



Learning

to

Let

Go



Elizabeth Pina



**She was precious. Sweet. Loving. Perfect. He couldn't help it. He kissed her.**

The touch of their lips was brief, gentle, and her eyes opened even wider. It thrilled him to watch that pretty pink flush spread across her cheeks. He loved her. Found her irresistible. She didn't pull back or move her hand but stood and studied him. A smile lit up her face.

No words would come, so he kissed her again, squeezing her hand as he did. To his joy, her fingers tightened in return, while her other hand moved up to rest lightly on his upper arm. He could have stood and kissed her all night, but when he squeezed her hand even tighter, she stepped back and exhaled.

"Wow. That was—nice. Thank you. It's great to see you."

"I can't tell you how indebted I am for your help, Emma." He still held her hand and pressed it to his lips. He needed Emma. "The children adore you, and it's wonderful to come home when you're there. I wish you were always there for us." His next sentence tumbled out without much forethought. "Marry me, please."

She looked stunned. Her eyes searched his face, but she didn't answer and seemed to be waiting for him to say something else. Marisa had laughed and thrown her arms around his neck in excitement. Why was Emma hesitating? Didn't she love him?

"I'll never hurt you, I promise. You can finish school and be a teacher or anything else. I'll take care of everything and make sure you're happy. We need you, Marisa."

Emma's face paled, and her eyes filled with tears. "I'm not Marisa."



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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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## Dedication

To my family for their support, my friends for their encouragement, and everyone else that has coached and guided me to success.



## **Praise for Learning to Let Go**

*Learning to Let Go* is the winner of the 2008 Southern Heat contest and the 2008 Gotcha! Contest





# 1

Of all the places to get a flat tire.

Dr. Keith Sullivan surveyed the graffiti-adorned buildings and regretted his decision to cut through a shabby neighborhood. He should have put up with the construction on the main highway. He punched the car's SOS button and fought irritation. After ten hours in surgery, all he wanted to do was get home and relax.

Roadside Assistance. Polite as always. Not as helpful as usual. "I'm sorry, sir. It will be forty-five minutes to an hour before anyone can get to you."

Keith pulled the key out of the ignition and his cell from its cradle. "Never mind. I'll take care of it myself. Thanks for trying."

"Please call us back if you change your mind, sir. Have a good evening."

Keith got out of his BMW. The skies were dark, but at least he'd made it to a lamppost. The cool, damp early November air had him reaching back into the car for a jacket. He stretched and stood for a moment, glancing around him.

The street was quiet on a Sunday evening. A police neighborhood storefront on the other side caught his attention. The miniature substation represented the Houston mayor's noble attempt to bring law and order to the outskirts of the city. For a moment he considered asking them for help.

They had better things to do. He opened the trunk, took out the tools and spare, and loosened the lug nuts before jacking up the car. The worthless tire removed, he picked up the replacement.

Music floated through the evening air. Not loud and jarring to disturb the solitude, but a joyful rendition of "Shout to the Lord." A cold hand clutched his heart as he listened to his wife's favorite song, and he couldn't help but look around to see where it came from.

A small church stood behind him. Light shone through the cracked stained glass windows, piercing the gloomy shadows. In spite of himself, he relaxed and hummed along. Marisa would've loved it. She always enjoyed singing during Sunday morning services. When he could, he went to make her happy and see her smile. But he hadn't been to church in over two years.

Not since her funeral.

He glanced at his watch and grimaced. He put down the wrench then pulled out his cell and pressed the number four key to speed-dial his home phone. "Mrs. Schneider. I have a flat tire and will be a little late." He propped the phone between his ear and shoulder to allow both hands to replace the lug nuts. "Tell the children I'll be home in thirty minutes." He slid the phone back in his pocket.

Peter. Rebekah. Too young to understand. Keith had promised Marisa he'd take care of them and keep them happy. It wasn't working. No matter what he gave them, they were still sad. Especially Peter. Keith's son lived in an invisible cocoon, impossible to penetrate with anything except the lure of video games. There had to be another way to get through to

him.

The spare in place, he stood and used a rag to wipe the worst of the oil off his hands. The melody ended and the bleak misery of the evening settled around him. The stained glass windows again caught his eye. Their glow spread light and hope through the darkness. Things that could give his family a new beginning.

All he needed was a way to make it happen.

He tossed everything into the trunk and slammed it shut. He'd get someone in the hospital garage to fix the tire tomorrow.

If only he could find someone to fix his life.



“Good night, Daddy.” Rebekah obediently kissed his cheek and took Mrs. Schneider’s hand to go upstairs. Her black hair curled around her small shoulders and cascaded over pink pajamas. When she smiled, she looked like her mother, and Keith found it hard to refuse her anything.

“Night, Dad,” Peter murmured as he followed his sister and their nanny. He shuffled his way up the stairs, eyes downcast. Marisa said he’d grow up to be like his dad, his dark hair straight and his body tall and lean. Only his rich chocolate eyes resembled her.

Keith couldn’t remember the last time Peter displayed any affection to anyone. He’d only been six when Marisa became ill, and Peter hadn’t understood why his father couldn’t cure her. Life was so simple through the eyes of a child and death so unfathomable. He fought the urge to chase his son, pick him up, and swing him in a circle until Peter collapsed in a giggling

heap.

The way he used to when Marisa was with them.

Everyone said he would get over losing his mother. In time. How long would it take?

Keith stared at the top of the stairs for a moment and then went back into his study. His cell vibrated, alerting him to a message. They'd postponed his morning surgery. Again. His fist clenched as he thought of the tiny baby, attached to multiple tubes and wires and in desperate need of a shunt to drain fluid from her head. Every time he scheduled her surgery, she'd run a fever. Or break out in a rash. Or something. Her parents and others prayed nonstop outside the neonatal intensive care unit. To no avail.

God wasn't listening.

He didn't miss his wallet until he got ready for bed and noticed it wasn't in his back pocket. He went into the garage to look in his car. Not there either. After going through the evening's events, he realized he must have dropped it when changing the tire. In an unusual display of frustration, he slammed the door behind him as he strode back into the house.

Mrs. Schneider called from the kitchen. "Is everything okay, Dr. Sullivan?"

He took a deep breath. "Yes, everything is fine. Good night, Mrs. Schneider." He wandered into his study and sat at his desk, rubbing his forehead with the heel of his hand.

That wallet was Marisa's last gift and filled with photographs of her and the children. Those were more important than the amount of money it contained, the two credit cards, or even his driver's license.

Remembering the small police station, he picked up his phone to make a call. A couple of transfers later,

he spoke to the officer on duty.

"Officer Michalski. How can I help you?"

"This is Dr. Keith Sullivan. I need to report a missing wallet."

"Missing? Was it lost or stolen?"

"I changed my tire earlier this evening, almost right across the street from you. I think it fell out of my pocket."

"I'll have someone take a look and file a report, but I have to tell you the chances of it being returned are about nil. Describe the wallet and its contents for me, please."

"Dark brown leather tri-fold with the initials KTS on the outside. It had several family photographs, my driver's license, American Express card, a bank card, and some cash. Some business cards as well."

"How much cash?"

A colleague had just paid Keith for a couple of golf clubs. "I don't know exactly. Maybe four hundred dollars." He rubbed his hand across his face and tried to keep his voice even. "But the money isn't important. I'd be happy to get back the wallet and the photographs. Everything else can be easily replaced."

"Have you canceled the cards?"

"No. Not yet."

"I need a contact phone number so we can call you if anything is turned in. I recommend you cancel the cards right away."

"I'll do that, thank you, Officer." Keith gave his cell phone number and hung up before checking his computer for the information to call American Express.

It was almost midnight when his phone rang. Shaking the sleep from his eyes, he swung his legs out of bed and answered automatically. "Sullivan."

"Keith. It's Vince."

Adrenaline made him fully alert. His colleague calling at this time of night was bad news.

Keith snapped on the light. "What happened?"

A long and frustrated sigh preceded Vince Chapra's answer. "She died. The Patterson baby. Twenty minutes ago."

"Oh no," Keith whispered.

"She started having seizures and her heart stopped. The team brought her back a couple of times, but then her parents said to let her go. They unhooked her, and her mom held her until it was over."

Keith sat on the edge of his bed and dug a thumb into his throbbing temple. He'd been doing this for too long and knew better than to get involved. But he'd found this little girl special, despite her handicaps.

Vince sighed again. "You okay?"

"Yes."

No.

"I'd have waited until the morning but thought you'd want to know right away. Can you handle Mrs. Patterson? She's in the room next door and asked to talk to you."

Like he could refuse. "Sure." Keith steeled himself for an emotional outburst.

It didn't come. Only a loud sniff. "Dr. Sullivan?"

"Hello, Rosie. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be. Anna is with Jesus now. No surgery required in heaven. But I wanted to thank you for everything you've done."

All he'd ever done was reschedule her surgery. God had never allowed the baby to be well enough for Keith to save her life. All he could manage was another, "I'm so sorry."

It sounded like Rosie Patterson was blowing her nose. "My baby is happy and out of pain. Don't be sorry for her. Or us. You take care of yourself, and God bless you."

Vince came back on the phone. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. Try and get some sleep."

Keith threw the phone on the bed beside him and stared at the wall. No sleep now. Without knowing why, he tiptoed up to Rebekah's room and watched her for several minutes. Marisa had hung a small angel from the headboard of each child's bed. A sign of God's protection. A wave of bitterness swept through Keith. God hadn't protected Anna Patterson. Did He watch over Rebekah?

Keith doubted it.



"Good morning, sweetheart." Keith kissed the top of his daughter's head. She grinned, displaying a mouthful of milky Cheerios. He turned to his plump and gray-haired housekeeper. "Good morning, Mrs. Schneider."

"Good morning, Dr. Sullivan. Do you need me to get you anything?"

"I'll help myself, thanks. Good morning, Peter." Keith pulled a yogurt out of the refrigerator and a muffin from the box on the table.

Peter grunted in response, his eyes not leaving his plate. Shoulders hunched over the table, he attacked his waffles. Peter rarely spoke, at breakfast or anywhere else.

Mrs. Schneider tapped on the table. "Hurry up now, Rebekah. We must get Peter to school."

Rebekah picked up her bowl to drink the last mouthful of milk, and her prim and proper caregiver pursed her lips in vexation.

Keith smiled at his daughter. Marisa had always let Peter do that, and Keith couldn't stand to correct Rebekah, even if it did drive Mrs. Schneider crazy.

Mornings with Marisa. The radio would play Christian music, and she would sing with Peter. Rebekah would join in and bounce in her high chair, scattering Cheerios everywhere.

Chaos, love, and laughter.

Now, only silence and efficiency.

"I have time to take Peter," Keith said to a surprised Mrs. Schneider. "Get your jacket, son, and tell me when you're ready." Peter didn't even look at him. How could he break through that invisible wall?

Keith walked into his living room to stare at the portrait hanging over the fireplace. What had he let happen to Peter, to his family?

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. The loving face of his beautiful raven-haired wife smiled back at him. She would've known what to do for their child.

Peter stared out of the window during the short ride to school. Keith tried in vain to think of something an eight-year-old would like to talk about. He had no idea what that might be. "What's your favorite subject in school these days?"

His son shrugged and stared at his hands, fidgeting with the straps of his backpack. "Nothing, really."

"What about math or history? Your grades are good in both."

"They're okay, I guess."

Keith tried again. "How about we pick up one of

your friends and go play miniature golf or something this weekend? Why don't you find out if Anjay can come?"

An angry face turned to glare at him. "Anjay moved to Dallas. I told you months ago."

Keith mentally kicked himself. "I'm sorry, Peter, I forgot. What about one of your other friends?"

Peter clenched his fists, his face red. "I don't have any other friends. And I don't care. I don't want to play stupid golf. Leave me alone."

They pulled into the drop-off line at the school, and Keith let out a deep breath. "I'm going to get us an appointment with Mrs. Perez."

"I don't want to see a stupid counselor." Peter reached to open the car door.

"Why not? I thought you liked her."

Peter shook his head. "She wants me to talk about Mom. I don't want to talk about her."

An agitated teacher rapped on the window. "Hurry up. You're holding up the line."

Peter made a speedy exit from the vehicle.

"Have a good day, son."

The slam of the car door drowned out any answer. Keith stared after him as he marched, head up and ready to battle the world, into the small, private elementary school. The teacher tapped the window again, and Keith got out of her way.

He was almost at the hospital when his phone rang. He hit the car's hands-free button to answer.

"Dr. Sullivan, this is Officer Recine, HPD. I'm at the Acton Heights neighborhood station and happy to report your wallet has been turned in."

Keith hit the brakes and turned into a nearby parking lot. "What? Are you sure?"

“Yes, sir, it has your ID. Stop by and pick it up when you get a chance.”

Keith couldn't help a smile. “I'll be there in fifteen minutes.”

He made a left turn and drove as quickly as traffic and speed limit allowed. After parking across the street, he almost ran into the station.

Officer Recine handed him the wallet and a release form. Keith stared at the unmarked surface before opening it in disbelief. It looked as if all of the money was there, plus the photographs and everything else. He turned to the smiling peace officer. “Who found this? I'd like to give them a reward.”

A shout to the room behind them soon received an answer.

“Danny Morelli.”

Keith signed the form. “Do you have an address for Mr. Morelli?”

Recine chuckled. “Danny's ten. He'll be at school now, but most afternoons you can find him at the small house beside the church at the end of the block. Go there about four and ask for Emma Chandler. She'll know where he is. In all probability, you can thank her for his honesty.”

Keith thanked the officer and left, counting the notes out of curiosity. The more than four hundred dollars was still there. What sort of boy would live in such a neighborhood but not take any of the cash? Who was this Emma to compel him to do so?



Emma put the last tray of oatmeal cookies in the oven and set the timer for twelve minutes. She

surveyed the disaster around her with a sigh. Martha Stewart's kitchen would never look like this. Bowls and spoons, gooey eggshells, dough-rimmed cookie cutters, and something sticky on the floor. Everything decorated with a thin layer of flour and sugar. She hoped cleanliness was not as close to godliness as her grandmother always told her it was. Otherwise, she'd be in trouble. She filled the sink with soap and hot water to start the not-so-fun portion of her baking routine.

Danny looked eagerly at the previous batch. "They smell good. Can I have one yet?"

"No, let them cool a bit more. Are you sure you don't have any homework?"

Danny shook his head as a girl ran in and threw her backpack in the corner.

Fifteen-year-old Jordan brushed long black hair back from her face and pulled a band off her wrist to capture the wayward locks in a ponytail. "I do. Can you help me with my algebra?"

"Of course I can," Emma said.

Several other children filed in, complaining about homework. Talking and giggling, they pulled books out of bags, sat at the large kitchen table, and, with one voice, clamored for cookies.

Emma threw her hands in the air in mock defeat. "Okay, I give up. You can each have two now and another one later. Everyone get some milk or juice to go with them. Jordan and Danny, help the younger ones for me, please. Someone pull a few pieces of paper towel off the roll, and" —she paused for dramatic effect— "what do we do first?"

The chorus hit her. "Wash our hands!"

She smiled at the delighted children, glad she