

The
Kendal Sparrow
A NOVEL OF
ELIZABETH FLETCHER

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Elizabeth Fletcher is finishing her chores in the cow shed on her aunt's tiny farm with Moe, the three year-old deaf orphan Elizabeth and her aunt have adopted, when her friend Lizzie dashes in to tell them that George Fox has arrived in their neighborhood near Kendal.

Chapter 8

Lizzie found Elizabeth in the cow barn with Moe, finishing the evening chores. “George Fox! He’s come! He’s here!” she cried, swiping at the smoke released by the hissing oil lamp. She purposely went closer to the smelly thing so Moe could see her gesture. “COME,” she signed, widely arching an arm and then pointing across the lane in the direction of her cottage. THERE. “Fetch Auntie and come over.”

Moments later, Elizabeth, Auntie, and Moe arrived at the Leavens’ front room, the space transformed. Gone were the muddy footprints and spinning wheel. The bundles of hanging herbs had all been moved to a back corner and the family chairs pushed together, a bench added. Beeswax candles were set about, giving off a magical cast the color of egg yolk and marking the evening as a special occasion. Moe dropped Elizabeth’s hand and went, baby doll Edward had given her in tow, to the beautiful bouquet of forget-me-nots, larkspur, and daisies that sat on a small, low table in the center of the room.

Elizabeth surveyed those in attendance. Thomas and Edward were there, of course, but Thomas’ parents as well. That was a surprise. Elizabeth fixed on Jennifer, thinking it was her love for her son, a full head taller than she was, that had brought the devout Presbyterian to hear what the Quaker had to say. She and Charles were dressed nicely, their expressions reserved.

Edward was talking to a stranger, a rotund, older gentleman, who stood out among the country people in his fancy waistcoat, the ribbons of his loose trousers tied evenly at the knees. *He couldn’t be the preacher, could he?* Elizabeth

wondered, her eyes fixed on his polished boots. Her eyes flitted to Kelsey and Hannah, serving beer and making small talk. She shifted her gaze again. Her breath caught. George Fox — she was sure of it. He'd come from the back room and was standing beside Edward. Not much older than Thomas but younger than Kelsey, he was clean-shaven, and his cheeks were bright from braving the wind. Whereas Charles and Thomas were dressed as men in the trades, the sleeveless leather jerkin and dark breeches of the preacher were plain and his shirt was soiled. There was a tear down the side of one of his stockings, and there were no buckles on his shoes.

Auntie tapped Elizabeth's shoulder. "Stop staring," she scolded gently. She pointed to a couple of chairs and they sat down just as Moe returned. She lifted her tiny nose to make a pretense of sniffing the air and pointed to the flowers. Then she splayed her fingers on her cheeks several times. Elizabeth saw blossoms in the gesture.

"YES," she nodded to show she understood. She copied the sign. "FLOWERS. YES." Then she moved her arms as if she were rocking a baby and pointed to the doll left by the little table.

"BABY DOLL," Moe copied enthusiastically. She punctuated the exchange with an exaggerated facial expression and ample head bobbing.

Elizabeth faced a giggling Lizzie, delighted by Moe's antics. "Did you gather those?" she asked kindly, pointing to the bouquet. "They're beautiful, Lizzie. The room's lovely."

Lizzie nodded. She seemed ready to burst. "He's soon to start, I think," she whispered, a hand squeezing Elizabeth's shoulder. She greeted Auntie and left them to sit near Thomas.

Moe was back. Doll dangling in her grasp, she raised both hands up like a toddler might to sit on Elizabeth's lap. Then,

settling there, she squirmed side to side a couple of times and purposely crossed her arms against the front of her little shift as if she were hugging herself. When Elizabeth smiled at her, she repeated the movements.

“LOVE.” Elizabeth guessed, dipping her chin to meet Moe’s gaze. “LOVE, YES,” she signed. The room seemed filled with it. She opened her heart to the possibilities of the evening, pulling Moe into her chest and rested her chin on top of her little head.

George Fox stepped forward and smiled at Elizabeth. His blue, penetrating eyes caught her ordinary brown ones, and heat crawled up her cheeks. “Thank you for joining us tonight,” he said as he gazed in welcome around the room. There was a murmur of anticipation and those who weren’t seated found a place.

The preacher remained standing, in command as he brushed aside the long, scraggly hair that hung loose from his hat and began. “I’ve been all over this region, conversing with folks such as you.” He glanced to Hannah and Lizzie, who were now sitting together on a bench beside Thomas. “I’m indeed grateful for the hospitality. Thank you.”

Lizzie sank behind her mother to be out of his sightline. She began to chew on a fingernail.

“It is wonderful to be in your midst, for as we travel, we depend on folks like you.”

It was then that Elizabeth noticed that Kelsey wasn’t in the room. Perhaps the risk of staying to listen to the “dissenter” was too great for him. She wasn’t sure. Kelsey was a reticent man, willing to listen to others but not one to share his own thoughts casually. At least not with her. He’d be the one held accountable, she considered, if George Fox brought trouble to the farmstead.

“I’m alive with holy Spirit and happy to share it,” George

was announcing. He removed his hat. “God and Christ are very real and present in this moment, are they not? Near at hand.” He seemed very sure. “Present within and among us.” He let the hat drop to the dirt floor. “Not an imitation from the imagination of ministers with their formal prayers and false preaching but moving here. Available to all of you, to all people, without charge. Free to every creature, to live in the Life and Power and Spirit as Christ did, in the beauty of the world as servants to Truth. For this Light is love, the immortal word, shining into you.”

The message seemed to galvanize those in the room. If Jennifer Holme was offended or thought George Fox blasphemous, she gave no indication of it. Elizabeth couldn't read Charles. His head was lowered, his eyes on the floor; his fingers pressed into his temples.

But how, how does one reach this Light? Elizabeth wondered. There'd been plenty enough talk of it of late, but she still didn't understand how a person found it.

As if he heard her query, George began to explain the way to the calm. “If you allow yourself, if you expect it, if you can brush aside your thinking and will accept what is available to you, you will feel goodness, shining into all your hard places, wrongful intentions, and jealous desires.”

As she listened, Elizabeth pictured a lantern lighting the way into her soul. She tried to think of an offense, the worst one, and how it'd be to face it, change it. “You'll find peace among the darkness,” George was adding. “Just as the roses and lilies grow in the thorns.” Elizabeth smiled with the familiar verse. *George Fox saw images, too — holy ones.*

“For once you have seen the evil within yourself, your bad habits, you can turn from them, turn from the dark to a living understanding of all that is divine. And be led to Truth, to be of good faith, and valiant,” George preached. “Grounded in

the holy presence. . . .” He licked his lips. “For it’s there that you find the power and strength to fiercely challenge yourself, to act to change.”

Act to change. Elizabeth rubbed a finger over her lips.

“Let Christ shine on everything you are doing,” George was saying. “It is the daily cross you bear, to stand naked and find what you are to discover. For it is the Light in your conscience, the Holy Spirit, who can speak to your condition, to remind you of the lessons Christ preached when he walked this earth. God, in the flesh, come and come again. *To counsel us in the living of our outward lives.*”

The preacher fumbled his hands and, in the pause, Elizabeth considered that if people were taught to speak to God in prayer then surely a divine message could be returned as well. *To counsel us in the living of our outward lives*, she echoed internally. She saw a swooping mass of sparrows, whirling in the afternoon sky, and she let all doubt fly with them from her heart. Never once had she felt like this in church — open, trusting, filled with hope.

It was the scrape of Charles Holme’s boots on his chair leg that distracted her and brought her back to stare at George. If he’d heard the noise, he didn’t let it divert him. He pushed at a lock of hair and started up again. “You know of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, created in the Divine image and restored to it?” He swiveled his eyes about the room. “You, too, good people, you, too, can be restored as they were, to the original pure nature of humankind. You can root yourself in love, compassion, and justice. Free yourself from a tradition that has lost its way.”

Elizabeth raised her chin, her lips thin, and held his eyes.

“Like many of you,” George said as if just to her, “I’ve fasted and sat in solitude since I was a child, saying daily prayers and pondering Bible verses that I felt might hold

answers for me. But I tell you now, it isn't the written verses, but the Christ, the Holy Spirit, moving through them, that can inform your life. It matters not whether you can read. Let your experience be your truth." His voice rang out and he let go of her. "Christ will reach you if you're willing and patient. So, come," he suggested, lowering his voice. "Come into the family of love. Be still and be counseled." He sat down and leaned back into the high, elegant chair that Kelsey had artistically carved from the lower part of a thick tree stump. Charles Holme got abruptly to his feet and pulled at Jennifer's elbow so that she, too, stood up. He herded her out of the cottage, the door slamming behind them.

Elizabeth angled her head, trying to see if Moe was asleep, her limbs dangling limp from her lap. She adjusted the sleeping child and turned back to George. His eyes were closed, his face slackened, his shoulders slumped. His hands rested on his knees and his feet were solidly planted on the swept dirt floor. She supposed he was well-practiced in the worship of Friends and could easily find his comfort in it. She copied his posture, relaxed her eyelids, and allowed his form to blur as she drifted inward.

It was sometime later when Elizabeth heard George stand, that she realized she'd been in a calm, thoughtless space. It surprised her. She opened her eyes to see the preacher briefly offer his hand to Edward and then turn to the rest of them. "Friends," he announced. "I'm thankful you've made time in your evening to meet me and experience our worship." He went to stand behind the stranger. "Seems time for a bit of a break. Then I'd like you to hear what Arthur Parnell here has to say."

Chapter 9

Elizabeth left the buzz of conversations in the Leavens' front room to run to the Fletcher's privy. When she returned across the lane, she briefly introduced herself to the merchant, Arthur Parnell, trying not to fix on the way his hair was slicked back with some kind of oil from his wide forehead. Before they'd said much to each other, George asked everyone to circle up the chairs and give their attention to him.

Elizabeth found a spot with Moe between Auntie and Lizzie. George took a chair beside Arthur and gave an encouraging pat to his back.

"Hello, everyone. I'm, I'm Mister Parnell," Arthur stuttered uneasily, as he rose. "I, I was in Kendal on business from Retford, asking about Quakers . . . er, Friends . . . in the area. Was directed out this way." He clenched and unclenched his fingers in front of his clean, tailored shirt.

Elizabeth gave Hannah a worried look.

"I, I mean no harm. I was careful as I rode out," Arthur added quickly, catching Elizabeth's expression. "I had to take the chance of it. Wanted whoever was out here to know of my son, James, James Parnell. We worry for him. My wife and I. Don't know his whereabouts, you see. He's attracted to you sorts, and, and I thought maybe your paths would cross with his."

You sorts? Elizabeth repeated in her mind, disliking the expression. It occurred to her that if she saw Arthur Parnell in the market cross, he'd expect a curtsy from her.

Arthur scratched his head and started anew. "What I mean to say is that James is off preaching somewhere and we haven't heard from him for quite some time." Arthur ran his hands down his waistcoat. "He's already run away from home a

couple of times, fell in with Seekers and now. . . .” Arthur rubbed at his neck. “He and I have had a rocky go of it.”

“Has he met George?” asked a frowning Thomas. He scratched at his stubble of a beard.

“He has,” said Arthur. “Sent to find him by Nottingham sympathizers. They told him he’d find Fox in prison in Carlisle.” He checked with George who returned a thin smile of confirmation. “He walked ten days straight . . . alone and out in the wild . . . to reach the man he thought would understand his struggle.”

Thomas gave a soft whistle.

“’Tis true,” George interjected, taking their attention for a moment. “He was limping and ragged when he came to me. The jailers, who’d turned away countless of other visitors, thought him mad, that his endless prattle would be annoying. So they let him visit.”

“Fox . . . er, George . . . tells me that he and James conversed all that whole day,” added Arthur with more confidence in his telling. “James, of course, had never been among the lice and stench of a cell where men and women are thrown together with no chamber pots or privacy for it.”

Murmurs fluttered around the room, none but George ever having seen a cell either.

“Still, I dare say, when James came home after that, he was happier than I’d seen him in a long while. Would sing in an odd manner around the place. Said he learned the way of it from George.”

“He did, did he?” interrupted Thomas a second time. He bumped Edward’s shoulder and smirked soundlessly. “How’s it go?”

Arthur nodded to him, wanting to please, Elizabeth thought. “Find holy Spirit,” he sang softly. “Find holy Spirit in your heart. Find holy Spirit . . .” He stopped the toneless

attempt. "A simple thought, repeated over and over," he explained awkwardly and then went on. "James was worried for his champion. Told us he was held in a place crawling with maliciousness. He left us again to go to London. Requested audience with the Lord Protector to ask if he might be allowed to switch places with George. His pluck got him admitted but the Lord Protector didn't allow the switch." Arthur paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts.

"It was during that time, the last time James was home, that he told of being moved to preach in the way of Friends. There was no arguing with him about it. And, you know, 'tis so dangerous on the routes. Gangs of highway men, bandits, all about."

"You've heard nothing about him?" Auntie interrupted, commiserating with the worried father.

"We hear a rumor occasionally. My wife especially when she does her marketing. James was arrested at some point and lay in a stale, dank cell for two nights before a jury acquitted him. He got word to us. Said he was driven out of town and must now carry a pass that describes him as a rogue." Arthur stared down at his shiny boots for a long moment. "I feel the shame of it, but, but he's our son . . . and that's why I've come to you."

George stood up. "If it be us who find him or hear word, we'll convey your worry and encourage him to write. If it's you who sees him first, tell him you've found his friend, George Fox, and he'd be welcome to join my travel. He can reach me through Swarthmoor Hall in Ulverston. It's southwest of here in the Furness area of Lancaster. Home to Judge Fell."

Chapter 10

Moe felt the knock on the door through her feet and slid off her little chair to open the latch. It was Edward.

“George’s going to tell a bit about himself if you’d like to come hear him,” he said politely.

Elizabeth gave him a little grin. “We’ll meet you there.” She set about to clean Moe’s face and hands from breakfast and ready the child. There was still mist on the ground when the three of them joined the others at the Leavens’.

Neither Thomas’ parents nor Arthur Parnell were among those gathered but Kelsey was there. He came to the Fletchers. “I’ll take Moe with me outside if you’re wanting. She can help with my chores,” he offered. He reached for a lump of sugar he carried for his plow horse and held it out to the child. A happy Moe took the sweet and followed him outside.

“Come, sit, join us,” George called over to Elizabeth and Auntie. “I’ve a tract I’ve written if you’d like a copy.” He held it up as Elizabeth and Auntie found chairs. *He must know we can’t read*, thought Elizabeth, not reaching for the pamphlet. She was thankful when Hannah distracted them with mugs of the light beer Kelsey made.

“I’d like to tell you about a woman, Elizabeth . . .” George began, giving Elizabeth a soft chuckle. “Elizabeth Hooten.” He glanced at Hannah and then Auntie. “When I was about the age of this one,” he reached for Edward, “I walked to Skegby in Nottinghamshire, searching for answers to the things that bothered me. I’d found none who could speak to my condition and was greatly depressed. A kind minister directed me to a woman of note, describing her as a ‘frustrated Baptist who was allowed to preach.’ He told me I’d find her in Mansfield.

“And I did find her — Elizabeth Hooton, a remarkable older woman. She and I spent much of the next days together. She knew how to ask probing queries to get at the heart of things and didn’t judge.” George stretched back his chest and then let his shoulders drop. “Imagine this woman, the wife of an important businessman, busy with her family and home, who found time for me when no one else had.” He chuckled softly. He peeked again at Hannah and Auntie.

“Weak and ill-formed as my ideas were at the time, Elizabeth Hooten saw merit in them. She listened deeply to what I was trying to tell her, allowed me to clarify my meanings. When I said my thoughts aloud to her, I realized that I knew for sure that it was only Christ who could speak to my condition, answers given to me when I listened within for guidance. My heart leaped with joy when I saw that I was to go out and preach the good news, that I was to follow my leading.”

Leading, Elizabeth repeated to herself, tasting the word. George had trusted the still, small voice within. *Like with Moe . . .* she realized. She’d felt compelled to do something for the child, a sureness to act, *a leading*.

“Everyone can act as the Holy Spirit directs,” George continued.

Everyone, repeated Elizabeth. She heard the songbirds calling outside. *Everyone. Everyone. Everyone can speak as the Holy Spirit gives them utterance. Everyone.* Her heart was beating wildly. *If George Fox can find answers in himself, then I can, too. That’s what he’s been trying to tell us.* She saw a key open a door in the blackness, a nameless force tearing into her. What he’d experienced was available to them all.

She came back to him. “Elizabeth Hooten introduced me to a group of worshippers who met in Spirit and in Truth,” George was saying. “Without clergy.” He took a sip from his

mug. “It was wonderful, really. I’d only ever sat alone and I flourished in the worship in Mansfield.” He licked the foam from his upper lip. “I remember that during one of those meetings, Elizabeth’s prophecy was about the injustice of the poor, them expected to tithe and be punished unfairly if they didn’t. My heart opened to the Truth of it and I let images of the struggling and suffering wander in me, sure the wrong shouldn’t be forgot. I sank in the quiet around the message, glad that no one spoke after it was delivered. I was moved to speak myself, Elizabeth Hooten saying the silence deepened with my message.”

“Was it the first meeting for worship then, in the way of Friends?” Thomas asked.

“The first settled meeting? Yes, I believe so,” George allowed.

“And she was the first convinced?” asked Hannah.

“Perhaps,” considered George.

There was a long silence and then people began to stretch and stand to mingle and attend to their needs. Hannah and Lizzie served a nice cake and refilled mugs. When they regrouped again, George wanted to tell about what had happened to him after he’d left Elizabeth Hooten and had started to preach publicly. “I went into Nottingham,” he began. “And was arrested for it. I didn’t fight it but went calmly with the constable and then before the judge. He sentenced me to jail — my first time.” He looked to those to his right side and then to his left. “But good can, and did, come from it, for when I was alone with the jailer, he apologized for all the goings on and wanted to discuss how I’d come to our ways. We talked long into the night, he encouraged me with food and drink — me in the cell and he just outside it. We tried earnestly to understand the deepest parts of each other, each calling our ideas and experiences by

words that resonated for us though they weren't the ones the other used: God . . . Lord . . . Christ Jesus . . . holy Spirit . . . Seed." George articulated each term carefully. "Each of these had bubbled up in me during worship or flashed in me at other times. I realized that the naming is not the center of it, that it didn't change my experience if the jailer used words that brought him comfort."

Light, Spirit. Yes. Elizabeth decided. They weren't the names she associated with church — God, Father, the man up in heaven. She took the ownership that George offered, shivering with the joy that fell over her.

"In the morning," said George, "I was told that the jailer had sought out the judge for my release — and it'd been granted. It seems both men were equally concerned that 'a man of God' had been imprisoned. My freedom was a surprise, to be sure, but it was an even greater jolt when the jailer invited me to his home, wanting his family to hear me out." George's face softened with the recollection. "I spent a dear night with them . . . and when I departed, the sheriff, his wife, and his children were convinced." He paused and, in the space, Thomas clapped softly. George stared over at him and he stopped.

"I mark that time as the end of my years as a troubled lad. Done with blood-letting and worthless ministers." He put a hand on his knee and stood. "I'd experienced an ocean of pain and trouble, but I saw an infinite ocean of Light and Love that flowed over it and would be with me always." He looked about the room. "That ocean of Light will flow over your troubles, too, lift you up and show you the way."

For her part, Elizabeth imagined a swath of clear sky stretching across the hillsides after the dark of a summer storm. She let the blue color run through her. "I see images of guidance, too," she whispered aloud, her hands sliding

down her hips and her heart galloping. “I see the birth of a new lamb, the gift of it making us happy and hopeful.” She snuck a peek at Auntie who raised her eyebrows, then gave a smile.

Elizabeth’s simple proffering hung in the room for all to quietly consider. After a while George rose again. “Mind the Light working in your conscience, the Bible of your heart, for the answers to all you are asking are within. You need no person, creed, or hymn to find your way. The true preacher stands at the pulpit within you. Let your doubt of it be hushed and fly away.”

Elizabeth’s chest felt as if it were on fire. *I need no one to tell me that what George Fox says is true*, she thought. The anxious place in her heart shifted and a new understanding replaced it. *It’s the Holy Spirit I hear in the wind, in the spaces between the leaves and in the whisper of the rain. . . . I am asked to stand naked, stripped and uncomfortable in it all. I am convinced*. She heard the sound of shoes lightly dancing towards her, Moe tapping on her skirts.

“EAT?” the girl signed, a hand tapping at her mouth, her eyebrows raised. When Elizabeth didn’t respond, Moe turned to Auntie. “EAT,” she mimed again. Others were rustling and rising, too. Auntie took Moe’s hand down from her face, stood, and motioned toward the door. She didn’t suggest Elizabeth come with them.

Lizzie came quickly to Elizabeth’s side. “I’m convinced. I am,” she whispered hoarsely. “It only took George Fox to share what he did for me to know it.” Thomas and Edward were staring over at them from across the room, their eyes twinkling.

“I am as well, Lizzie. . . .” Elizabeth stuttered, bliss trapping her.