



By the Author of *A Violent Hope*

# DEAR *Hearts*

By Ericka Clay



# Dear Hearts

Ericka Clay

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events  
are entirely coincidental.

*DEAR HEARTS*

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# A Note From the Author

*“Everything is meaningless.”*

*- From Ecclesiastes 1:2*

I can't help thinking about this verse as I've been rewriting *Dear Hearts*. I first wrote this book as an atheist, and I'm sure you can only imagine the type of scenes I worked through this story.

It scared even me.

But I took it as a challenge from God to rewrite my characters' story in a way that still highlights their brokenness yet is still accessible to the average adult reader. There are still some hard themes in this book, and it definitely won't win me Clean Christian Book of the Year. But this book is truth. This book is what happens when you stop leaning on God to only lean on each other.

Disaster, my friends.

Mitch and Elena are two people who have been broken since childhood and are merely playing at adulthood without the benefit of true healing. When we live life through our own volition and refuse to submit ourselves to God, everything truly is meaningless.

Everything truly is just dust in the wind.

As you'll see as the story unfolds, there are hard consequences to Mitch and Elena's choices. Despite believing they're victims of circumstances, they, like all people, have been given the gift of choice by God. Instead of asking God to help them make the right decisions for themselves and for their family, they seek self-satisfaction, whether it be satisfying a sexual temptation or attempting to purchase an alternative reality that will never truly exist.

I pray as you read this book, you understand the heart behind it and take this cautionary tale for what it is: an attempt to pull back the curtain on man's selfish desires and to exhibit what life is like when we rely on other human beings to “fix” our wounds and not the Father who made us.

- Ericka Clay

# ONE

*Mitch*

People do things out of love, I guess, but I also got this theory that you do them because there's a story building. It starts when you're born, cut out of your mother's gut, pushed through her privates—what have you. And it continues, spiraling like yarn around a finger until you're choked up into it, and you realize no matter how hard you pull, strain your muscles, maybe even break a bone to free a hand, that you are as much a part of it as it's a part of you.

But I'd never say any of this out loud. I'd get my clock cleaned.

"Legs on that one," Jimmy says. It's no longer a command like, "Hey, check out the legs on that one." Mainly it's just a fact of life. Women have legs, and Jimmy loves that fact.

We're in the parking lot of Double Dee's, but it's a secret though because Jimmy's wife, Pam, hates the place, and Elena pretends she hates us coming here too, mimicking Pam down to the cocked head like she's listening to God. "It ain't church right," Pam usually says through a nostril because she's always got one clogged due to allergies. And Elena just nods along to her nasally whistle. But later on, when Sela's asleep and we sit on the couch and drone out to *20/20*, Elena will laugh—the whiskey fresh on her breath—and call Pam "a bonafide nag." It's my favorite thing about her: the fearless taste of her honesty.

"Whatcha leaving for baby? Just got here!" Jimmy says to the short-skirted waitress in the parking lot and leers at her unfortunate state. She looks like a wilting plant left out in the sun, her slick forehead shining with afternoon sweat.

"Why you think I'm hurrying?" she answers back but winks as she crouches down into her dinged up Impala. There are puddles in the pockmarked gravel, and the light shines up bright against her. And that's when you can see the cracks in her pretty face, a dry sort of sad-

ness breaching through her skin and expanding to the childless car seat in the back.

Sometimes, I feel like I can see what everyone else can't. Or won't.

"What I wouldn't give," Jimmy mutters. Jimmy's one of those people I've known forever, which means I can't unknow him. I tried once right after Elena and I got married and moved out to White Smoke to start our waterproofing business, but Jimmy caught wind that I was getting the heck out of dodge—also known as Helena, Arkansas—and he thought that would suit him just fine too. Fast forward to our first wedding anniversary, which Elena spent mopping up Jimmy's celebratory vomit on our kitchen floor. Unknowing would have been a blessing.

"Work," I say, nodding at the wooden double doors up ahead. "But yeah, nice legs," I add and drag on my Marlboro before grinding it senseless with the heel of my boot.

The door opens to a blast of fried air from an overhead vent. It's subzero as we fork our way through the waitresses and the truck drivers hounding the waitresses.

In the back, there's a greasy little office that houses the greasy little manager, Louis MacArthur, who everyone calls Louie Mac. When I knock on the office door, I hold my breath.

"You two knuckleheads again," Louie says with affection. His face is a mask of hair, and I can't tell if he's actually talking. But then he starts to hock something up in his throat, and it's hard to miss the noise grunting right out of him.

"Mmm..." Louie says, chewing down whatever it is he's just spit up. "Listen now, fellas. I think we've got ourselves a warranty issue on our hands." He lifts his own hands that are rust-colored with barbecue sauce.

"I told you, Louie. This one ain't a warranty. We just went around back and checked the pipe penetrations we did two weeks ago. They're all good to go," I say. The word hurts. "Ain't." It slices off my tongue and

feels like it's taking a part of me with it. But I smile, relax my face. I want Louie to believe we bleed the same blood.

"Now, now, Mitch. I know you guys, trust you guys, but that was a dang crazy storm we got last night. Even The Super Duo has to admit that." I try not to wince at the nickname Jimmy uses whenever he introduces us to a new customer. "I'm Jimmy, this here's Mitch, and after we plug up that son of a gun leak, you'll be calling us two The Super Duo."

"Louie, I get it, but I swear, it's not a warranty. I'll go show you out back." I make to leave the rancid little office and its dully piped Tim McGraw tune, but Louie stays in his place and only moves to cross his hairy arms against his chest.

"I really don't want to have to get Elmer involved here," he says. I look at Jimmy for back up, but he's busy eying a series of group shots of the waitstaff over the years. The one labeled 1986 is a teased hair, blue eyeshadowy mess, but Jimmy isn't taking note of their faces.

"No need to call, Elmer," I say, and a shot of the old man blinds my eyes for a minute. Elmer's our contact at Setting Sun Properties. Fat gut, fat head, fat tuft of white hair poking out of one nostril. You hear nothing but the n-word every time the man opens his mouth. Each time I come face-to-face with Fat Elmer, I want to scream "Shut up!" just like I want to do now to Louie who's excavating his fly with a finger to check if it's unzipped. But I don't. There it is ladies and gentlemen, the story yanking at my fingers and toes: I never do a darn thing.

"That's what I thought. So now you boys, you go and fix it up real nice, and then get back here for a free lunch on me," Louie says, smile a mile wide, and I catch a shot of his barbecue-stained teeth.

"Sure thing," I grunt, Jimmy breaking his lady spell behind me, and we make our way around back again to sweat a few buckets and fix whatever needs fixing. I don't look Jimmy in the eye once.

"You still baby trying?" Jimmy asks later as we eat our free Double Dee's lunch special. He wipes a stripe of mustard off his chin while I try to decipher the question.

“Baby trying? Oh, are me and Elena still trying to have a baby?”

“Yup,” Jimmy says, his chin taking a dip.

“Yeah, you know not rushing anything. But yeah.” It’s been seven months this go-round. Seven months of sticks and pee and Elena wiping her nose on her pink, puffy robe. “Maybe something’s wrong with me,” she says sometimes, and the rotating fan puffs up ribbons of her hair, so I have a clear shot to her neck, press my lips against it. *Nothing’s wrong, baby. Nothing’s ever wrong with you.*

One time Sela walked in. She was quiet, a fifty-pound ninja. She didn’t say anything, and Elena didn’t see her, but I did behind Elena’s curtain of hair. She curled her hand and clawed at the air a little. *Hello*, I mouthed back and prayed she wouldn’t tiptoe into our bathroom and spy the toilet filled with blood.

But I don’t mention any of this to Jimmy who has three boys and would knock out cold if I even hinted at bodily fluids.

“Earth to Gomer. You done ‘bout pass out from all these broads?” The table of camo at our right overhears Jimmy’s quip and starts throbbing with laughter. Hunters, sitting sore thumbs in their sticky red chairs. I don’t have the heart to tell them deer season is five months away.

“Nah. Just thinking,” I say.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” pipes up one of the goofier-looking ones with a cocked Browning cap on his head.

I’ll try not to.

#

There’s a leak at a church, a leak at another church, and then there’s a leak at Jugs McCormick, the strip club over near the hangar. The call came in while Jimmy was taking a leak at The Philips station, and when he got back in the truck, and I told him where we were heading next, it was like watching a kid on Christmas.

After work, we grunted our way through unloading the truck at Triple A storage, lining up the water blaster and caulking guns on the metal racks we rigged up when we finally moved our shop out of Jimmy's garage.

And now I'm headed home after dropping Jimmy off, waving at him and Pam who I'm sure got a nasally whiff of the lunch beers on Jimmy's breath. They live in the woods, Jimmy and Pam, so my truck rides out the bumps in the back dirt roads until I'm up on pavement again. I head to Arrow Wood Hills, the neighborhood where my house sits on a cul-de-sac that the trash guys miss roughly three times a month.

I think about it: a decent day's work, really. Made eight-fifty split two ways. But I don't really think in money, more in terms of dance shoes and doctor's appointments and all those pee sticks, snapping together like a ladder, one you could easily fall off if you weren't careful.

When I walk into the house, the smell of clean hits me, which is a relief on one hand—no more scent of women with the bodies of goddesses and the eyes of a broken heart—but on the other, I know what Elena's done all day. It can get really bad when the OCD hits her, and by the glimpse I get of her worn-raw cuticles as she wraps her arms around my back, today is one of those days. Her hair reeks of bleach.

"Jimmy still alive? All those ladies didn't give him a coronary, did they?" she whispers because Sela is down the hall humming. I picture her forking her fingers through Barbie hair.

"He's something," I say and smile, greedily taking in Elena's face. It's wrong of me because I know I should turn on my heels and lift up my daughter like other daddies do—the kinds in movies with the shirts and ties and briefcases. But I'm not like those movie men, so the only thing that settles me is Elena's face, the pale moon shade of it, the vulnerable line of tears at her lids she dutifully keeps in check.

"I made the appointment. Two months from now, but still, we got in." The tears grow stronger, and I hug her, her body smaller than mine but tougher because she's willing to undergo appointments and proce-

dures to have a child, to give Sela a sibling. Her lips graze at my neck even though I'm rough with grit and sweat.

"Go see her," is soft in my ear, Elena always knowing what's best for me. I walk slow though, preparing in my mind a question—"How was your day, pumpkin pie?"—because it sounds like something a little girl would want to hear. But before I can ask it, there's wailing in Sela's room. A single, long shriek cuts out of the threshold and into my heart. So does the stink of urine.

"Oh no, oh no!" Sela says with horrified eyes when she meets me in her doorway. I'm seeing something I'm not supposed to see: a seven-year-old girl who's just lost her bladder like a baby and has her blanket wrapped around her waist to hide it. It's something that's been happening a lot—twice at school, three times at home—and it's just another reason that makes it difficult to sit and hold her like a good daddy would.

I can't fix her.

"Here, let me," Elena says, and she softly shoulders me out of the way. She sends me a look—a "leave, leave, leave" look—because our little girl's panicking and she needs someone who knows how to whisper out the fear.

So, I do. I leave.

#

She eats dinner in her room, Sela. She's too embarrassed, even too embarrassed for me to softly kiss her forehead. So, I wait until there's no noise in her room, and after I change into the worn house shoes Elena bought me three Christmases ago that make me feel like I'm padding through an insane asylum, I inch open her door.

Sitting on the edge of the pee blanket—now scented with a heavy dose of Ivory soap—I watch Sela's face move and jerk, responding to the trail of images in her head. Her eyes run like lines of traffic beneath her lids, and I know she feels a good deal more than she lets on. I can

see it already—the story’s tentacles growing, driving a wedge between her and possibility—and as her pupils skate against the back of her eyelids, I can’t keep it stowed in my stomach any longer.

I crouch down and whisper in her ear.

“Run.”

#

I pad into the kitchen, watch Elena take the whiskey from a back corner cabinet while I tear the flimsy lid off a pudding cup. I suppose if anyone would stumble into our home at ten at night, they’d think everything’s on the up and up. One small bottle of booze, one seven-year-old tucked in her clean, safe bed. But there’s only one bottle because we can’t seem to keep any more in the house.

And some nights it’s all right. We drink, not too much, just enough for the buzz. Just enough so when I hold my wife against me, I don’t mentally whimper like I’m conjuring up some past that doesn’t want to stick. Some nights it’s all in good fun.

But then there are the other nights. And a little later, we find ourselves smack in the middle of one of those. Elena drags on the cigarette I’ve left burning in the lopsided ashtray. It’s the one Sela made for me in art class, and when she had brought it home, I asked if it was a coffee mug then watched her cry.

“Let’s see, I remember, she always smelled like apricots? That’s what you said once. Apricots.” Elena’s voice is quieter now, her toes are naked, the pudding cup empty. I told her to wear shoes, and she told me to go stick my head in the ground.

The only relief is the fact that Mrs. McMorrow has turned off her kitchen light, and I can’t see her cotton candy head peeking out her window anymore. But the downside’s a lot worse: that consequential lack of trust.

“I was a stupid kid. It wasn’t love. I mean not like with you.” We’re having the same argument we usually do when things get this unde-

fined, and as soon as I say it, I know it's the wrong thing. Her face prunes up, the lips shrivel into themselves, and the whimpering begins. I know what this is now. We've practiced this dance so many times my feet have blistered a revelation of sorts: this isn't the way it was supposed to be.

The fence behind Elena's head is a solid block of light, the outdoor bulb above me flickers until everything's on fire, and I feel like stepping into the flames.

"And then those strip joints. I bet they don't even have any stinking leaks." Her words are whispered with another drag, a tear encroaching on wrinkled terrain. When we do this, I blame the alcohol the next day because it throbs along the ridges of my brain, but I know it's something more for Elena. I know she's hinted the scent on me for years, but she hasn't quite grasped what it is she's searching for. And if there's a God in heaven, I pray she never does.

The flames seem brighter now. I pour another double, and it burns, burns, burns, and so does the fence behind Elena's head. She's glowing, my beautiful wife. Barren and beautiful and counting her mistakes like dirty coins.

Elena rubs her nose, and a sticky mess of snot and tears stains her cheeks. I want to clean her up and make her shine.

"Why?" she asks.

"I just don't know." And I don't. The girl went to high school with us. Her name was Virginia Sewall. I know it like it's tattooed to my eyelids. Her face was sculpted by God himself, and there was a rumor going around that she wanted me. She wanted *me*. Elena and I had been together for years by then, the kind of kids who get married at three and can never sever that vein of understanding. And I didn't sever it, not with Virginia and her cherry chapstick lips, but with a boy named Brooks Lloyd who was Virginia's cousin and came to work her father's farm the summer I turned sixteen.

The bleach is still strong on Elena's skin as she skims the top of her glass with another generous pour.

"You never do," I think she says but can't be sure because now her face is attached to both her palms. Noise comes that seems otherworldly this far into the bottle. It's the glass door behind us sliding open.

"Again," Sela says, stepping outside, bringing the scent of urine with her. Her face prunes up just like her mother's.

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