sound recordist and special effects expert—an early and well-known contributor to the refinement of sound in movies. Between 1936 and 1954, he was nominated for nine Academy Awards, including his sound recording for RKO's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

He received the Academy's Scientific/Technical Award in 1938, and would later win the Academy's Medal of Commendation for outstanding service in 1979. In 1982 he won the Gordon E. Sawyer Award for his lifetime contributions to the industry.⁵ For Sara Jane, landing a man like "Big John" was a real coup.

Sara Jane thought of herself as the "new young girl" at RKO—despite the fact that she was already in her mid-thirties. Her success in playing that role, at least when

it came to Aalberg, was helped by the fact that he was thirty-three years older than she and two years older than her own father.

Sara Jane first saw John from her desk when he visited the RKO administrative offices. Sara Jane soon found out that John was single and considered a man about town who was never without a date. Knowing that he was a bit of a womanizer only fueled Sara Jane's determination to win him over. According to her version of the courtship, she decided to present herself as the prim and proper girl from West Virginia in contrast to the many would-be actresses

looking for their big break that he was likely dating. She said that, at the time, she was living in a women-only hotel and that John had to get her back in time for an 11:00 P.M. curfew. She said she made it clear to him that she was not like other girls and maintained an air of propriety for a while.

"I decided that I wouldn't make it easy for him," she told me in a letter. "I made him work hard before I agreed to a first date with him, and then I didn't even let him kiss me goodnight that first time, which was totally unlike what he was used to with the other girls at the studios." She practiced being coquettish, explaining that she would first look down, and then glance up furtively. She called this her "proven technique."

"He was very used to getting what he wanted," she explained in another letter. "I played hard to get and that was how I reeled him in."

John landed with a thud. When he popped the question, Sara Jane said yes. They were married in June 1965. Sara Jane had three marriages and four children behind her; her parents were both alive, and she had four siblings. Yet, she wrote to me that on the night of his proposal, she looked up at Big John and said lovingly, "You know, one of the things we have in common is that neither of us has any family."

Long after their breakup, Sara Jane would continue to brag about John to her friends. "He was a biggie in Los Angeles," she would say, nodding her head seriously. "You'd know him." She loved to describe in detail the expensive pearl and amethyst earrings he had had made especially for her; she also liked to recall

how she and John loved to pack light for a quick trip, boasting that they could travel around the world with just one suitcase and one toiletry case each.

However, Sara Jane's movie romance had an unhappy and abrupt ending. In July 1965—just one month after their marriage, and shortly after she felt John's child quicken within her—Sara Jane packed her bags, dumped John, and headed up the coast to San Francisco. Alone. Afterward, she would say that she left "to think things over"; she detested Los Angeles and just could not stay there a minute longer. She never gave me a clear reason why she did not like Los Angeles, just that she could no longer live there.

"We both assumed we would eventually end up back together," she wrote to me. "That we didn't is because of L.A."

Sara Jane's fifth child, Frederic W. Aalberg, was born in San Francisco on March 18, 1966.⁷ For John, who really didn't have any other family, maintaining a link with his son was especially important.

He and Sara Jane developed an informal custody and visitation agreement for Frederic that included child-care payments from John to Sara Jane in exchange for monthly weekend visits.

John would visit Frederic every other month in San Francisco, and in the alternate months, Sara Jane would take the boy to Los Angeles to see his father. John even considered moving north, but his work was in Los Angeles and he could not leave.

Sara Jane felt conflicted: Her beloved Big John was in Los Angeles, where she claimed to have had friends and good memories; yet she hated L.A. and felt "crushed and depressed" every time the plane landed at Los Angeles International Airport.

By the summer of 1967, the dam had broken as far as popular culture was concerned. Young people were streaming into Berkeley and San Francisco from all over the United States. An estimated 100,000 arrived, eager to join the hippies and become part of Haight-Ashbury's "Summer of Love." The psychedelic sixties were being celebrated everywhere from popular music to Life magazine.

Peace, love, and understanding were the words of the day. The generational

conflict was raging, and there was nothing the older generation could do to influence kids who suddenly proclaimed that they didn't "trust anyone over thirty." In downtown San Francisco, the genteel ladies in white gloves who had sipped tea and shopped in Union Square for decades were unceremoniously replaced by their longhaired, face-painted daughters and sons who were experimenting with mind-expanding drugs and free love, caught up in the excitement and momentum of the times.

The north-south visits with Big John did not last long. Any thought Sara Jane might have had about reconciling did not last either.

Frederic was only eighteen months old when, on December 22, 1967,⁸ Sara Jane married Dr. Willard J. Carmel Jr., a man just ten years her senior. A mutual friend who made the introduction told Sara Jane that Carmel was a successful physician who worked for Kaiser Permanente, a major California health maintenance organization.

A year earlier, Dr. Carmel had divorced his first wife, Helen, the mother of his two children. Feeling suddenly vulnerable and alone with a young child again, Sara Jane was looking to the safety of the suburbs. Carmel, a man with a strong presence and a forceful personality, made her feel secure. She knew that he would take care of her and her son.

She honed in on her target and turned on her West Virginia charm. After the wedding, Carmel began to provide support for Sara Jane and Frederic, and he even insisted that Sara Jane discontinue receiving child support from Big John. Dr. Carmel did not want money coming from another man as a reminder of Sara Jane's past, Sara Jane told me in a letter.

Carmel moved Sara Jane and Frederic into a house in the new Sycamore development a few miles away from the center of Danville. The pastoral, upper-middle-class community of perfectly maintained homes and strict codes, covenants, and restrictions helped maintain an orderly environment. It was a peaceful respite from the youth revolution that was beginning to shake the nation and the turmoil that was turning other parts of the San Francisco Bay Area inside out.

As Sara Jane began to remodel her new home, she met some of Willard's friends at the Blackhawk Country Club in Danville. Blackhawk was considered the most prestigious club in the East Bay. She was determined to fit in and talked endlessly to the wives about fixing her home, Sara Jane's Danville neighbors told me.

Sara Jane described the details of landscaping her home in Danville to me: She liked gardening and spent hours at the local nursery to find just the right shrubs and flowers to line the walkway to the front door. She told me the house was decorated in what she called Early Matron style, but she would transform it according to tasteful southern graciousness.

Slowly she began to meet the other women at the club. It appeared to Sara Jane that there were some rather significant contradictions between what these women said and what they did.

While their conversations often focused on civil rights and current political issues, she told me that was as far as it went—just conversation.

As she began to take more of an interest in the outside world, she developed a low level of discomfort that she buried at the time. She could not explain clearly to me what exactly was bothering her. She simply told me that while she enjoyed fixing her home, she did not want to shut herself off from the rest of the world.

Sara Jane lived the paradox of discussing these topics while remaining an armchair observer. She could picture herself there on the front lines in the early 1960s in the fight to eliminate segregation.

She could envision riding with the students on the buses in Washington, D.C., or at a lunch counter in Greensboro, sitting with other civil rights activists, defying the locals. As she learned more, she could see herself as an active participant. Sara Jane needed to change her strategy.

The civil rights movement had created a new consciousness in restaurants and clubs throughout the country. Waiters and waitresses in many restaurants were African American, and the white patrons and club members, uncomfortable with these obvious class differences, would reflect those feelings by being overly solicitous.

Groups of whites and blacks joined to show support for the civil rights activists in the South. New leaders began to emerge from several communities.

By the mid-sixties, frustration with the slow pace of civil rights change grew and began to merge with the general frustration about America's participation in the ongoing and seemingly endless Vietnam War. Nonviolent groups began to take a more militant stance. In 1966, joining alongside the mainly white Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was the Black Panther Party (BPP), formed in Oakland, California—just a few miles from Danville—as part of the larger Black Power movement.

For the more conservative white citizens, Danville remained a refuge from the teeming demonstrators, brash bra-burning feminists, and long-haired hippies who were challenging the status quo on every street corner and government step. Danville and its neighboring Walnut Creek community were buffered from the harshness of San Francisco by distance, and from the political rudeness of Berkeley by the foothills. The Sycamore housing development was a testament to an upper-middle-class community that did not want the realities of the Vietnam War, women's rights, drugs, and antiestablishment challenges to enter their world. The heavily tree-lined streets and the pristine country club and tennis courts were all the reality they needed. In Danville, moms had their hair done, stayed home with their children, took tennis lessons, and kept well within the environs of their safe geography. It still seemed to be the early 1950s in Danville.

The members of an informal group of neighborhood moms nicknamed "the Danville Circle" were not very receptive to Sara Jane. "She was well kept and attractive. It wasn't that," complained one mother who at the time had five children under the age of ten.

"It's that she barged in on my life as though I had nothing to do but listen to her. The final straw for me came one morning. Ms. Moore-Carmel showed up on my doorstep all charged up about one of her campaigns. She invited herself in without a thought to my schedule, settled into my kitchen, and just talked nonstop until I was late for a pediatrician appointment. I had to practically throw

her out. She had no regard for anyone but herself.” Another member of the circle added: “She always wanted to be the center of everything . . . and always name dropping . . . that just made me so-o-o uncomfortable . . . no, actually, it’s worse—she royally pissed me off !”

Sara Jane wanted to find a group of women who did meaningful work. She found projects for herself and sought to involve others in them. One such project was spearheading a collection for the family of a construction worker who had fallen and died while the subdivision was being completed. By 1970, even though she had been envisioning herself in the activist melee of the era, she had thrown herself headlong into the reelection campaign of Republican.

Senator George Murphy, an ultraconservative former song-and-dance man whose best-known accomplishment during his six years in Washington was having an always-full candy jar on his desk.

Sara Jane had been involved in the actor-candidate’s first campaign during her Hollywood years. Murphy’s election to the Senate in 1964 had been helped both by California’s powerful supporters of conservative Barry Goldwater and by the weak campaign mounted by Democratic opponent Pierre Salinger; but Sara Jane felt that her support had helped significantly as well. When Sara Jane visited a number of her Danville neighbors to seek their support in Murphy’s reelection campaign, she put herself front and center. “In true form,” one neighbor reported, “Sara Jane elaborated her importance to the point that, to hear her tell it, Murphy had been elected in 1964 because of her.”

In 1970, however, Sara Jane’s determined support for Murphy was not quite enough to carry him to victory. His younger rival, John Tunney, a Kennedy look-alike, swept the election with a lopsided margin of victory of more than 600,000 votes. Sara Jane, too, was crushed and defeated.