

THE STONE SISTER

CAROLINE PATTERSON



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She was the secret heart that lay under the silences in her family, like the mysterious swath of stone, the batholith, that formed when magma rose to the earth's surface and flowed along a tectonic plate, like milk under a rug, except that it flowed for millions of years, growing harder and thicker until it created a granite slab two miles wide and ten miles deep. Different in texture and appearance than the schists and sandstones around it, the slab went underground and was a vast silent presence beneath the windblown ponderosas and Doug firs. At Homestake Pass, where the soil had worn away, it suddenly appeared: the fields of broken rock exposed and named, appropriately enough, the Dragonback. No one could really explain why, on these cold plains, amid this thin, slanting light, in this place where even the sunshine hurt, the cracked rock appeared like a strange race of people, misshapen and stunted by cold.

CHAPTER **ONE**

Louise Gustafson liked to think her life began when a screen door banged shut in Blue Earth, Minnesota. Banged shut as she snuck out the back door of the brown Lutheran church blessed by wind and sun and land stretching from horizon to horizon, where her fiancé, the dirt farmer, stood at the altar, stood waiting with his father and his father's father for her to walk up the aisle to join him in growing into the earth, getting smaller and more furrowed each year until they joined the rest of his ancestors buried in dirt, with only their children to cough up their names.

Or that her story began with a slap. Right there in the Plough Bar in the middle of town, when she told her boyfriend she wouldn't marry him even if he held a gun to her head, the bar stool falling back, metal ringing, glasses clinking, Hank Williams on the jukebox, everything growing silent and slow as he stared at her, raised his broad weathered palm, the snap of flesh on flesh, the stain rising on her cheek as the bartender reached across the scarred wooden bar

to grab his arm and say, “Not in this place, buddy,” and she, Louise Gustafson, picked up her purse and walked out and got into her car and drove west.

But these stories weren't true. She left out of sheer boredom. Blue Earth in summer. Sun drumming the pavement. Her mother sweeping the porch each day with her hymns, certain that Louise wouldn't marry. Louise certain she would be there to ease her mother's dry bones into the earth as old men eyed her with glances that said, *Lift me up in my infirmity*. She had backseat dalliances with the occasional farm boy, but she knew when the time came, their affections would go to the corn silk girls, never a redheaded, sass-talking woman like her who'd gone to nursing school, who'd seen women die, babies born, men cry out in pain.

She left one hot summer day, after her nursing shift the fan-fluttered wooden box known as the Blue Earth Health Clinic. She left after swabbing down children with chicken pox and tending to an old farmer dying of emphysema and a farmhand with a broken leg. She quit her job and drove home on Highway 90 and thought, *drive. Drive till the money runs out*, and when she said good-bye, her mother said the devil had entered Louise's heart and that she'd pray for her return.

Louise said, *save your breath*.

She drove slowly down the main street of Blue Earth, the broken-down town with a bar and a gas station and the hardware store with the peeling green paint and the redbrick school where hopes were raised and routinely dashed and weeds poked up through the sidewalk and quiet swept the streets. She drove slowly, etching each detail in her mind, then turned onto the highway, adjusted her rearview mirror, and shifted.

The highway was like a river west. She flowed past the flatland, river bottoms, farmland, laid out across the prairie like a black-checked

picnic cloth, past small towns like her own, the lives so rooted there, lives of waking up and working and drinking and bedding down again and waking to a certain future. She didn't know what she was driving to, but she didn't care. What she was doing was unforgivable, but she wasn't married, she wasn't pregnant; she was a woman alone and there wasn't a story that fit her out there.

As she drove from Minnesota to South Dakota and from South Dakota to North Dakota, the land rose up around her, rose into small canyons, hills, mountains. As the land rose, so did her spirits.

She overnighted in tourist cabins, where men talked cattle and crop prices with other men, and women cooed to babies, and newlyweds made love cries in the night. She filled her gas tank at stations with the flying tigers where attendants winked at her and asked her where she was headed (*straight to hell*, she wanted to answer, but did only once) or they snapped to attention, scrubbing the windows, and stole looks at her legs.

As she drove, she watched the numbers roll over on her odometer like pages flying from a calendar in a movie, each one measuring how far away she was from her mother's hymns, from the head nurse who watched her with her sour instructions, from the dirt farmer who took her to the Saturday movies and expected to cop a feel in return.

She entered Montana near Glendive, where the oil derricks bobbed up and down like bath toys, and farmers planted spring wheat, tilling up thick rows of dirt behind their tractors, great flocks of birds wheeling around behind them. Occasionally Louise spotted a woman standing in the doorway of a ranch house, her sleeves rolled up her muscled arms, calling a scatter of dogs in the driveway, calling men in to dinner, and Louise wanted to call to her, *hello, good-bye!*

In each town was a life she left behind, ranch wife, librarian, even the whores who disappeared around corners of peeling buildings into

alleys where weak lights lit stairways to their rooms. Each tableau a chrysalis she cast off. She wanted to drive west forever. It was a direction she believed in.

The mountains hovered, deep, mysterious, ghost-like. She drove to them, feeling the past strip away from her, the narrow brick school, the nurse's training with its aluminum bedpans and starched white uniforms, the farmers with their pinches and sly remarks, the amputees with their sausage-like limbs and bitter hopes or worse yet, the cheerful ones with their upturned faces and wheelchairs. With every mile, she cast off her own thin dreams of a house and a righteous man and babies and gardens as she drove into this landscape of angles and planes.

Clean, spare lines she could live with.

It was the geometry of starting over.

Helena, Montana, down to her last fifty dollars, she checked into the YWCA, and joined the other stranded women—women without family, women escaping family, women without wits, women whose songs had run out, whose paved roads had suddenly turned to dirt—ruled over by a matron who must have weighed three hundred pounds and had the voice of a sparrow. Here she answered an advertisement in a local newspaper: The Stone Home for Feeble-Minded and Backward Children. Nurses needed, little experience necessary.

When she drove over the hill and down into Stone City, the broad valley reached out to her like a hand. The valley was spotted black and red with cattle, with clumps of pine trees at the foot of the shy, forbidding mountains she later learned were the Elkhorns. A long, silvery river, clotted here and there with moss and cattails, ran parallel to the highway.

Louise drove down the empty main street lined with one-story

brick buildings with plate-glass windows—a hardware store, café, and several garages and a market—following signs for the Stone Home. *Why was this called a city?* she wondered. *Why stone?* Her heart thumped. It was cold, high, remote. It was June and snowing. The place enfolded her at once like a lover.

On the outskirts of town, she immediately saw the building, a tall brick Italianate building, so out of character with the one-story Main Street town. It had to be the Stone Home, she thought, wondering at the generosity of a state that provided such a grand place for its feeble-minded children. The building was three stories high with tiled roofs, Italianate cornices, and six-foot plate-glass windows.

It looked like a library. Or a men's club in the middle of London.

Louise was hired for the nursery by the chief of staff, a Dr. Oetzing, or "Dr. O," as everyone called him. She met him, along with the head nurse and two social workers, around the wide table in the library, sunlight streaming through the long leaded-glass windows to slice the table into triangles of light. On one wall stood a large framed photograph of Sigmund Freud, on another a print of Van Gogh's haystacks.

When she accepted the job, everyone stared across the smooth surface of the table at her, and she tried to read their looks: Astonishment? Sympathy? Amusement?

"Welcome aboard," Dr. O said, after they had hired her to care for eight babies in the nursery. As he said this, his eyes traveled down her body, from her eyes to her lips to her chest, and then discreetly back to his notes. "Louise Gustafson. That sounds like a very sturdy name."

"I'm a very sturdy person, Doctor," she said, and immediately wished she'd kept her mouth shut. It's a place to rest my head for a while, she told herself. Nothing more.

When she stepped back into the hallway, the cacophony of voices shocked her, as patients walked, limped, dawdled in the hallways, the push and thrust of bodies—hands, feet, legs—the body odor and wet diapers, everywhere. There were toddlers, children, young adults, all of them dressed in the same blue serge coveralls and with regulation bowl haircuts. It was as if she had woken up in some kind of Dutch village, except for the nurses in their white uniforms and starched caps and the staff who threaded through the throng in their blue uniforms and another harried-looking doctor in a white coat who rushed upstream against the patients. Two orderlies with broad muscled shoulders and tanned faces supported a man whose face was blank as a pie plate as he flopped one foot in front of the other, like a puppet trying to walk.

Above the chaos was a portrait of a woman in a pale green Victorian dress, Frau Holtzmeier, who gazed down at them through her pince-nez across her forbidding-looking bosom as if they were great curiosities. A bronze plaque beneath the painting stated that she had helped found the school in 1898 for the “care of the unfortunate, because to care for backward children is a mission entrusted to a Christian society by God.”