The Kendal Sparrow
A NOVEL OF
ELIZABETH FLETCHER

Barbara Schell Luetke
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.
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 curtsey 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.
Part II
Conviction
1654
Chapter 11

George was wanting Thomas to go along to Durham with him. Edward and his friend, John Audland, would be with them, too. The women weren’t invited.

“If there’s ‘that of God in everyone,’” Elizabeth complained to Lizzie, the two of them sitting on the bench in the Leavens’ garden, “Why weren’t we asked to go as Thomas was?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Because we’re women?” she scoffed.

“Would you leave Moe, so soon?” asked Lizzie, dodging the claim. “Who knows how long they’ll be gone.”

Elizabeth considered the remark. Moe was just settling in, learning the routine of the days at the farmstead, building trust with Auntie, the Leavenses, and the Holmes. How would she have explained her leaving to the child? How would she explain it to herself? That she and Lizzie were going to stroll off for four or five days, with no plan for what they would eat or where they would sleep, to witness George — and maybe Edward and John — preach? A fledgling, unschooled, she doubted she and Lizzie would be much help; they’d probably only be in the way. No, Elizabeth finally decided. She let go of her ire. She was happy enough to wait at the farmstead to hear how it went, to sleep in her own bed and snuggle with Moe.

When Edward returned a week later, he came eagerly to find her. The crowds had welcomed them, he reported. George, Edward, and John had all taken a turn to preach to the hundreds they’d attracted. Thomas had listened, rocking in silence nearby. He’d been so taken with the messages that he could be seen visibly shaking and contorting himself. “He’s enthusiastic and willing,” espoused Edward. “A bit zealous, but it’s good, it’s good. He’s learning the way of Friends.”

When Elizabeth asked Thomas about it, tears streamed down his cheeks. He blubbered through telling her that he’d felt blessed, wholly blessed, as he’d stood with George and Edward and John. He was sure he was to do the holy work.

“What does your Da have to say about it?” Elizabeth carefully asked.
Thomas was still supping and sleeping at his parents’ cottage as far as she knew. “You’re not weaving or selling at all anymore? You’ve ended it?” she asked. She hadn’t seen Charles since the first night George had come to them, and although she didn’t feel close to him, he’d always been kind to her. She hoped he wasn’t going to disown Thomas as Edward’s parents had done.

“He’s angry, my Da,” admitted Thomas, scowling. “Says he’s lost his only son and business partner to a man who’s preaching against the Church, a man who’s spending his time wandering the countryside instead of helping his family.” Thomas folded his arms and lifted his chin. “I’m to preach with Friends. I’m sure of it.” In the next days, he spent large parts of the day pacing the Holmes’ garden, arms whirling like a Ranter, calling out his “prophecy.” All talk of marriage, as far as Elizabeth knew, was suspended.

“And will we be able to preach?” asked Lizzie innocently one afternoon. Thomas gave her a cockeyed gaze. “You heard George tell of Elizabeth Hooten. She’s a woman, isn’t she?” He threw his hands in the air, irritated. “One of the first of our preachers. Anne Audland and Mabel Camm, too.”

“But I’ve never heard of a woman preaching in Kendal,” Elizabeth countered, coming to Lizzie’s aid.

“Well, that’s right,” Thomas allowed. “The time has come when God is reigning supreme in our hearts, and who’s to say what will happen next? Christ has come again among us to do remarkable good.” He seemed to be quoting someone else. He clasped his hands dramatically at his heart, his eyes unfocused on an imagined audience.

Elizabeth and Lizzie stared at him. “He has?” Lizzie asked, head cocked and leaning forward.

“He has. Inwardly,” Thomas clarified. “And if I am to be a spokesman for God, I must practice my ministry.” He turned from them and began pacing again.

“We’re going to ride to Swarthmoor Hall,” Edward told Elizabeth a day or so later. He was freshly shaven and wearing a clean dark shirt atop his breeches. Margaret Fell, the matron there, had sent funds so that George and Edward could lease horses and ride to the Ulverston manor. “We’re
going to discuss a plan to blanket the country with the Truth,” explained Edward. He stood tall and confident.

“And Thomas is going, too?” asked Elizabeth, trying not to sound assuming.

“I haven’t heard that he is,” Edward said.

“And will it be safe for you all to be there?”

“Oh yes,” Edward assured her, his eyes twinkling. “Swarthmoor is the home of Judge Fell. He’s climbed the ranks of judges and was a member of Parliament until only a few years back. He quit because he doesn’t approve of Cromwell thinking he’s God,” the lad scowled. “And Margaret’s a landowner in her own right; well respected in the area.”

Things reverted back into the familiar farm routines after George and Edward left. As it turned out, Thomas wasn’t invited along but he was seldom at the loom either. One day when Elizabeth didn’t see him about, she went over to talk with Jennifer, out in her garden hanging newly dyed squares of cloth.

Jennifer seemed relieved to have George and Edward gone away and not influencing her son. Perhaps Charles Holme was also pleased to have his partner occasionally back by his side, although Elizabeth saw Thomas walking down the road toward Kendal and then returning, two or three times a day. He was anxious to hear about Swarthmoor, she supposed.

He didn’t have to wait but a week. It happened that he was practicing out by the Holmes’ workhouse when he saw the two men riding down the lane toward the farmstead. Elizabeth was out in the vegetable garden and ran to meet them. By the time they’d dismounted and Thomas had lashed the horses, Elizabeth and Lizzie were both bunched up with him to greet them. “New hat?” Elizabeth asked Edward. It was all she could do not to take his hand.

“Margaret Fell thought the wide-brim more practical than my cap,” explained Edward. “She used money from the Kendal Fund, set up to support those who travel.”

Elizabeth wondered if it’d stung his pride to receive the charity. After all, if his parents had been speaking to him, they could’ve readily provided whatever he needed.

“And so, you made a plan?” Hannah wanted to know. She’d come out of