

NADENE LE CHEMINANT

THE
GATES
OF
EDEN



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THIS IS A WORK of fiction inspired by the life of my great-great-grandmother, who converted to the Mormon Church and journeyed from England to the Utah Territory in 1856, pulling a two-wheeled handcart over the Rocky Mountains. Shortly after she arrived, the girl became the polygamous wife of a man almost four decades her senior.

Although my ancestor's story provided my initial inspiration, the primary characters in *The Gates of Eden* are wholly imaginary. The public characters, however, are real; they are directly quoted or abide by generally known facts about their lives and personalities. The novel is based on historical events that took place in Utah during a three-year period beginning in 1856.

The sources for chapter quotations are provided at the end of the book.



PART ONE

Hunger

1

... WE NOW INVITE you to a feast of fat things, to a land that will supply all your wants with reasonable labor; therefore let all who can procure a bit of bread, and one garment on their back ... doubt no longer, but come next year to the place of gathering ...

—“Seventh General Epistle of the Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star*



Liverpool, England, 1855

At first the neighbors just threw insults, but eventually someone landed an egg on their door, even though eggs were dear that winter.

And it wasn't just the neighbors. Josephine Bell's own brothers hurled taunts as well. Edward, raised a gentleman, forgot his gentlemanly manners and shoved the Bible in their faces, flipping through the pages so roughly he almost tore the family history.

“What do you want with the Mormons?” Edward implored, his voice caught between pleading and fury.

“Edward, our family record! You’ll rip the page,” his mother Elizabeth remonstrated. “Take care, son. And your father would not be pleased to hear you raising your voice to your mother and sister.”

Caught off guard at the mention of his recently deceased father, Edward looked sheepish for a moment, but he soon bore down again. “Your preposterous new religion—*that* is what’s ripping our family apart. I would rather see you join any church but that one.” He pushed the Bible in their faces again. “This is God’s word! Not that rot you got from the missionaries.”

“It’s fine for you to speak about God’s word!” his sister Josephine retorted. “When you and your chums tip the bottle every Saturday night until you can’t stand straight.”

“Joe Smith was a blackguard,” her brother William said earnestly, pushing his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. “I hear the Mormon prophet kept thirty wives, one for each night of the month.” He blushed at his own words, obviously not used to speaking so coarsely in front of his mother and sister.

“That will be quite enough,” Elizabeth told her sons.

An angry frown crept over Josephine’s face. The girl had heard the rumors on the street, but she knew it was best to ignore them. She was decided: The Mormon missionaries were promising a land of plenty across the ocean, and how else was she to change her fate?

And her fate? That was the problem.

Last year Josephine and her mother had started their career at the Dorsett & Company Woolen Mill in the picker room, whose dank stone walls gave the feeling of being entombed alive. The place was so dimly lit it strained their eyes. Some days they ripped buttons from used clothing, recycling dresses and trousers; other days they picked twigs and burrs and even dung from sheep’s fleece until their fingers were raw.

After three weeks, mother and daughter had been moved upstairs to join the weavers. A long bank of windows let in streams of light when it wasn’t raining outside, but the unheated room was almost as cold as the picker room, and the floor vibrated noisily as shuttles slammed yarn into long rolls of cloth.

Mr. Griggs, a boss with a scowl etched into his forehead, had made it clear when he moved them to the looms. “If you make a mistake, it comes out of your pay. If you lose an arm on your shift and can’t do your work properly, you’ll be let go, nothing to be done for it.”

Josephine tried to concentrate on keeping her arms intact, but her mind was often elsewhere. During the tedious hours from dawn to dusk, she gave herself over to visions of warm scones with clotted cream. Ten hours a day, six days a week, dreaming of beefsteak pie and waiting for the few shillings that were placed ceremoniously in her and Momma’s hands each Saturday night. The amount was not enough for them to buy butter more than once every fortnight. And although Josephine stuck wool in her ears to dull the clatter of looms, she still left each day with the cacophony ringing in her eardrums and the noise on the streets outside strangely muffled.

Leaving the mill should have offered freedom, but the walk home was no better. First, the butcher’s shop, with its row of rabbit haunches and sausages hanging in the window, and then the confectioner’s, its platters of meringues and marzipan making the girl aware of the empty ache in her stomach. The singsong cries of costermongers were so piercing they drowned out the horse hooves on the cobblestones. “Oysters! Sheep’s trotters!”

Always—more food! Even the sour stench of night soil on the streets was overpowered by the sweet fragrance of roasting chestnuts.

In the past, Josephine had assigned names to emotions. Sad, happy, impatient, amused. In the last year she had become familiar with another emotion, one strong enough to keep her awake at night: the desperation of hunger.

Each night on the walk home she lifted her skirt over fresh droppings of manure and stole sideways glances at the painted prostitutes huddled near the steps of Saint Nicholas Church. They plied their trade, keeping hunger at bay; their eyes fastened on every male stranger with a mixture of hope and dread. Josephine would pull her cloak tight against the clammy fog and hurry past street urchins selling matches and newspapers. Lads hobbling on crutches; a girl

with no arms. Josephine knew they had sacrificed limbs to a machine, making cloth for people who lived in other parts of the great city, or even across the seas. She would look straight ahead, trying to ignore their pleas.

As if I had something to give them, she thought.

In the slums of Liverpool, Josephine was discovering, it seemed to be every person for themselves.

When she and her mother had first broken the news of their decision to be baptized, Edward's face had flushed an angry crimson, and even the normally placid William squinted through his eye-glasses in disbelief. In part, Josephine thought her brothers simply seemed embarrassed. In recent weeks the girl had heard their friends laughing at them.

"Will your ma and little sister be taking a dip in the river?" Edward's oldest friend asked, rubbing his hands with pretended glee, while another friend raised a mug in the doorway of the Stag Ale House and jeered, "Here's to Joe Smith and his gold plates!"

Josephine had heard the Mormon missionaries preach about the golden plates Joseph Smith had dug from the hillside near his home in New York State. The plates were inscribed with stories of bloody battles between ancient American Indian tribes, and they had been collected into scriptures called *The Book of Mormon*. To tell the truth, Josephine herself was a bit uneasy about the origins of the book, but that didn't dampen her resolve.

When one of Edward's friends teased, "Hell, I reckon Will and Ed could go to Utah and get themselves a whole passel of wives," all Josephine heard was the tantalizing word: *Utah*. A land of abundance, the missionaries said, where manna and blessings flowed down from heaven, where no one went hungry.

Now Elizabeth beseeched her sons. "I wish you would allow us the respect to determine our own future." And then, faltering, "Perhaps the missionaries can answer your doubts." She seemed to have lost her characteristic poise in the face of their fierce disparagement.

“Doubts? Well yes, let’s talk about doubts,” Edward said, his voice high with emotion. His sister was startled; she had never heard him talk back to Momma.

“I don’t *doubt* Joe Smith’s golden book came from a runaway imagination,” said Edward, clenching his fists. “I don’t *doubt* he’s a charlatan. And I don’t doubt this foolishness will lead you to misery.”

“Edward, you’re the one who’s making a mistake,” Josephine said, more sharply than she had intended. “Momma and I are going to a better life. There’s nothing here for any of us. Surely you can see that.”

At that, the younger brother William shrugged and seemed to give up the argument. He still seemed dumbfounded by the family’s sudden poverty. A year ago, when their fate had abruptly changed, he and Edward had started at the Dorsett & Company Woolen Mill alongside their mother and sister. One week in, William left for a position at the docks and Edward stormed out in disgust. After a drunken spree that lasted a fortnight, Edward went on to a greengrocer on a backstreet near Albert Dock, and after that disappointment, worked as a compositor at a book press on Cooper Street. Now he was talking of landing a position as a pressman, although no offer had been forthcoming. In the meantime, his chums bought him cheap beer and he wore his gentleman’s frock coat and cashmere trousers with care, lest the cloth wear thin before he could afford another set.

Josephine’s older sister had taken a different approach. Meaghan seemed torn between sincere curiosity about her sister’s new beliefs, fear of where they might lead, and the suspicion her sister had been taken for a fool.

Crusted egg, the same egg thrown by the neighbor, was still on the door when Meaghan visited, and she lugged a pail of water and helped Josephine scrub the wooden panel.

“It’s a shame no one’s taught them better manners,” Meaghan said crossly, in solidarity with her sister. “Not to mention the foolishness of wasting an egg.” She took another swipe at the dried yolk.

And then: “Josie?” Meaghan cautiously asked, “Do you think ...” She concentrated on the last streak of egg white.

Josephine bit her lip, and her sister left her sentence hanging. Instead, Meaghan brightly asked, “Are you going to ask me in for tea?” She poured the cleaning water onto the cobblestones, dropped her dirty rag in the pail, and took her sister’s arm. “I bet you have some leftover champagne hidden in that pantry of yours.”

Of course, there was no champagne, and no pantry either, only a single half-empty shelf, but Josephine set out two slices of bread, a meager pat of butter, and the teapot with the broken spout.

“Scones, dear,” Josephine said with perfectly instilled etiquette. “Your favorite.” And, “Would you like a glass of champagne with that? This vintage is particularly agreeable.” She poured a cup of weak tea and offered the single chair to her sister and sat on the narrow bed—the one where she and Momma slept.

“If only the tea really was champagne!” said Meaghan, taking a sip. She waited a moment before asking again, “Josie? ... Do you think you should slow your decision to get baptized? It’s not been very long, and perhaps you’ve rushed things.”

Josephine nervously straightened the folds of her skirt.

“Reverend Phillips preaches as much truth as the Mormon missionaries,” Meaghan said. “And I don’t see anything in King James that makes mention of American Indians.”

“They are Nephites and Lamanites,” Josephine clarified, feeling a bit self-conscious. “The two tribes in the *Book of Mormon*.” She spread a thin dab of butter, keeping her eyes on the bread. If she looked at her sister, tears would spill over. “I’ve stayed up nights over this. But I’m—”

I’m hungry, that’s what, Josephine thought.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she said dully. “Bread and potatoes and bread and potatoes, and not enough of them at that. That miserable woolen mill. This flat.” She cast her hand around the room. Walls etched with water stains and grime hardened by decades of neglect. A single nail holding their few items of clothing. The window broken, the room drafty. In the alley outside, sewage and heaps of

garbage gave off a sickening stench.

“The Mormons offer a new life,” Josephine said. “Surely God would want that for me. And I believe in their gospel.”

And then she broke the news she had dreaded sharing. “Meaghan? I’m going to go to America. Momma too.”

“America!” Meaghan clutched her heart. “Josie. Oh, Josie. You never said anything about that.”

“Have some more tea,” said Josephine, offering a thin smile and trying to distract her sister.

“I don’t want more tea! Josie, what’s this about America?”

“The missionaries say in the Utah Territory life will be different—better. With enough to eat. A lot of the Saints are going. The ship leaves—” Josephine swallowed hard. “It leaves in April.”

“April! But that’s only—oh, Josie.” Meaghan knotted her hands. “I understand, I do, but the thought—” Her words tumbled out. “You’re leaving? How do you know you’ll be safe? And Momma too. And America is so far away. Will we ever see each other again?”

That was Josephine’s worst fear, the one that gnawed at her in the middle of the night, but she bravely said, “I think God has opened a door. Don’t you see? *Please* see. I think Momma’s looking for an open door too. For both of us.”

“But you have no money! How will you pay for passage?”

Josephine repeated what she had heard from the missionaries. President Brigham Young, a Vermont carpenter who had taken Joseph Smith’s place after the prophet was murdered, was offering loans through his Perpetual Emigrating Fund, loans that would enable the Saints to take passage to the Utah Territory.

“President Young said not to wait, the Church will provide loans,” Josephine said.

What she neglected to tell Meaghan was this: Their loan would only go so far; she and Momma would go on foot across the North American continent, pulling a handcart.

The morning of their baptism, Josephine’s brothers came to block the door as they tried to leave their flat. Edward spread his arms

across the threshold, shouting, "If you let them dunk you in that river, that's the last you'll see of me."

Josephine could smell his beery breath. She pushed angrily past her brother. "Then that's that. We don't need you."

To Josephine's shock, Edward wiped his hands as if he were freeing himself from both of them, and walked out. William pushed up his glasses and looked helplessly at his older brother—he had never been strong-willed and had relied on his brother for cues about how to proceed through life. "I guess it's goodbye then," William said. He tipped his hat, as if politeness could make up for callousness, and with a last timorous glance at Elizabeth, followed his brother.

The November weather was raw, and a squall threatened. Josephine sucked in her breath, looking at the River Mersey. Whitecaps flashed and the current looked too swift for baptism. Josephine looked at her mother for reassurance, but Momma was wearing a forced smile and didn't seem to notice the scene. Elizabeth hadn't said a word on the long walk there, ever since Edward had stormed out and William had crept out behind him.

"If you're not born of the water and the spirit, you can't enter into the celestial kingdom," said Brother Woodcock, standing at the side of the river. "Baptism is a sign to our Heavenly Father that you have chosen to do his will."

The missionary guided Josephine down the muddy slope, but at the water's edge she stopped mid-step. "I can't." She panicked, stumbled backward. Meaghan was right! This was happening too fast. But Brother Woodcock seemed to anticipate her apprehension, and calmly guided her one step at a time into the current, assuring the girl her sins would be washed away. Her skirt swirled and floated and she pushed it down. He dipped her into the thick brown water, its current tainted with the night soil of Liverpool, and pushed her shoulders beneath the surface. Josephine lost her balance and grabbed his hands. Without thinking, she opened her mouth and drew in a mouthful of icy water. She came up sputtering.

And then it was her mother's turn. Still wearing a rigid smile, Elizabeth waded into the river.

What sins does Momma have? Josephine wondered. What does she need to wash away?

The girl couldn't think of a single flaw. Not even an inconsequential one. She winced, thinking of the way she and Meaghan had made a habit of poking fun at Momma's insistence on manners and proper deportment. Now, while Josephine shivered with cold, Brother Woodcock immersed her gentle, gracious mother in the current.

Meaghan had shown up unexpectedly and was watching silently from beneath a willow tree on the bank. She tapped one heel nervously and clenched her hands. As Momma emerged from the water, Josephine noticed that she avoided her older daughter's eyes. When Josephine looked again, Meaghan was gone.

The walk home seemed longer than the walk there. They bent into the wind, which bit at their drenched bodies, and once they arrived the flat was not much warmer than the air outside. Josephine hung her cloak on the nail, scrubbed her hands over the bowl of cold water. She changed into her gingham, pulled two potatoes from the shelf, and took up the knife.

She and Momma were hungry and tired and half frozen, but they had been born of the water and the spirit, and now, Josephine knew, the Promised Land was theirs for the journey.