



Everything
is Just
Beginning.

A Novel

Erin Bartels

Books by Erin Bartels

We Hope for Better Things

The Words between Us

All That We Carried

The Girl Who Could Breathe Under Water

Everything Is Just Beginning

Everything
Is Just
Beginning

— A Novel —

Erin Bartels



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For Mom
who taught me that if you're going to sing,
you may as well *sing*

and for Dad
who showed me that nothing soothes the soul
like really loud music

Liner Notes

I never wanted to live at my Uncle Mike's. Partly because I swore I'd never have anything to do with my dad since he clearly wanted nothing to do with me. (Being my dad's twin brother, Uncle Mike is about as close to my actual dad as anyone could be). And partly because he's the type of guy whose entire life screams *failure*, and the more your path crosses with his, the more likely you are to become a failure yourself. Truthfully, I do a good enough job of that on my own.

But then, if Uncle Mike hadn't taken me in when Rodney and Slow kicked me out, I wouldn't be covered in mud and standing in this pit with Natalie Wheeler.

Yeah, that Natalie Wheeler. Daughter of reclusive guitarist-turned-producer Dusty Wheeler and onetime-flower-child-singer-songwriter Deb Wheeler, who also happened to be Mike's across-the-street neighbors and long-suffering landlords.

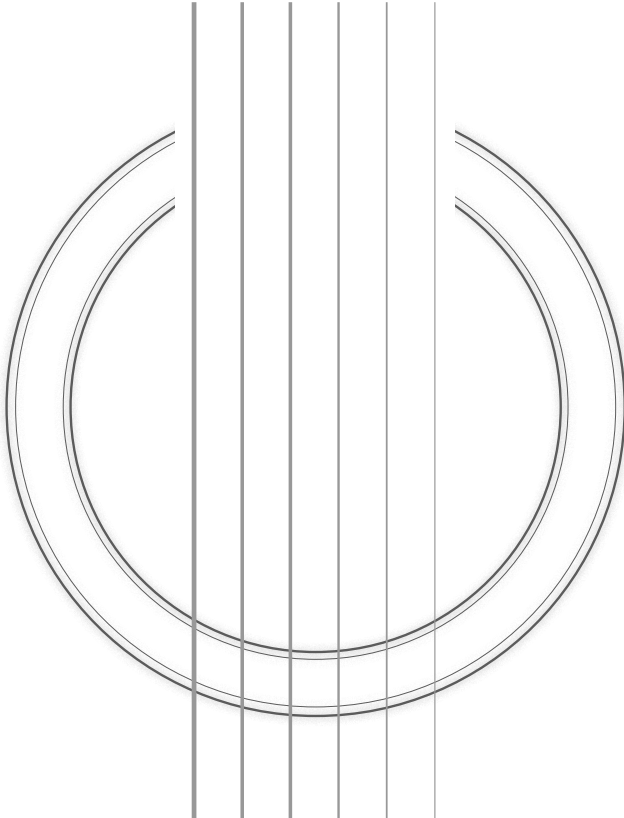
Mike's house was never meant to be a house. It was just the break trailer for the construction crew that built the Wheeler estate twenty years ago back in 1970. Mike was on the crew, and the Wheelers rented him the property cheap after their sprawling contemporary glass and stone house was finished. I guess because one of them liked him and one of them pitied him.

I'm not one hundred percent sure which impulse first inspired Natalie Wheeler to give me the time of day, but right at this moment, I don't really care. Right at this moment, I'm seeing more clearly than I ever have in my short and rather disappointing life that maybe I'm meant for something . . . better. It doesn't really matter to me how we got here.

That said, it probably matters to you—or if it doesn't yet, it will shortly—so maybe I should start earlier. Maybe the night I first made it through the door of the Wheeler house. The night I first saw Natalie. Even if she didn't see me.



Side A



Track One

I wasn't invited.

I should probably make that clear right off the bat. Because I don't want you to get the wrong idea about me. I'm nobody special. I don't know anybody important, and nobody important knows me. I just happened to know somebody who knew somebody. Or rather, I happened to have the same name as somebody who knew somebody.

The invitation I pulled out of the rusty mailbox did say Michael Sullivan, but it wasn't for me and I knew it. It was for my uncle, who I happen to be named after. Not because my dad wanted to honor his brother, but because my mom preferred his brother to him and wanted to get back at him for missing my birth twenty-two years ago. Only I go by Michael, not Mike. The invitation said Michael. Probably because Mrs. Wheeler has class.

It arrived on Wednesday, December 27, 1989. I knew Mike wasn't going to be around for New Year's. I hadn't been living with him long, but it was long enough to notice a few patterns.

One: he smoked a pack of Camels every day.

Two: he never slept at home on weekends.

Three: he was bad with money.

Four: he listened almost exclusively to Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Five: he was wildly superstitious.

When it came to ringing in the new year in style at the Wheeler house, four out of five of those facts worked in my favor.

As I came back inside with the mail and knocked the snow off my boots, I heard Mike on the phone talking to his friend Carl. I knew it was Carl because of the voice Mike was using. He used one voice for work, another voice for girls, another voice for friends, and another voice for Carl, who was a friend but also someone who routinely loaned Mike money and rarely got any of it back.

I slipped the thick envelope (which had been sent through the post office even though I could see the iron gate at the end of the long Wheeler drive from the kitchen window—like I said, classy) into my pocket and listened as Mike convinced Carl to pay for gas for a road trip out to California, where Lynyrd Skynyrd was playing the Cow Palace on Sunday the 31st. Then they'd swing by Vegas on the way back to Michigan, where Mike was certain he'd win enough money to cover what he owed Carl as long as Skynyrd opened with "You Got That Right" and closed with "Sweet Home Alabama" (see also: superstitious). When he hung up the phone and started throwing some underwear and jeans into a duffel bag, I knew what I was going to be doing on New Year's Eve.

Mike left the next morning without so much as a "Stay out of my room"—which the lock rendered unnecessary anyway. You might think he could have invited me to go along with him. I liked Lynyrd Skynyrd okay. The guys and I occasionally threw in a cover of "Simple Man" when we played gigs, which wasn't as often as Rodney had wanted but proved to be more often than I managed to show up (see also: being kicked out).

A good uncle might have made an effort to bring his aspiring rock star nephew out to California to live it up a little at a big concert. And I was over twenty-one, so I wouldn't have been a drag on them in Vegas. But I knew he wouldn't ask me to come. I was bad luck.

The day I was born and my mom named me after him, Mike lost half of his squad in a firefight somewhere west of Quảng Ngãi. For the next couple decades, whenever something went wrong in Mike's life, which seemed like it was more often than in most other people's, there was some way in which I was to blame. He routinely cheated on his girlfriends, but they dumped him because it was my eighth birthday or I had talked to him earlier in the day or I was watching the same TV show at the same time. When he got injured on a construction job, it was because my baseball team got mercied, not because he had been up drinking the night before. The day I got my first guitar—a right-hander even though I'm left-handed—he was sentenced to one hundred hours of community service after his third drunk and disorderly offense. The night I first kissed a girl, he was stranded in Detroit with a dead car battery.

The only reason he let me come live at his place when I found myself homeless back in August was because I promised to pay him rent and he needed the money. He always needed money. Most of the time he tried to stay out of the house—which was just fine with me—and when we were there at the same time, he was always looking at me sidelong, like I was contagious or something.

So when he left without me on Thursday morning, I was nothing but relieved. I had three boring days of work at Rogers Hardware in downtown West Arbor Hills to get through, days when I'd be marking down Christmas lights and stocking gardening supplies that people would look at for the next

three freezing, snowy, slushy months but no one would actually buy until after Easter. Then it would be New Year's Eve and I would finally see what was on the other side of that iron gate across the street.



When Sunday rolled around it was windy and warm, nearing forty degrees in the afternoon. I'd spent the morning sleeping late and eating three bowls of half-stale Cocoa Puffs because the milk was going to expire, then digging around in my drawers for something to wear to the party.

The invitation had been printed in gold on heavy paper, but it said "Come As You Are" at the bottom of it. "As I Was" usually meant ripped jeans, a concert T-shirt, and a denim jacket, though I'd been trying to save up for a leather one I'd seen at the mall. But that didn't seem right for a party announced in gold lettering. I had khaki slacks for work, but that wasn't really "As You Are" for me. That was just something I had to do to keep a roof over my head and gas up the car and pay for pedals and strings and maybe please God a better amp someday.

However, Uncle Mike had a closet over on the other side of the thin wall, and for all his faults, he always looked cool. Actually, maybe that was the problem with him. What you saw was not exactly what you got. It fooled people into trusting him when he was only slightly more dependable than his brother—which was not at all.

He'd locked his bedroom door, as always, but it wasn't hard to pick the lock. I had plenty of experience doing just that to get into various houses or apartments when I either lost my keys or was accidentally-on-purpose locked out by the people I was crashing with.

Mike was a middle-aged contractor and I was a skinny wannabe rock star built more like Steven Tyler than Henry Rollins, so most of his clothes would be too big on me. Definitely I'd have to wear my own pants. But Mike was also secretly sentimental, so he never got rid of certain things, even if he couldn't stretch them over his growing gut. He had faded T-shirts from concerts I wish I'd been old enough to go to, a black motorcycle jacket I assume he must have worn during his glory days of roving across the country following bands and girls and pipe dreams, his old army junk from Vietnam.

I settled on a pair of my least ripped jeans, Mike's Goose Lake Music Festival tee—nothing said I'm a legit Detroit musician like a nod to the legendary 1970 concert—and the black leather jacket, which I knew would land me in either the hospital or, more preferably, the morgue if he ever found out I'd touched it and gotten my bad luck all over it. I tied my finally-shoulder-length hair at the back of my neck and pulled out a few strands around my face so it didn't look too polished or purposeful—cool wasn't cool if it wasn't effortless—and laced up my black motorcycle boots. No, I didn't own a motorcycle, though when I was little I apparently rode on the back of my dad's once. According to my mom, there's a picture of it somewhere.

I was ready to go. It was 4:59. The party didn't even start until 9:00.

I caught the tail end of a football game I didn't care about, half watched the news talking about Panama and Israel and some bomb threat on some airline, then turned up the volume when *Life Goes On* came on, but it was a rerun. I killed the TV and turned on the radio instead, but it was mostly year-end junk. Top songs of 1989, but not actually being played in full, and most of them were pop shlock—Paula Abdul and Debbie Gibson and Milli Vanilli.

I secretly did like some of that crap—it was just so catchy—but synthesizers and drum machines wouldn't get rid of the churning I'd started to feel in my stomach when I thought of walking through the door at a party I wasn't really invited to and where I wouldn't know anyone.

I turned the radio off and popped *Slippery When Wet* into the tape deck, following it up with *Hysteria* and then *Appetite for Destruction*, which I turned off after “Sweet Child O' Mine.” Axl's pinched, perfect whine still rang in my ears as I crossed the dark street and approached the open gate of the Wheeler house. I thought of how Axl would walk into a party, shoved my hands into my jeans pockets, and put a friendly sneer on my face, the kind of expression I used to get through gigs without a panic attack.

The winding driveway was already lined with cars at 9:15. Nice cars. Some new, some classic, all perfectly shiny except for the spatter of salt water just behind the tires. Who washed a car in the winter? Rich people. What did “Come As You Are” mean to rich people? Ties and sport jackets? I didn't own a tie, and I'm not sure Uncle Mike did either. Well, maybe. For court dates.

I could feel my heart rate tick up and sweat gathering on my scalp and my palms. I almost turned around and called this what it was—a bad idea. But then the last thing Rodney had said to me when he and Slow gave me the boot from our crappy apartment in Plymouth (which he always told people was in Detroit) replaced Axl's aching E-flat in my brain. “*The minute you're not a drain on this band, the minute you actually have something to offer, that's when you can come back. Not one second sooner.*”

Knowing Dusty Wheeler . . . that would be something to offer. That might make up for me missing the odd gig or five. That might make up for the fact that my equipment kind of

sucked. That might make up for Slow's girlfriend hitting on me right in front of him, which, hey, wasn't my fault to begin with but also didn't bother me all that much because she's pretty cute and is one of the few people who makes me feel kind of good about myself in kind of a bad way.

If I could get a demo to Dusty, I'd be worth something to those guys. Maybe they'd even give a few of the songs I wrote the time of day. Maybe I could actually sing lead once in a while instead of Rodney, who was always a little flat and on the unintelligible side.

I picked up my pace and pushed through the panic. I wasn't going back to that trailer right now. That trailer was the past, evidence of a forgettable life in a disappointing family. My future was waiting for me at the end of this driveway.