

“*We Hope for Better Things* has it all: fabulous storytelling, an emotional impact that lingers long after you turn the last page, and a setting that immerses you. I haven’t read such a powerful, moving story since I read *To Kill a Mockingbird* in high school. This book will change how you look at the world we live in. Highly recommended!”

Colleen Coble, *USA Today* bestselling author of the Rock Harbor series and *The View from Rainshadow Bay*

“A timely exploration of race in America, *We Hope for Better Things* is an exercise of empathy that will shape many a soul. Erin Bartels navigates this sensitive topic with compassion as she shifts her readers back and forth between past and present, nudging us to examine the secrets we keep, the grudges we hold, and the prejudices we may help create even without intention.”

Julie Cantrell, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Perennials*

“It’s not easy to weave three time periods into a cohesive narrative, each with its own story and intriguing characters. Erin Bartels has accomplished the difficult. She’s woven together black and white silk threads into a braid so well crafted that a reader will carry forward the braid of love and separation, race and reconciliation, long after the last page is read. I applaud her courage, her authenticity, her beautiful turn of phrase, the freshness of her imagery, and the depth of her story that speaks to a contemporary world where understanding is often absent. *We Hope for Better Things* is a remarkable debut novel that every reader will see was written by a skilled writer telling a story of her heart.”

Jane Kirkpatrick, award-winning author of *Everything She Didn’t Say*

“Erin Bartels’s *We Hope for Better Things* shares the joys and sorrows of three women from different generations. Beginning with

the turmoil of the Civil War through the race riots of the sixties to modern day, the story peels away excuses and pretensions to reveal the personal tragedies of prejudice. A roller coaster of emotions awaits as you share the lives of these women and hope along with them for better things.”

Ann H. Gabhart, bestselling author of *River to Redemption*

“Storytelling at its finest. Erin Bartels delivers a riveting story of forbidden love, family bonds, racial injustice, and the power of forgiveness. Spanning multiple generations, *We Hope for Better Things* is a timely, sobering, moving account of how far we’ve come . . . and how much distance remains to be covered. A compulsively readable, incredibly powerful novel.”

Lori Nelson Spielman, *New York Times*
bestselling author of *The Life List*

“There is the Detroit we think we know, and there is the Detroit full of stories that are never brought to the forefront. With *We Hope for Better Things*, Erin Bartels brings full circle an understanding of contemporary Detroit firmly rooted in the past, with enthralling characters and acute attention to detail. It’s a must not just for Detroit lovers but also for those who need to understand that Detroit history is also American history.”

Aaron Foley, city of Detroit’s chief storyteller
and editor of *The Detroit Neighborhood Guidebook*

WE
HOPE
for
BETTER
THINGS

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WE
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ERIN
BARTELS



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For Calvin,
whose compassion gives me
hope for the future

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Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus.
We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes.
Detroit city motto

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— ONE —

Detroit, July

The Lafayette Coney Island was not a comfortable place to be early. It wasn't a comfortable place, period. It was cramped and dingy and packed, and seat saving, such as I was attempting at the lunch rush, was not appreciated.

Thankfully, at precisely noon as promised, an older black gentleman in a baggy Detroit Lions jersey shuffled through the door, ratty leather bag slung over one drooped shoulder.

"Mr. Rich?" I called over the din.

He slid into the chair across from me. I'd fought hard for that chair. Hopefully this meeting would be worth the effort.

"How'd you know it was me?" he said.

"You said you'd be wearing a Lions jersey."

"Oh yes. I did, didn't I? My son gave me this."

"You ready to order? I only have twenty minutes."

Mr. Rich was looking back toward the door. "Well, I was hoping that . . . Oh! Here we go."

The door swung open and a tall, well-built man sporting a slick suit and a head of short black dreads walked in. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Denny! We're just about to order." Mr. Rich set the leather bag on his lap and slid over in his seat to accommodate the newcomer.

The man sat on the eight inches of chair Mr. Rich had managed to unearth from his own backside, but most of him spilled out into the already narrow aisle.

"This is my son, Linden."

Something clicked and my eyes flew to one of the many photos on the wall of famous people who'd eaten here over the years. There he was, between Eminem and Drew Barrymore, towering over the smiling staff.

I sat a little straighter. "The Linden Rich who kicks for the Lions?"

"Yeah," he said. "And you are . . . ?"

"This is Elizabeth Balsam," Mr. Rich supplied, "the lady who writes all those scandal stories in the *Free Press* about corruption and land grabbing and those ten thousand—eleven thousand?—untested rape kits they found awhile back and such. She covered the Kilpatrick trial."

I offered up a little smile, one I'd practiced in the mirror every morning since college, one I hoped made me look equal parts approachable and intelligent.

"Oh, yeah, okay," Linden said. "I see the resemblance. In the eyes."

"I told you," Mr. Rich said.

"You did."

"I'm sorry," I broke in, "what resemblance?"

A waiter in a filthy white T-shirt balancing ten plates on one arm came up to the table just then and said, "Denny! Whadayawant?"

We ordered our coney dogs—coney sauce and onions for me, everything they had in the kitchen for Linden, and just coney sauce for Mr. Rich, who explained, "I can't eat onions no more."

"And I need silverware," I added in an undertone.

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When the waiter shouted the order to the old man at the grill, Linden was already talking. “You are not giving her that camera.”

“You said the photos—the photos should stay for now,” Mr. Rich said. “Why shouldn’t I give her the camera? It ain’t yours, Denny.”

“It ain’t hers either.”

“No, she’s going to give it to Nora.”

Linden took a deep breath and looked off to the side. Though probably anyone else would have been embarrassed to be so obviously talked about as if she wasn’t even there, years of cut-throat journalism had largely squelched that entirely natural impulse in my brain.

I jumped on the dead air to start my own line of questioning. “On the phone you said you’d been given a few things that were found in a police evidence locker—that belonged to a relative of yours?”

“No, they belong to a relative of *yours*. Maybe I should just start from the beginning.”

I resisted the urge to pull out my phone and start recording the conversation.

But before Mr. Rich could begin, our coney dogs were plunked down on the table in no particular order. We slid the plates around to their proper owners. The men across from me bit into their dogs. I began to cut mine with a knife and fork, eliciting a you-gotta-be-kidding-me look from Linden.

“I’ve been reading the *Free Press* over the years,” Mr. Rich began, “and I kept seeing your byline. I don’t know if I would have noticed that all those articles were by the same person if I didn’t have a connection to your family name.”

I nodded to let him know I was tracking with him.

“And I got to thinking, maybe this Elizabeth Balsam is related to the Balsam I know. It’s not a real common name in Detroit. I don’t know if I’d ever heard it outside of my own association with a Nora Balsam. Now, is that name familiar to you?”

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I speared a bit of bun and sopped up some sauce. “Sorry, no. I don’t think I know anyone by that name.”

Linden lifted his hand up to his father as if to say, “See?”

“Now, hold on,” the older man said in his son’s direction. “You said yourself she looks like her.”

“I’ll admit you do look like her,” Linden said. “But—no offense and all—you do kind of all look the same.”

I laughed. As a white person in a city that was over eighty percent black, I was used to occasional reminders of what minority races had to contend with in most parts of the country. I didn’t mind it. It helped me remember that the readership I served wasn’t only made up of people just like me.

“I wouldn’t say you’re the spitting image,” Mr. Rich said, “but there’s a definite resemblance in the eyes. If you had blonde hair, maybe a different chin, it’d be spot-on.”

I took a sip of water. “I still don’t know who you’re talking about. Or what this meeting is all about.”

Mr. Rich shut his eyes and shook his head. “Yeah, we’re getting ahead of ourselves again. Now, you know well as anyone lots of things have gone by the wayside in this city. We got too many problems to deal with them all. Well, I been looking for something that’s been lost for a very long time. I knew the police had to have it, but you try getting someone on the phone who knows what they’re talking about in an organization that had five police chiefs in five years. And I get it. They got way more important things to do than find some old bag collecting dust on a shelf.” He paused and smiled broadly. “But I finally found it. Got the call a couple years ago and got it back—and a bit more I hadn’t bargained for.” He tapped the bag on his lap, still miraculously free of coney sauce. “This camera belongs to Nora Balsam. And I have a box full of photographs for her as well.”

I realized I’d been squinting, trying to put the pieces together in my head as to what any of this really had to do with me. I

relaxed my face and tried to look sympathetic. “And you think I’m related and I therefore can get them to her?”

“That’s what I hoped.”

I wiped my already clean hands on my napkin. “I’m sorry, Mr. Rich, but I think you’ll have to look elsewhere. I’ve never heard of her.”

The old man looked disappointed, but I was relieved. I had bigger fish to fry and a deadline that was breathing down my neck. I didn’t have time to courier old photos to someone. I glanced at my phone. I didn’t even have time to finish lunch.

“I’m so sorry not to have better news for you. But unfortunately, I have to get going.” I started to pull some bills from my wallet.

Linden held up his hand. “It’s on me.”

“Thanks.” I drained my water glass, pulled my purse strap onto my shoulder, and pushed back my chair a couple inches, which was as far as it would go in the tight space. “Just out of curiosity, why was this stuff at a police station? What are these pictures of?”

Linden looked at his father, who looked down at his plate as if the answer were written there in the smear of coney sauce.

“They’re from the ’67 riots.”

I felt my heart rate tick up, scooted back up to the table, and leaned in. “Did you bring them?”

“Denny didn’t think I should.”

“Why not?”

“Because of that,” Linden said. “Because you weren’t interested until you knew what they were, and I knew it would play out this way.” He turned to his father. “Didn’t I tell you? Didn’t I say she’d only be interested in getting her hands on the photos?”

I sat back, trying to play it cool, trying to put that approachable-yet-intelligent smile back on my face. “Why shouldn’t I be? I’ve built my entire reputation on exposing corruption and neglect in this city. Photos of historic significance left to rot in a

police station are just one more symptom of the larger problem. And I'm working on a big piece right now on the riots. Those photos have never been published—I assume. I'm sure the *Free Press* would pay handsomely to have the privilege of sharing them with the world."

Linden pointed a finger in my direction. "There! There it is! Just like I said."

Mr. Rich placed a hand on his son's forearm. "Okay, okay. Just calm down and let me talk a moment."

Linden withdrew the accusative finger and leaned back on his half of the seat, his million-dollar foot stretching out past my chair, blocking me in even as I knew he must want me out.

His father looked at me with tired eyes. "Miss Balsam, I'm burdened. I been carrying something around for fifty years that I got to let go of. This camera and those photos have to get back to Nora. Not to the paper, not to a museum or a library. To Nora. Now, I can't take them. But you could. Are you willing to just look into it? Do a little poking around to see if you're related like we think you are? And if you are, would you be willing to make contact with her? Kind of ease her into the idea slowly? These photos will stir up a lot of hard memories for an old lady. But I know it in my heart—the Lord laid it on my soul—I need to get these to her."

One of the most important lessons I learned in my first couple years as a professional journalist was not to get emotionally involved with a story. There was simply too much heartbreaking stuff you had to write about. To let yourself empathize with the boy who was being bullied or the man who had lost his business or the woman whose daughter had been abducted, when there was nothing you could do to help the situation beyond making a voice heard—it was just too heavy a burden to bring home with you every night. So I built up a wall around my heart and stayed within it at all times when it came to work.

But there was something about this man's eyes, the crooked

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lines on either side of his mouth suggesting he had found as much to frown at in life as to smile about, that chipped away at that wall.

I tapped my finger on the table. “Why do you have them if she’s the one who took them?”

“She didn’t take them. My uncle did. But he’s gone. They belong to her now.”

“Why?”

“She’s his wife.”

An interracial couple in the 1960s? This was getting interesting. Maybe I could work this into my larger series of articles about the riots and the time surrounding them. It had a great human angle, a larger cultural-historical angle, a connection to a beloved NFL player. I could even frame it as a personal family story if I truly was related. The question was, would I have the time? I still hadn’t been able to crack the protective shield around Judge Sharpe, the white whale of my investigative series, and time was running out.

“Okay, let’s say I am related to her. I still don’t know her and she doesn’t know me, so why would she even listen to me?”

“Miss Balsam, do you believe in God?”

The question caught me off guard. “Yes.”

“Do you believe he works all things together for his glory?”

My parents believed that. My sister did. I had once. Before I’d seen just how chaotic and messed up and out of control the world was. If journalism had taught me anything, it was that we were all just out there flailing and stumbling through a minefield of dangers and predators and dumb blind chance. But it was obvious that Mr. Rich believed God had given him a task—return these items—and that he would get no rest until the task was completed.

Instead of answering his question, I asked one of my own. “Why don’t you just ship it to her?”

“No, that ain’t the way.”

I waited for a logical reason why not, but clearly none was forthcoming.

“Would you just look into it?” he said.

Those beseeching brown eyes tugged a few more bricks out of my wall.

“Sure. I’ll look into it,” I said.

Mr. Rich nodded and slid a business card across the table. I avoided Linden’s sharp gaze as I pocketed the card and squeezed out of my chair.

“It was so nice meeting you,” I said. “Thanks for lunch.”

I walked out into the windy, sun-drenched afternoon, handed a dollar to the homeless guy who paced and mumbled a few yards from the door, and headed down the street to the old Federal Reserve building, which had housed the shrinking *Free Press* staff since 2014, and where a pile of work awaited me.

I tried to concentrate on the unending march of emails marked *urgent* in my inbox, including one from my editor—*My office, ASAP*—but my mind was spinning out all the directions this new story idea could go. This was decidedly inconvenient because I needed to focus.

I’d been stalking Judge Sharpe through his affable and unsuspecting son Vic for months, and I finally felt like a break was imminent. Vic had texted me last night to set up a meeting after he, in his words, “discovered something big I think you’ll be interested to know.” I had to get these photos off my mind for the moment, and the best way to do that was to get the research ball rolling.

I slipped out to the stairwell and pulled up Ancestry.com on my phone. A few minutes and thirty dollars later, I was clicking on little green leaf icons that waved at me from the screen. I found my parents and then began tracing my father’s branch back to the family tree. Grandfather Richard, Great-Uncle Warner, and *ping*, just like that, a great-aunt born Eleanor Balsam.

I typed a quick text to my sister in L.A.

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Hey, long time, no see. Family question: have you ever heard Mom or Dad talk about a great-aunt Eleanor or Nora? Let me know. TX.

I waited a moment for a reply. She was probably with a patient. It was also possible she had no idea who was texting her because it had been at least two years since we last talked. I walked back to my desk, pulled up my piece on a black cop who worked the 1967 riots, and gave it one last read before sending it on its way to my editor. It would join my piece on a white firefighter I'd sent him two days ago. The piece on Judge Sharpe, who'd been a National Guardsman during the riots, would complete the triptych. If I could get it written.

It was 1:14 p.m. If I left in five, I'd have time to freshen up before meeting Vic for coffee at the Renaissance Center Starbucks.

My phone buzzed. My sister.

She's Dad's aunt. Why? Is she okay?

Leave it to Grace to immediately worry.

I want to visit her. Do you know where she lives?

I stared at the screen, waiting.

As far as I know, she still lives in the old Lapeer house.

She said it like I should know what it was, like The Old Lapeer House was a thing. Even after all this time, it still irked me that my unplanned birth nine years after my sister's meant that I so often felt like an outsider in my own family, never quite in on the stories or inside jokes.

Address?

Pause.

Mom may have it.

Great. My parents had been medical missionaries in the Amazon River Basin for the past eight years. It wasn't as if I could just call them up any time I wanted. Mom called on my birthday and Christmas and any other time they happened to be in a town for supplies, but that wasn't often.

My phone buzzed again.

Or call Barb. 269-555-7185

I didn't bother asking who Barb was, especially since it was apparent I should already know. I'd cold-call her no matter what. The prospect of getting my hands on those never-before-seen photos of the riots was too tempting to wait for proper introductions.

I looked at the clock again. If I was going to make it to the RenCen Starbucks on time, I had to leave. Now. I grabbed my purse and my bag from my desk and headed back to the stairwell.

"Liz!"

My editor was the one person in the world who called me Liz.

"I'm out the door, Jack. I'll stop in when I get back. Three o'clock. Four, tops."

I pushed through the metal door, put the box of photos out of mind, and got on with my real work: getting the notoriously circumspect Judge Ryan Sharpe to open up about his involvement in the 1967 riots. Because no matter what image he liked to project to the public, my gut told me that beneath the black robe lurked a man who had something to hide.