

CAMRON WRIGHT

A NOVEL

LETTERS FOR
EMILY

"Clever, heartwarming, and heartfelt, *Letters for Emily* is a novel every member of the family should read. I love it!"

—MARY HIGGINS CLARK



CAMRON WRIGHT

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FOR
EMILLY

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藏书章



POCKET BOOKS

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HEARTWARMING PRAISE FOR *LETTERS FOR EMILY*

“Eloquent . . . powerful and gripping.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“I absolutely loved it! Telling the story through the poems, the passwords, and the letters was enthralling, wonderful, and unique. . . . A warm, inspirational story [that] leaves you feeling more grateful for love and family. Chills. Tears. Fabulous!”

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“Readers will enjoy it! Love, compassion and forgiveness find a home in *Letters for Emily*.”

—James Michael Pratt, *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Last Valentine*

A SELECTION OF THE DOUBLEDAY BOOK CLUB

*To Alicyn,
Who believes in me, more than I believe in myself,
and
Nathan, Trevor, Danika, and Corbin
“See, when Dad’s at the computer, he is working.”*

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CHAPTER *One*

My BED IS FRIGID AND THE ROOM DARK. I'VE PLACED many blankets on my bed, but they don't stop the cold Wasatch wind that penetrates to my bones. I stare through the window at my snow-covered plants and realize I will miss my garden. I will miss the way the carrots emerge from seeds not much bigger than dust. I will miss thinning beets in the late spring. I will miss digging for new potatoes in the fall. I will miss harvesting buckets of zucchini for unsuspecting neighbors who will then have no idea what to do with them; and I will even miss watching the plants turn brown and die each year as winter sets in.

My garden has taught me that every living thing must die. I have watched it happen now for scores of years—I only wish I could have a few more summers in my garden with Emily.

I have other grandchildren, and I don't mean to play favorites, but the others live far away and seldom visit.

Emily visits with her mother every Friday. Though our ages are more than seven decades apart, Emily and I are best friends.

My name is Harry, a laughable name for a man who's been completely bald most of his life. But, hairy or not, it's my name nonetheless. It was my father's name before me, and his father's before him. I wish I could say it was a name I passed on to my own son. I can't. When he was born and it came time to give him a name, we chose Bob instead. He rarely visits; he never writes. Now, on occasion, I wish I'd named him Harry as well.

Strangely, I'm not bitter about what is happening to me. Why should I be? I am no better than anyone else. I am no wiser, no stronger, and no smarter. (Okay, I am smarter than ol' man Ross who lives next door but that's beside the point.) So then, why not me?

I hope to go quickly so I'll be remembered as Grandpa Harry and not as the person I'm becoming. I fear I'll be remembered as a contemptible, cranky old man and that thought sickens me. The fact is, I'm losing my mind. I have Alzheimer's—an insidious disease that causes the nerve cells in the brain to degenerate. As it works its havoc, the brain shrinks and wastes away—dementia sets in, causing disorientation and confusion. There is no cure, no way to slow its determined progression.

This disease is a thief. It begins with short spells of forgetfulness, but before it's finished, it steals everything. It takes your favorite color, the smell of your favorite food, the night of your first kiss, your love of golf. Droplets of shimmering water cleansing the earth during an invigorating spring shower simply become rain. Mammoth snowflakes blanketing the ground in white at the onset of winter's first

storm merely seem cold. Your heart beats, your lungs suck in air, your eyes see images, but inside you are dead. Inside your spirit is gone. I say it is an insidious disease because in the end, it steals your existence—even your very soul. In the end I will forget Emily.

The disease is progressing, and even now people are beginning to laugh. I do not hate them for it; they laugh with good reason. I would laugh as well at the stupid things I do. Two days ago I peed in the driveway in my front yard. I had to go and at the time it seemed like a great spot. A week before, I woke up in the middle of the night, walked into the kitchen, and tried to gargle with the dishwashing liquid that is kept in the cupboard beneath the sink. I thought I was in the bathroom, and the green liquid was the same color as my mouthwash. I get nervous. I get scared, and I cry; I cry like a baby over the most ridiculous things. During my life, I've seldom cried.

There are times when I can still think clearly, but each day I feel my good time fading—my existence getting shorter. During my good spells, now just an hour or two a day, I sit at my desk and I write. I crouch over the keyboard on my computer and I punch the keys wildly. It's an older computer, but it serves its purpose well. It's the best gift Bob has given me in years. It's an amazing machine and every time I use it, I marvel at how it captures my words. Younger people who have grown up with computers around them don't appreciate the truly miraculous machines they are. They create magic.

I'm not a good writer, but I've loved writing stories and poems all of my life. Writing always made me feel immortal—as if I were creating an extension of my life that nothing could destroy. It was exhilarating.

I no longer write for excitement. There are times when

my back aches and my eyes blur, and I can't get my fingers to hit the right keys, but I continue. I write now for Emily. She is just seven years old. I doubt she'll remember my face; I doubt she'll remember the crooked fingers on my wrinkled hands or the age spots on my skin or my shiny, bald head. But hopefully, by some miracle, she will read my stories and my poems and she'll remember my heart, and consider me as her friend. That is my deepest desire.

At times I feel bad that I'm not writing to my other grandchildren, but I hardly know them. While they visit every Christmas, they don't stay long. They are courteous, but they treat me like a stranger. It's not their fault. I'm not angry with them, and I hope they aren't angry with me.

My worst fear is that before I finish, I will slip completely into the grasp of the terrible monster, never to return. If this happens, my prayer would be that those around me might forget—but they will not forget—and then, worse than being forgotten, I will be remembered as a different person than I truly am. I will be despised.

I vow not to let this happen, so during my good times, I write—I write for Emily.

CHAPTER *Two*

*I*F YOU'LL NOTICE THE KITCHEN, MRS. HENDRICKS, THERE'S A sink in the corner below the window, as well as one on the center island. With two sinks and the double oven, this place would be fabulous for entertaining friends." She was trying not to rush the woman, but she'd been with her all morning, and both time and patience were running short. Emily would never let her hear the end of it if she showed up late again.

"I do like this place a lot, Laura. I just don't know," responded the plump, finicky woman. "Can we run back to the one on Pierpont and compare it, one last time?" It was posed as a question, but came out more like a command. Laura took a deep breath and tried not to let her frustration show.

"Absolutely, but I'd like to do it first thing tomorrow morning. I need to pick up my daughter from school in a few minutes, and she'll skewer me if I get there late."

"Tomorrow? Oh no, that won't do. I have my hair appointment in the morning, and I promised Charlie I'd decide between the two today." Laura detested such clients, but forcing a smile, she reminded herself how much she wanted this commission. While her initial reaction was to tell the woman to take a flying leap off the back deck, she continued calmly. "I'll tell you what, Mrs. Hendricks. Come with me to pick up Emily, my daughter, and after I drop her off to visit her grandpa, we'll run back up to the other house. Will that work?"

"Hmm, could you drop me off at the Pierpont house first? I'll just stay there and wander a bit until you can swing back and pick me up after your little errand."

It was not an errand, it was her daughter, and Laura was close to reaching her breaking point. "Certainly," she blurted as she headed to the front door. Right now, dumping "Cruella" anywhere seemed like a great option.

As she reached the school, she could see Emily standing on the curb. While she normally rode the bus, today was Friday. That meant Laura would pick her up and they'd head straight to Grandpa Whitney's house to visit.

"Mom! Hurry, we're gonna miss his good time."

"We'll be fine, honey. I'm so sorry. At least it's only fifteen minutes this time. Last time it was twice that. I'm making progress."

Emily didn't smile as she jumped into the car. "Okay, go!"

"So, how was school today?" Laura questioned, hoping to change the subject.

"It was good, 'cept for I colored my leaves purple and

Billy Mason said it was stupid to color leaves purple and then he took the purple crayon so I couldn't color and so I told teacher and Billy got in trouble." She hardly took a breath.

"Is that so? Well, what color did Billy use on his leaves?"

"He didn't have leaves. He drew a picture of a tank, but he colored it red and tanks aren't red, and it was stupid, but I didn't tell him."

"That was very kind of you, sweetie. Can I see your picture?"

"I didn't bring it home yet."

"Bring it," Laura corrected.

"But I'll show you my other papers." Anxiously unzipping her Old Navy backpack, she pulled out her notebook and gathered her papers.

As Laura watched the sun reflect off her daughter's shoulder-length brown hair, she could almost remember being seven herself. It was such an innocent age—full of adventure and learning.

Emily held out several papers for Laura to see. She swerved twice in traffic trying to look at them. "Honey, you'd better show me the rest when we get to Grandpa's house. I don't want to crash."

"Okay, Mom," she replied, stashing them back into the bag. "Are we there yet?"

"Just about."

"Mom?"

"Yes, dear."

"How come pigs don't wear clothes?"

Laura laughed. "What?"

"We wear people clothes, how come pigs don't wear pig clothes?"

Emily was always full of questions. Sometimes they were profound, sometimes bizarre, and often they were humorous.

"Next time you meet a pig, why don't you stop and ask him?"

Emily giggled. "Pigs don't talk, duh."

"You're right, honey. Pigs don't talk."

Several minutes passed as Emily appeared deep in thought.

"Mom?" she asked again, "Why don't pigs talk?"

"I'm not sure. Let's ask the cows," Laura joked.

Before Emily could respond Laura turned the corner in front of Harry's house. "Look, we're at Grandpa's now. Let's figure out the pigs later, okay?"

Harry's small brick house was located on Lincoln Street in Midvalley, a fifteen-minute drive from Emily's school in Lake Park. All of the homes in this section of town were well kept. Both sides of the street were lined with old-fashioned lamps which not only kept the area well lit, but also gave a nostalgic feeling to the neighborhood.

Harry had lived in the house most of his adult life. He'd built it with his own hands in the mid 1940s with help from his brother, a carpenter. It was his first house, and though later in life he could have afforded more, he could never bring himself to move. Perhaps it reminded him of life with Kathryn.

As Laura and Emily approached, they could see Cara's car parked in front at the curb.

"Oh good, Cara's here," Emily shouted. "I like her, she's funny."

Cara's business card read "*Independent In-Home Assistant to the Elderly.*" Though she was just twenty-six, her heavy build and full round features made her look ten years older.

Her dark black skin was a stark contrast to the bright white uniform she always wore. She might have been mistaken for a nurse; the truth was that she had dropped out of nursing school in Atlanta five years earlier after only one semester because she'd found it difficult to scrape the tuition money together. She'd begun in-home assistance after moving to the area four years ago to help take care of her aunt. She'd told Laura that while she wasn't getting rich, there always seemed to be plenty of customers, and the satisfaction she received from helping elderly people in need was exactly the reward she had sought when she chose nursing as a career.

Laura's husband, Bob, had hired Cara three months earlier when Harry's condition began to worsen. Initially she dropped in for a few minutes each morning, fixed breakfast, checked his condition and took care of any small needs. Lately, she had been spending a good part of her day at the house.

After the car came to a stop, Emily jumped out and ran up the steps to the front door. Without ringing the doorbell, she burst into the house and began searching for Grandpa Whitney and Cara.

"Hello? Hey, where is everyone?" she called out.

"Emily? That you?" Cara answered from the kitchen.

Emily bounded toward the sound of the voice. "Hi, Cara, how's Grandpa doing?"

Cara stood at the sink washing dishes but put down the wet plate to welcome the child with a high five. "Well, girl, I think he'd love a visit."

"Is he out back?"

"Sure enough. He's out on the porch," she replied, pointing toward the back door. Emily was gone in a flash. Laura caught just a glimpse of her blue pants streaking out the door.

"Hi there, Cara," Laura greeted.

"Hey, Laura. How y'all doin' today?"

"We're doing great. Late as usual, but still great."

"Is that a new 'do?" Cara asked.

"My hair?" Laura chuckled. "Yeah. I was getting tired of pulling out the gray. I had a weave last week. They lightened the brown a touch, but you're the first to notice."

"Really? Looks dynamite."

"Thanks. So, is he on the porch?"

"Yep, Emily's already there."

"Hang on, I'll be right back." Laura walked softly to the back door to eavesdrop on Emily's conversation. The old man sat in a reclining lawn chair under an aluminum-covered porch attached to the house. It was a pleasant place for Harry to sit and admire his garden.

"Hi, Grandpa," Emily greeted. There was no response from Harry. "I said hi, Grandpa," she repeated louder.

"Hell's bells, you don't have to yell."

"Grandpa, don't talk that way, it's not nice!"

"What's your name, anyway?" he asked, in a softer tone.

"Grandpa! You know my name. It's Emily."

"What a nice name, Amy."

"Grandpa, it's Emily, not Amy." She giggled. "So you want to play checkers again?"

He appeared confused at the question. She ignored his puzzlement and skipped over to the cabinet next to the back door to retrieve the game.

"You want black or red?"

"What?"

"I said do you want to be black or red?" No reply came. He watched intently as the little girl placed the colored plastic disks neatly on the checkered board. As Emily made the

first move, his eyes brightened. He reached out with his bent finger and pushed the black plastic circle one spot forward.

"Listen, Emily," Laura called through the screen door, "I have to run a quick errand. You stay and visit with Grandpa for a while. I'll be back in thirty minutes. Cara's in the kitchen if you need anything."

"Okay, bye, Mommy. Your move, Grandpa." Laura watched the two for another moment, intrigued that a girl as young as Emily would have so much empathy for a crotchety old man. Smiling, she tiptoed back to the kitchen, so as not to disturb the game in progress.

"How's he really doing, Cara?"

"He's not doin' too good, Laura." She talked while she dried the last of the dishes. "He typed like a maniac in the mornin' for about ten minutes, but then he locked himself in the bathroom for almost an hour before he could figure out how to undo the lock. I almost called 911, but he wasn't screamin' and I figured he couldn't get into no trouble in there. It's just my opinion, but you may wanna start thinkin' 'bout getting him into a home. I hate to say it, 'cause I'd lose my best client, but I'd hate it worse to see Mr. Harry hurt himself or somethin'." It was the answer Laura dreaded but had been expecting. Harry had seemed despondent lately. She had sensed it was time for a change.

"Thanks, Cara. Sorry for the trouble. I'll call Bob tomorrow and talk over the timing with him. We'll figure out what to do this week. Is it okay if I let you know by next Friday?"

"Oh sure. And like I say, I don't mind being here, just give me a few days' notice once y'all decide."

"Thanks again. So, did Bob send you a check for last month?"