

# WHERE THE ROAD BENDS

*Also by David Rawlings*

*The Camera Never Lies*

*The Baggage Handler*

W H E R E  
T H E  
*a novel*  
R O A D  
B E N D S

DAVID RAWLINGS



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

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# PROLOGUE

## Fifteen Years Ago

The four mortarboard tassels flicked away the past and ushered in the future as they arced in the afternoon sun. The circle of friendship that withstood four hard years started its inevitable loosening; the glue that bonded their foursome eased away as the cheers across the quad died away. The clock started a lifetime of mesmeric ticking, a time for potential to become performance.

The first hand thrust the caught cap onto a head of bouncing red curls. Bree Carter choked back tears as she flicked the tassel from her eyes. “I can’t believe it’s all over.”

Andy Summers grabbed his mortarboard and spun it between his fingers, his lithe forearm muscles rippling as the billowing gown’s sleeves fell away. “This moment has been so far away for years and now that it’s here, it doesn’t seem real.”

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Another hand snatched a graduation cap destined to fall onto the head of a stunning young woman with jet-black locks. Eliza Williams. “I know, Breezy. It’s hard to believe we’re finished, but now the next chapter of our lives begins.”

Lincoln Horne casually swung his graduation cap by its tassel. A perfect smile beamed from under contoured, don’t-care rusted-blond hair. “And I can’t wait for that next chapter to start.” He gave a cheeky wink to Eliza.

Bree wiped away a runaway tear. “I’m not ready. I’m happy enough to stay here.”

Andy smirked at Bree. “Out of the four of us, you’re probably the one with the least to worry about. An audition in New York and the chance to play on your own CD? I just hope you remember us when you make it big!”

Bree bit a quivering bottom lip. “I don’t know . . . It’s a long way to go for a long shot. What if I fail?”

Eliza scolded her roommate with a wagging finger, an action she’d perfected in dorm rooms and classrooms. A replacement mom without the implied guilt. “It’s your chance to prove everyone back home wrong.”

Andy threw an arm around Bree’s shoulders. “I believe in you. If I didn’t I wouldn’t have lent you the money to go. I want to help you achieve your dream, and now that I’ve come into some money, I can.”

Lincoln bowed theatrically to the group. “No need to thank me again for the tip, Mr. Summers. I thought you’d

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like to know our star player would be a last-minute withdrawal against Clarendon University. No one else knew, so I'm glad you acted on my advice."

Andy beamed. "Biggest lucky streak ever! Long may it continue. I'll be a millionaire before I'm thirty."

Lincoln placed a firm hand on Andy's shoulder. "Slow down, buddy. I've told you a thousand times before. Life is more than what we earn; it's the good we do with it."

Andy bowed his head in deference. "Thank you, Brother Horne."

Eliza's black hair swayed as she tut-tutted, back in her familiar den mother role. "I told you to be careful, Andy. You don't want to head down that road."

"What road? You have to live a little, Lize. Anyway, when you're a huge name, Breezy, I know you'll pay me back with front-row tickets for life."

They shared a laugh, the common soundtrack to life at college. Except this time it petered out, almost as if the soundtrack was entering its coda.

Bree's tears returned. "So when do you leave, Linc?"

Lincoln's enthusiasm bounded into the conversation. "Eliza and I leave in two weeks. I can't wait to start building the school in Uganda. Now that graduation is out of the way, we can really focus on changing the world, you know? And I've got a big surprise planned for us."

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Bree patted Lincoln's arm with a glare at Eliza, who rejected her plea with the tiniest shake of her head.

A frown cut through Lincoln's wide-eyed innocence. "What?"

Eliza crinkled her nose. "I need to postpone the Africa trip for a while."

Lincoln's mouth dropped open, and Bree squeezed his waist.

"Something's come up—an internship in fashion—and it just feels like the smart move is to take it. Maybe we can talk about going out and changing the world after that's over."

Lincoln's grin slid from his face as he folded his muscular arms. "When did this come up?"

Eliza looked away at the dispersing crowd as Andy nudged her. "Good for you, Lize. I'm so proud of you."

A thin smile settled on Eliza's face as she studied the ground. "Thanks, Andy, you're a pal."

Silence descended on the foursome—unheard of in the nonstop talking since that chance grouping in their first anthropology project in Professor Snowden's classroom and cemented in mind-numbing lectures, which had forged a four-year friendship and one romance.

Bree broke it. "You guys have gotten me through college. That won't stop, will it?"

Eliza left Lincoln's brow-knotted grimace unreturned.

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“Of course not. Let’s just enjoy the moment. Aren’t we celebrating at Andy’s place?”

Andy grinned. “It will be my pleasure to host my favorite Flagstaff College alumni with all the food and drink money can buy, courtesy of the little birdie Lincoln knows inside our basketball program.”

Bree frowned at Eliza. “How will we make sure we won’t drift apart?”

“We’ll make it work. We don’t have to be in each other’s pockets to still be in each other’s lives. Enjoy the opportunity in New York.”

Andy smoothed his oversized gown. “If Bree’s worried we’ll lose touch—and I don’t think she has any reason to be—let’s put something in place to catch up in what . . . ten, fifteen years? We can share our stories of greatness and how we got there.”

Bree wiped away another tear. “What, like a dinner?”

Andy guffawed. “A dinner? You’ll be a famous musician by then, so you can pay for us all to travel to the other side of the world!”

Bree waved off Andy’s enthusiasm, which only drew another finger waggle from Eliza. “You won’t get that recording contract if you don’t start believing in yourself.”

Lincoln leveled a pleading look at Eliza, who mouthed back, *Not now*.

Andy snapped his fingers. “Why don’t we go back to the

beginning? In that very first project in anthropology class, we studied outback Australia. What do you think about heading there?”

Bree shuddered. “All those spiders and snakes? Are you sure it will be safe?”

“You’re presuming we’ll survive the next fifteen years.” Andy thrust his hand to the middle of their circle. “So what do you say? Who’s in?”

Bree’s smile emerged through the tears as she placed her hand on top, followed by Eliza’s. Lincoln’s hand was the last to join, his brow furrowed as he failed to catch Eliza’s eye.

Eliza looked around the circle with a frown. “Fifteen years! That’s our thirties. Middle age! That’s so far into the future.”

Lincoln forced a smile. “So was graduation.”

Bree folded her arms, pinning down her gown now billowing in the growing warmth of the afternoon breeze. “Can you imagine what we’ll look like?”

Andy cackled. “I’ll bet you one thing. If Bree hasn’t conquered the world, I’ll be the most successful.”

Bree slapped the mortarboard from Andy’s hand. “Dean Fulwood talked about not getting ahead of ourselves on the road of life, but to enjoy the journey.”

Eliza stared beyond the group, wistfulness softening her expression. “He could find a way to jam that marketing slogan into anything.”

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Andy threw his arms wide, drawing them into the close circle they had become. “So I’ll see you in Australia in fifteen years. But that’s way off. Who’s up for a party?”



# ONE

## Present Day

With the gloss of their fifteen-year reunion fading, the buzz of excitement settled into the sharp ache of anxiety. One set of American thumbs twiddled on the cold gray table in the interview room of a police station parked in the red dust of the tiny town nestled in the heart of Australia. Fingernails of a second tourist beat an impatient tattoo, while another set of American nails were already halfway chewed away.

The ordeal started long before the police car ride back into civilization, the unexpected bookend to a reunion that had started days earlier. Their story—which they each thought to be unbelievable—turned out to be a variation of someone else’s. Except one, which went unspoken. That someone else should have been sitting in the empty chair, but

the police had found no trace at all, save for a neat stack of rocks at their campsite.

There was no question they would stay around—the police were not keen on them leaving—but there was no way they could leave one of their group behind. Silence fell on the windowless, white-walled room, punctuated by drumming fingernails.

A hard swallow and a jerked thumb toward the closed door. “How can we explain it to them?”

The fingernails stopped in midtap. “It has to be the tour group. I can’t think of how else to explain it.”

A shake of the head and a lowering of bitten nails. “At least you two didn’t have to run for your life.”

A quiet voice, buried deep in thought, said, “Still, there’s a part of me that’s glad I did.”

Nodding, the three glanced at the chair where their missing friend should be sitting.

Distant footsteps grew louder in the corridor before they stopped outside their door.

Three heads pivoted. “Do you reckon that’s—?”

“It could be that detective. He looked like he doesn’t believe us for a second.”

Outside the interview room, Detective Green scratched his graying temples as he clutched to his chest a notepad filled with question marks and scrawled, angry arrows. And no answers.

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“How do you want to play this?”

Detective Sergeant Winter thumbed through a transcript. “Their individual interviews came up with no red flags. Weird, definitely, but not suspicious.”

“Eddie says he’s got nothing to do with it, and I tend to believe him.”

“What do we do with what they said about their friend?”

The senior detective shook his head. “I don’t even know what to make of that, or where else to start looking.” He turned the door handle.

# TWO

## Five Days Earlier

Waves of passengers surged back and forth past Bree in an ebbing tide, half happier than her, half more relaxed. From her vantage point behind the tiny square of laminex that passed for a table at the Rock & Brews café at LAX, it was easy to see who was flying out on their exciting vacation and those returning to the every day, their expressions already recoiling under tension.

Bree's fingers toyed with the apple she'd bought with reluctance. The money from Sam's extra shifts at the nursing home would fly her to Australia, fulfilling a promise made in another time by another Bree, but their straining family budget hadn't stretched to the pricier snacks on the menu. Overpriced fruit it had to be.

Another time. Before Sam and his belief in her—a salve

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for the wound of her self-esteem, opened around the kitchen table of her childhood. An easy target for a wounded sniper. Before the girls and their love of music. She was glad to have passed that on and hoped she could guide them to avoid the same mistakes she'd made.

Time ticked on, a slow drip after the flooding rush of a race to the airport and boarding a flight among family tears, most of them hers.

Bree stared at the musicians whose photographs paraded on the café's signage. McCartney and Lennon. Jagger. Springsteen. Musicians she'd hoped to join in the future of her past, but they weren't in her present. The bitter pang of disappointment bit down on her hard. Bree used to hope her music would make a big splash. But after floating for years, she felt like she'd never even made a ripple. And she was still paddling in her small pond.

She banished the creeping negativity with a practiced hand and summoned back the excitement that had warmed her the minute the plane had pushed back from the gate in Nashville, the space around her quiet, free from demands. A space of her own.

A chunky guitar riff drifted across her table, followed by an angel voice Bree knew had been crafted by a sound engineer in a cramped, smoky studio like the one in which she worked on the wrong side of the mixing desk. The TV screens filled with the latest sneering teen sensation, delivering a song

written by someone with real talent. Someone like she used to be.

Bree checked her phone. They'd be boarding their flight to Sydney in just over an hour. Where were they all? She tried Eliza's cell phone again with no success.

Bree turned over the apple in her fingers. Ten days in the heart of Australia with old friends. She smiled at the memory of Sam's reassurance as she boarded her LA flight.

*"Look, maybe you aren't the person you used to be—who is?—so take some time away to rediscover that. Forget about the three of us and fulfill the promise you made to your friends. Once again, Breezy, you are completely overthinking it."*

She was lucky to have Sam, a man happy for her to reconnect with old friends while he guarded their princesses—in an age where some of her girlfriends seemed to use their weekly coffee date to moan about men making their lives a misery. Self-doubt threatened to engulf her without her white knight by her side.

This trip was more than fulfilling a promise. It was the reporting back of what they'd done and who they'd become. At graduation it was all about unfulfilled potential. Fifteen years down the track, it felt a lot like regret.

The outgoing crowd parted like the Red Sea for a tall, elegant woman, somehow separate from the crowd while immersed in it, wearing large sunglasses pinning down jet-black hair at her crown. Bree breathed easier as she waved.

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Recognition eased across Eliza's face, and she nudged her way through the traffic, her smile on high beam.

Eliza hadn't aged a day since graduation. Following her rise through the ranks of fashion glitterati from the comfortable sidelines of social media warmed Bree's heart but had frozen her self-confidence. Her old friend had everything—the looks, the figure, the apartment, and the high-powered job.

Eliza enveloped Bree in an embrace, and the diamond egle on Eliza's jacket scratched her nose. "Breezy, it's so good to see you." As Eliza stood back and held her by the shoulders, Bree felt a foot smaller and thirty pounds heavier in her old friend's shadow. Her own red hair had been her greatest asset in college. Now it wasn't quite a liability, but it had slid down her balance sheet.

"Where are the guys?"

Bree shrugged. "I can't get hold of Lincoln."

"Shall we head to the gate and wait for them there?" Eliza turned and carved a wake as they pushed upstream against the tide of traveling humanity. Bree fell into line with Eliza's long stride, skipping on the occasional step to keep up with leopard-skin luggage.

Eliza slowed. "I'm so glad you decided to take advantage of Sam looking after the girls. You don't know how lucky you are—the girls in my Pilates class don't think he's real."

Bree chuckled. “Just lucky I guess. Did you enjoy the show in Miami?”

Eliza nodded. “It was all right. It was good to see some sun again and get out of the cold for a while.”

“But didn’t you win a big award?”

Eliza powered through the crowd. “They give those things out like candy, so it was just my turn. Anyway, did Emily’s concert go well? I saw the photos you posted.”

Bree skirted a family parked in the middle of the walkway, juggling climbing children and a mountain of baggage. “She loved it, but a recital is a recital—five minutes of interest in a two-hour program. Oh, before I forget—” Bree rummaged through her handbag and drew out a small bracelet of painted pink-and-yellow beads and twine, shining with glitter. “Emily made this for her Auntie Lize.”

Eliza slipped the bracelet over her wrist. “You tell her Auntie Lize loves it and I’ll wear it in Australia. How are Imogen’s singing lessons coming along?”

The crowd thinned as they approached gate 58. Bree and Eliza batted back the focus of their conversation to each other like Wimbledon finalists as they found two empty seats next to the window.

Eliza scanned the crowd for familiar faces. “We’re doing it again, aren’t we? Trying to downplay the successes in our lives.”

“I guess it’s what we do. You’re glad I’m taking time off

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from the family, and I'm glad you could fit this trip in with your busy schedule." Bree squeezed Eliza's knee. "I'm so glad you came."

"I couldn't leave you on your own and a promise is a promise, isn't it? Plus, this trip has come at a good time, to be honest."

"What do you mean by that?"

Eliza pursed thin lips. "The chairman has asked me to consider the CEO job."

"So you'll be running your own fashion label? That's amazing!"

Eliza's face showed she didn't share Bree's excitement. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? I'm one step from the pinnacle of my industry, but something isn't sitting right. Going to the middle of nowhere and dropping offline is exactly what I need at the moment. And I've been researching it. Did you know there's an outback thing in Australia called a walkabout? Although I read somewhere they don't call it that anymore. A journey of self-discovery—maybe I could do something like that. Find out what I'm supposed to be doing in life."

"But you've got the perfect life. Aren't you happy?"

Eliza gave the tiniest shake of her head as she continued scanning the crowd. "I feel like I'm supposed to do something different, you know? Something that means something—"

"But you're so successful." Bree couldn't comprehend her

friend's perfect life being anything but a dream. "Unless this is about something else?"

Eliza rolled her eyes. "I hope you're not referring to having a man in my life. I'm above all that biological clock nonsense, and I'm not really looking for Mr. Right, although I sure have dated a few Mr. You'll Dos over the past year. I think it's deeper than that. I thought I'd have changed the world by now."

Bree put an arm around her friend's shoulder. "What did you used to say to me in our dorm? You need to believe in yourself?"

Eliza smiled. "I *do* believe in myself. Maybe I've reached the point where I wonder if I'm believing in the right thing."

"You and I can chat about it under the stars in outback Australia. At least it will be warm for us." Bree surveyed the growing throng at the gate. "So we know what Lincoln looks like, but what about Andy? Do you think he's put on more weight since the ten-year dinner?"

"Who knows? I've spent hours online trying to find him, but even my ninja skills on Google couldn't uncover him. And that cell phone number he gave me at the reunion was disconnected."

Bree leaned into her old friend with a conspiratorial whisper. "Have you worked out how you'll handle Lincoln?"

Eliza shrugged as behind them a plane pushed back from the gate. "There's nothing to handle. Check his social

media—he's doing very well for himself and seems like he's enjoying life.”

“But what about those LinkedIn notifications you got saying he was looking at your profile?”

“So?”

“Twenty times?”

“It's a free country, Breezy, and he was probably checking my contact details for this trip.”

“But twenty times? He hasn't gotten over graduation, has he?”

Eliza laughed it off. “I would *hope* so. We should have all grown up since then.”

“Well, on social media it looks like Lincoln is living it up. It's nothing but money and parties.”

Eliza frowned. “What did Professor Snowden always say? ‘Change is inevitable; growth is optional.’ But as I said, that's ancient history.”

“Speaking of ancient history—” Bree leaped to her feet and waved at a tall man making his way toward the gate, sunglasses pushed up onto tousled brown hair that looked good despite the late hour. He wore a faded Switchfoot T-shirt under a linen jacket and chinos. “Linc!”

He beelined toward them, a huge smile splitting his face. Bree rushed to throw her arms around him. “I'm so glad to see you.”

“You too, Breezy. It's hard to believe that the last time

the three of us were together was fifteen years ago. It feels like yesterday.”

A heady cloud of cologne enveloped Bree as she shot a raised-eyebrowed look at Eliza, before she gazed back into a familiar face that could have been lifted from their yearbook photo. He hadn’t aged a day either. She hoped Andy had been battered by similar storms in life to her, if only so she could share the tag of ugly duckling. “You didn’t come to the ten-year dinner.”

Passengers milled around the gate as a shadow passed over Lincoln’s face. “Work was crazy so I couldn’t fly in. We’ve got this ridiculously long flight to catch up on all that anyway.” He peered past Bree. “Hey, Lize. Is it okay to still call you Lize or is Mrs. . . .”

Eliza stepped forward, and Bree clocked the smallest hesitation before their polite embrace. “Lize is fine.”

Bree stood dwarfed between two old friends who could easily have passed for runway models. Still.

Lincoln surveyed the growing crowd. “Andy not here yet?”

Eliza checked her phone. “No, and I couldn’t find him online either. How can you do business in the twenty-first century without being online?”

Lincoln scrolled through his phone. “I need to see the airline.” He charged off to a counter staffed by a flight attendant in a green-and-yellow uniform.

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Bree grinned at Eliza. “Feels like yesterday, eh?”

Eliza’s jaw clenched. “Ancient history.”

Lincoln returned, his cell phone to his ear. “Do you remember what Andy was like in our early conversations? Couldn’t wait to get away on this trip, but since a month ago we’ve heard nothing, apart from one message asking me to lend him the money for his ticket.” He lowered the phone. “Voice mail.” He pulled back his sleeve and checked a glittering, chunky Rolex for a moment too long, as if giving it its moment in the spotlight. “Probably. He was very quiet about it. We board in fifty minutes.”

Eliza smirked. “When was Andy ever quiet about anything?”

Bree’s gaze was drawn to Lincoln’s wrist and she whistled. “That looks expensive.”

“When you’re in stockbroking, it’s important to wear your success.” Lincoln glanced at Eliza’s wrist. “Good to see you’re doing it too, Lize.”

Bree elbowed Lincoln. “That was a gift from my girls. Hey, didn’t you bring home a bracelet from that African orphanage you went to after graduation?” Another quick-fire glance at her old friend.

Lincoln shuffled on his feet, a hardness swirling across his face. “Probably.” He studied the incoming passengers as he rose on his toes. “If Andy doesn’t turn up, I’ll have to get

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the money from him somehow, but I don't really know how.  
It's like he's disappeared.”