

Chapter One
GROWING UP SARAH

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SARAH PALIN'S childhood home faces Alaska's Talkeetna Mountains. In the spring, purple violets, Indian paintbrush, and wild geraniums carpet the mountains' alpine tundra in a bloom of color. In winter,

the snow-covered mountains take on a rose blush in the soft alpenglow. Sarah could see these mountains from the front porch of the family's little yellow house near downtown Wasilla. These mountains would become, like other wild places in Alaska, a place of sustenance and renewal for her boisterous and busy family.

Born in Sandpoint, Idaho on February 11, 1964, Sarah Louise was the third of four children born in rapid succession to Chuck and Sally Heath. The family moved to Alaska when

Sarah was two months old. Chuck took a job teaching school in Skagway. Her older brother, Chuck Jr., was two years old, Heather had just turned one, and Molly was soon to come. Chuck Jr. vividly remembers the days in Skagway when he and his dad ran a trapline, put out crab pots, and hunted mountain goats and seals. The family spent time hiking up to alpine lakes and looking for artifacts left behind during the Klondike Gold Rush.

“Dad never stopped lining up new adventures for us,” Chuck Jr. said. The kids caught Dolly Varden off a nearby dock. Chuck Jr. loved to catch the Irish Lord, an ugly, creepy-looking fish, for the pleasure of holding it up to his little sisters’ faces and making them scream.

In 1969, the Heaths moved to southcentral Alaska, living for a short time with friends in Anchorage, then for two years in Eagle River before finally settling in Wasilla. The family lived frugally. To help make ends meet, Chuck Heath moonlighted as a hunting and fishing guide and as a bartender, and even worked on the Alaska Railroad for a time. Sally worked as a school secretary and ran their busy household.

In 1974, Wasilla incorporated with a population of barely four hundred people. The Heath house sat a few blocks from the center of town, north of the railroad tracks and south and east of woodlands of birch, willow, and spruce. The woods were a wilderness playground—the kind of place where kids play out the imaginative adventures of childhood. They had a white cat named Fifi and a German shepherd named Rufus, a canine sidekick to the kids who shows up in many family photos. The children often hiked the “Bunny Trail” to the home of a distant neighbor who had kids the same age.

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In both summer and winter, most of the family’s activities took place outdoors. Sarah said that she appreciates the many outdoor adventures she had as a child. Fitness was a big part of family life. “My parents jumped on the bandwagon of the ‘70s running craze,” she said. The whole family ran together, competing in five- and ten-kilometer races throughout the summer.

When the family wasn’t running or hiking, it was hunting or fishing.

“We could literally go hunting out our back door,” Chuck Jr. said. Sarah shot her first rabbit at age ten not far from the back porch. In her teens, she hunted caribou with her father. The family’s freezer was always full of fish and game. Chuck Jr. said he didn’t eat a beef steak until he was a senior in high school. Gardening helped fill the family larder.

In summer, Chuck Jr., Heather, Sarah, and Molly spent long sunny days building tree forts, riding bikes, and playing with friends. They took swimming lessons in Wasilla Lake—a pond with water so cold that they huddled around a campfire on the beach afterward to silence their chattering teeth. During the summer, their father put away the television. For entertainment, he put up a basketball hoop with a dirt court in the back yard. The Heath kids and their friends spent many hours playing ball.

Once a year, the family accompanied Chuck Sr. on a week-long class field trip to Denali National Park, where camping in view of majestic Mount McKinley left indelible memories with the Heath children.

The family often packed up and drove fifteen miles to Hatcher Pass, a scenic expanse of alpine tundra tucked between jagged peaks in the Talkeetna Mountains. In summer,

the family hiked, picked berries, and followed the trails. In winter, they skied and hunted ptarmigan, an Alaska game bird.

At home, Sarah shared a bedroom with her sisters in the upper level of their wood-frame home. Chuck Jr. slept in a closet-sized room next to the kitchen. The three sisters loved listening to the patter of rain on the tin roof above their heads. The room was unheated except for a wood stove that their father installed when he built an addition onto the house. The kids had to feed wood into the stove to keep the room warm but often they decided it wasn't worth the effort to get out of bed. Instead, they snuggled deeper under the covers, watching their breath condense in the cool air.

The three sisters had a code phrase that helped ward off the chill and the scary shadows of the night. "Do you want to play *Sleeping Beauty*?" one of them would ask. That was the signal for Sarah, Heather, and Molly to pile into one bed for the night.

"I was afraid of everything," said Molly, the youngest. Even after Chuck and Heather left for college, Molly and Sarah slept in the same room. "I would push my bed next to Sarah's and we would hold hands, even in high school," Molly said.

One of the girls' favorite pastimes was to form clubs to organize field trips. On one occasion, for example, the group hatched a plan to hike at Bodenbug Butte, where a recreational trail overlooked the Knik River Valley. Because the Butte was too far away to bike or walk, an adult had to drive them. Sarah helped broker deals to do chores in exchange for a ride.

"One time, I remember we stacked firewood so that we could earn a ride to the fair," Molly said. But when they finished stacking an enormous pile of wood, the whole stack

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toppled to the ground. "We just looked at each other and got back to work."

The domestic scene in the Heath family was not without its squabbles. The children fought fiercely over the usual sibling issues and had no qualms about physically taking their differences right down to the green shag carpet. When things got out of hand, however, they agreed on one thing.

"We had a pact," Heather said. "If any of us got hurt, or if we broke something, we promised not to tell."

"We learned to toe the line at an early age," Chuck Jr. said. "If we had a problem with Mom, she'd usually just say, 'wait 'til Dad gets home.'"

Molly agreed. "Mom was like June Cleaver. I rarely remember her being upset. But when Dad came home, we stood a little straighter and turned down the volume."

Sally Heath has a kindly face and a voice that sounds like a song. Even as adults, the Heath kids enjoy listening to her voice. Sally quickly puts strangers at ease, and with smiling eyes she expresses genuine interest in everyone she meets. She is a woman of deep faith and strong convictions.

Whenever possible, Sally joined her husband in his outdoor pursuits. When he guided big-game hunts, she traded babysitting with a friend so that she could go along as camp cook and all-around assistant. She hunted, fished, cross-country skied, and ran a marathon.

Today, Sally Heath still plays an integral part in the busy households of her children, all of whom now have children of their own. When needed, she supports the working parents, volunteering as chauffer, tutor, nurse, and cook for her grandchildren. All twelve of them live in Wasilla or in nearby Anchorage.

Chuck Sr. is a wiry man, taut with enthusiasm and high-voltage energy. As a high school cross-country and track coach, he brought out the best in people around him. And he expected nothing from others that he didn't also demand from himself. During his years coaching the track team, he ran at least a dozen marathons, including the Boston Marathon.

Chuck Sr. brought his passion for the outdoors into his classroom. His classrooms then—and the Heath home now—look like exhibits in a natural history museum with pelts, skulls, and fossils adorning the walls. He continues to hunt and fish and has taken up gold mining. He often takes grandkids on a two and half hour four-wheeler ride to an old friend's mine near Gunsight Mountain.

Even in their so-called retirement, Chuck, sixty-nine, and Sally, sixty-seven, work summers for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services Program. They've trapped fox in the Aleutian Islands, contributing to the recovery of bird populations decimated after the fox was introduced by Russians in the 1750s. They've used pyrotechnics to scare birds off runways in the Pribilof Islands. And they've helped eradicate rats from Palmyra Atoll, one thousand miles southwest of Hawaii. Chuck and Sally even accepted an assignment from the federal agency that took them to Ground Zero in New York City to keep rats away while investigators recovered remains after 9/11. Chuck also substitute teaches and enjoys bringing specimens from home to conduct workshops on wildlife biology.

The Heath children agree that their parents provided the right combination of affirmation, encouragement, and tough love. No infraction was more egregious to either parent than lying. Honesty became a non-negotiable family standard. There

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was an expectation, too, that if you wanted something, you earned it.

"We always worked," Heather said. "We never had anything handed to us."

Molly agreed. Whether weeding an enormous garden that they shared with family friends or stacking firewood, everyone pitched in. From age twelve on, everyone had a job to earn spending money—picking strawberries at the nearby Dearborn farm, babysitting, or working as a waitress at the local diner. The Heath kids knew what it meant to work.

"We knew on a teacher's salary that we would all have to pay our own way through college. We knew we'd have to be independent," Heather said.

After high school, much to her older brother's amusement, Sarah entered the Miss Wasilla pageant and won.

"I remember asking Sarah why she would enter a beauty pageant when that seemed so prissy to the rest of us," Chuck Jr. said. "She told me matter of factly, 'It's going to help pay my way through college.'"

Her family makes a point of saying Sarah was never the beauty-pageant type. Even though the scholarship she won did help pay for college, years later Sarah seemed chagrined by the pageant experience.

"They made us line up in bathing suits and turn our backs so the male judges could look at our butts," she said in a 2008 interview with *Vogue* magazine. "I couldn't believe it!"

Sarah had two childhood traits that her family says played trajectory roles in her life. From the time she was in elementary school, she consumed newspapers with a passion. "She read the paper from the very top left hand corner to the bottom right corner to the very last page," said Molly. "She didn't want to

miss a word. She didn't just read it—she knew every word she had read and analyzed it.”

Sarah preferred nonfiction to the Nancy Drew books that her classmates were reading. In junior high school, Heather—a year older in school—often enlisted Sarah's help with book reports. “She was such a bookworm. Whenever I was assigned to read a book, she'd already read it,” Heather said.

Sarah's thirst for knowledge was nurtured in a household that emphasized the importance of education. There was never any question that all the Heath kids would go to college. With her love for newspapers and current events, Sarah majored in journalism and minored in political science. Her brother, like their father, became a teacher. Heather works for an advertising firm. Molly is a dental hygienist.

Sarah's other trait is what her father calls an unbending, unapologetic streak of stubbornness.

“The rest of the kids, I could force them to do something,” Chuck Sr. said. “But with Sarah, there was no way. From a young age she had a mind of her own. Once she made up her mind, she didn't change it.”

Sarah's siblings were astonished by Sarah's resolve in the face of a father whose decisions were the final word in their household.

“She never lost an argument and would never, no matter what, back down when she knew she was right,” Chuck Jr. remembers. “Not just with me or with other kids, but with Mom and Dad too.”

Later on, Sarah's father would enlist the help of people Sarah respected—especially coaches and teachers—to persuade her to see things his way. Yet he concedes Sarah was persuasive

in her arguments and often correct. Later, when his daughter became governor, Chuck found it immensely amusing that acquaintances asked him to sway Sarah on particular issues. He says he lost that leverage before she was two.

That doesn't stop him from speaking his mind, however. During her campaigns he sometimes called to defend his daughter on talk radio. “Sarah finally asked me to stay out of it, and so I do,” Chuck Sr. said. “But it hurts me when people rag on her.”

Sarah's niece, Lauden, remarked that the closeness of the Heath family resembles a scene from the movie “My Big Fat Greek Wedding.” When the group gets together for a holiday gathering or a sporting event, everyone is loud, opinionated, and gets into everyone else's business. The one thing they all agree on is how hard it is to watch Sarah become a target of her political foes.

“One of her strengths is being able to hold her tongue when she's been unfairly attacked,” said Chuck Jr. “By staying true to her beliefs, things always seem to fall into place for her.”

Not that Sarah's journey to the governor's office was easy. From the moment she began making her mark in the politics, she was criticized for being too young, too inexperienced, and too naïve.

Yet, time after time over the years, underestimating Sarah always proved to be a big mistake.