Acclaim for David Rawlings

"In his intriguing novel, *The Camera Never Lies*, David Rawlings challenges us to wonder what our photographs would look like if our souls, not our faces, were captured by the lens. This fascinating story will capture your imagination and your heart."

—Rachel Hauck, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Wedding Dress* and *The Memory House*

"The camera never lies, and neither does this gripping story about unearthing our deepest secrets in the most fantastical of ways. A message relatable to us all, bottled in an adventure we all love to read. Highly recommend!"

—Melissa Ferguson, author of *The Dating Charade*, on *The Camera Never Lies*

"A thought-provoking look at the real price that secrets extract—not just from the person keeping them, but from their loved ones too. You'll close this story and be compelled to examine your own life . . . and also look at those around you and wonder, 'Who else looks like they have it all together but is drowning on the inside?'"

—Jessica Kate, author of *Love and Other Mistakes,* on *The Camera Never Lies*

"*The Baggage Handler* by David Rawlings is an extraordinary novel that lingered in my heart long after I finished it. Rawlings's fabulous writing highlighted the unusual premise that had me thinking about my own baggage. I want everyone I know to read this!"

—Colleen Coble, *USA TODAY* bestselling author of *The House at Saltwater Point* and the Lavender Tide series

"Throughout the day I found myself itching to get back to this story. You will too. *The Baggage Handler* is a tale that will resonate deeply with those who have held on too tightly, for too long, to the things that hold them captive. That's me. That's you. Pick it up and prepare to have your world turned upside down, then turned right side up."

—James L. Rubart, bestselling author of *The Man He Never Was*

The Camera Never Lies

Also by David Rawlings

The Baggage Handler

The Camera Never Lies

a novel

DAVID RAWLINGS



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Camera Never Lies

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What would you do if your secrets were revealed to those around you?

One

Eighty-eight years of life reduced to a vintage, cracked briefcase sat before Daniel Whiteley. Gramps used to joke he loved this briefcase because it matched his complexion—weathered and beaten, knocked around at the edges. A survivor.

But now Gramps was gone.

The dusty leather contained not his soul but his meager possessions, entombed by rust-seized locks in an arthritic grip. Daniel stared at what remained of his grandfather and sipped at his watery, soulless coffee.

His mother wiped away a tear. "He was adamant I give it to you straight after the funeral."

As if he were the only thing holding her up, she dissolved into Daniel's embrace, and he raised his Styrofoam cup as she stifled a sob into his chest. Then she stepped back, pressing the creases from her shapeless black dress to distract another

wave of emotion. "You spoke so well. He would have been proud of you."

"It was important I got it right." So important he'd worn a tie for the first time in years. He wouldn't let down his hero.

He clasped the briefcase handle and lifted it, feeling an unexpected weight.

"You look so much like him." Emotion swallowed his mother's sentence, and she dabbed at her eyes with a sodden handkerchief. "Where's Kelly?"

"Had to go back to work."

The tiniest frown tugged at the corner of her mouth. "How is Milly after the funeral?"

Daniel looked over his mother's head to the top of his daughter's, her gaze buried in her phone. She fidgeted on the last plastic chair in the row against the wall of the tiny room of the funeral home that only thirty minutes earlier had been half filled with people who had gathered to bid farewell to Gramps.

"She's quiet, but that's just a normal grief reaction." But he knew it was more than that. Milly was becoming a puzzle not even his master's degree in counseling could solve. She was twelve years old now, a time of life when a father's pride and dread should emerge in equal measure. The testing of boundaries for independence. A whole universe of dribbling, hormone-infected boys. Exploring the edges of the fun the world had to offer. But instead his daughter was growing quieter by the day.

"And Kelly?"

"It's hard to say. She's sad about Gramps, but she won't accept my help to work through anything she's dealing with."

"Is that why you aren't taking the rest of the day off to spend with your family?"

"Three of my afternoon appointments are new couples, so no. Thanks for looking after Milly."

His mother reached up, a familiar stroke of his cheek. "I'm so proud of what you've achieved, especially with your book."

No Secrets was the difference between just staying afloat and living in luxury on the cliff tops in his late thirties. He was so fortunate to have stumbled across the idea for the book.

"I want you to be happy, Daniel."

He fobbed her off with a side hug. This was not the time to have *that* conversation. "Thanks, Mom. I'll call you tomorrow so we can work out a time to go through the last of Gramps's stuff."

His mother deposited the sodden handkerchief in her oversized handbag and then drew out an envelope with trembling fingers.

"There's one more thing. He wanted you to have this." She glanced again at the familiar writing, and the tears returned. "I need to talk to the funeral director—" Another cresting wave of emotion carried her from the room.

The last of Gramps sat at Daniel's feet, his last words in his hands. He took another lukewarm sip as he studied the

envelope and the two words printed across the front in a stilted hand.

For Daniel

He drained the Styrofoam cup, ran a finger under the sealed flap, and drew out a single page filled with Gramps's upright handwriting. He ran a hand through his thick black curls and then adjusted his glasses as the sadness, clamped down for the funeral, wriggled free. For the last time, Gramps spoke to him.

> My boy, you often told me very little surprises you, so I thought I would speak to you from beyond the grave. I'm sure that might.

Daniel chuckled as the gravel in Gramps's voice echoed in his head and shook loose a tear.

> I'm so proud of the man you've become, with the success of your counseling practice and, of course, that book.

Daniel smiled through a bitten lip and filmed eyes.

> I know you've got great insights into other people, but I worry for your family, Daniel. When I've raised this before, you've always shifted the conversation. Forgive an

old man for advising the counselor, but I can see where your hearts are and where you're headed. Based on your current trajectory, I'm not sure you'll last.

Daniel winced as he sucked in a breath. He looked across to his distant daughter, thumbs hammering at her phone, within reach yet so far away.

I can help. I'm leaving you this gift I wish I had in my younger days, when choices in front of me were easier and would have saved so much pain.

The briefcase sat at his feet. Its leather shone in patches, and cracks on the lid revealed a paisley pattern beneath. Silver corners were burnished and tarnished, and combination tumblers with faded numbers sat on either side of the clasps.

My gift to you is in my old briefcase. I'm sure you'll be able to unlock it. The combination represents the most special day in my life.

The first tear fell onto the quivering page as Daniel read the final words Gramps would ever say to him.

I never allowed you to touch it, but you need it now. I have left it for you and not your mother because I know

you need its truth. Please use it wisely; it has freed me from so much and taught me there's always more to life than what we see. I love you.

Gramps

The gravel died away, and Gramps became silent in Daniel's life.

More tears came—a normal grief reaction—as he reached for the briefcase. *The most special day in my life.* Daniel chuckled to himself. He'd heard that phrase every year just before he blew out the candles. On the first lock, 0–1–1. On the other, 7–8–3.

His birthday.

The locks snapped open with a *thunk*. A puff of nostalgia and Old Spice drifted out as Daniel lifted the lid to find the one thing in Gramps's life he was never allowed to share.

His old Olympus camera.

Heavy, black and silver—from a time when the camera pointed away from photographers and not back at them while they made a face like a duck.

Daniel lifted it out with reverence; it was a sacred relic. He ran his thumb across the thick knobs and stiff levers, surrounded by tiny etched numbers. A rising sense of the forbidden grabbed him as his finger rested on the trigger where Gramps's weathered and lined index finger had once sat.

Daniel squinted through the viewfinder, and the tiny

room came alive. The fading plastic chairs sparkled like new. The fluorescent lighting was somehow more yellow, more natural. Milly hunched even further over her phone. He brushed a roughness on the bottom of the camera and flipped it over to find an inscription in an elegant cursive script.

No matter what you think you might see, the camera never lies.

Gramps could be melodramatic when he wanted to be.

Film was already in the camera. That was good; he had no idea where he'd buy any.

Something else was in the briefcase—a flash of red. Daniel pulled out a small book with a fading red cover and a word stenciled on the front in worn gold: Photos. He felt another rising sense of the forbidden; he had seen few of Gramps's photos and never this album.

The book creaked open with a stiff groan. On each page was a single photograph held in place with tiny black triangles—Daniel recognized two of Gramps's friends from the funeral. The color in the photos was washed out, as if someone had dialed it down when the photos were processed.

As he flipped the pages, he noticed something odd about the photographs. Unsmiling eyes looked everywhere but at the camera. It was as if they'd been taken the split second before the subject knew the camera was there. One of Gramps's friends—a man in his sixties who had delivered a reading at the funeral—lunged to block a computer screen with his hand. Another

friend; the curl of cigarette smoke emerged from behind her back.

These photos were poor quality and embarrassing. Why put them in an album?

Daniel turned another page. There was Gramps's friend Garth, a gray woolen beanie jammed down on escaping wisps of gray hair, a bushy unkempt beard, punctuated by a pained grin full of teeth that looked like a vandalized graveyard. He leaned against a shuttered door in a bleak back alley, forlorn eyes pleading with the night sky. But Garth had spoken at the funeral, clean-shaven and resplendent in a striped woolen vest and crisp white shirt. Daniel was sure he didn't live on the streets.

Another page. Gramps sat in his beloved burgundy recliner—although it was now a dull, dirty pink—smiling as he tore up a betting slip. A sad revelation washed over Daniel as the pieces locked into place. He often quizzed Gramps on his lack of money and meager possessions, and now he knew why. Gramps never mentioned he was a gambler. But why get someone to take a photo of it?

Another page, and his own face appeared, pain and frustration on display in crisp color. He sat at one end of the couch in his expansive living room, tight arms folded across his chest, white and pink balloons floating at his shoulder. Kelly sat at the other end of the couch, overdressed for a child's party, blond hair styled to perfection. As usual. Under her

outstretched painted nails was . . . a pill bottle? It sat on a sheet of paper as Kelly threw a furtive glance over her shoulder at him, her brown eyes wide.

On the next page of the tiny album, the same photo. Why would Gramps have two copies? But no, this one was different. While Kelly's fingers still splayed over white plastic, in this one Daniel's face beamed at someone off camera, his anger gone. Daniel's professional radar pinged. He should have been seen enjoying his own daughter's birthday party, not fuming at his wife while happy to see other people. He prided himself on his poker face. It was a professional necessity when a conga line of excuses rolled out from the couples who sat opposite him on the couch in his office, giving lame reasons for selfish choices or justifications to wallpaper over guilt. Before he advised them that the best thing to do was to be honest with each other and keep no secrets.

Daniel stared harder at the plastic under Kelly's fingers. Why would she be holding a bottle of pills at Milly's birthday party? Something was up. He'd spent enough time sitting five feet from people who tried—and failed—to hide things from their partner and his probing questions. He'd have to ask her what was going on. Again. He hoped it would go better this time.

The stiff spine creaked as Daniel reached the final photo, only halfway through this strange album. Another familiar face. Milly sat on a chair in the corner of their living room in

her new dress, which she had spent hours choosing to match the pink-and-white theme she'd set for her twelfth birthday party. Her eyes lowered, hands clasped on her lap, the camera flash catching the trickle of a tear down her cheek.

This time embarrassment didn't flood through Daniel. It was guilt. Their rush to cater to everyone else at the party meant he didn't notice Milly at all, and he should have. The pulse of his family had quickened because of their busyness, but it had not brought life.

He looked up at Milly, still head down over her device in an almost mirror image of the photo he held in his hand. Daniel sighed hard. It was another reminder that for all the families he'd saved as a counselor, his own was in danger of falling apart.

Two

The traffic ahead of Kelly smeared into a kaleidoscope of taillights and vague color on bumpers.

Tears will do that.

Kelly drummed them away to music on the steering wheel as she drove from the funeral. Away from her family. She had ten minutes until she called on a new children's clinic and rolled out the usual spiel about the wonder drug ridding families of frustration all over the city. She should be home, not going back to work after a funeral. But this was one more time when the choice was taken from her. As she shot through traffic, Kelly checked the rearview mirror and tried a smile. Sadness still lurked. That would have to go. You only got one chance to make a good first impression, and that didn't happen with red, puffy eyes.

Gramps's passing would leave a big hole in her life. A caring man with a kind word to say—and he always knew the

right time to say it. He was almost her grandfather, too, and he was the one who could get through to Daniel.

The next song from the radio eased into the car—plaintive piano chords in a careful tread over rising violins. The tears crept forward, and Kelly punched for another station. Jagged synth chords backed with the attitude of an all-girl group banished her tears with a finger snap.

The further apart she and Daniel drifted, the more he gravitated toward work. He only talked about people at the practice—the brilliant Anna, whom she had tagged his work-wife out of frustration, or that new receptionist with blouses always two sizes too small.

On the on-ramp to the freeway, the traffic thinned, and she put down her foot. The concrete ribbon stretched into the distance, dry, empty plains shepherding it to the horizon.

Her fingers drummed again as the music powered on. They hadn't had bad times; their good times were just in the rearview mirror. Their early days were a soaring mountain range—the peaks of joy and the valleys of conflict that always rose to another peak. Always. But they had hit the flats.

The tears welled again. A failed wife. That's what she felt like.

Marriage counseling had given her the house of her dreams on the cliffs, but it came with a steep price: more of their conversations devolved into pseudo appointments. Daniel couldn't help but put on his professional hat. Why couldn't

he just *be* in his own marriage instead of diagnosing it? She wanted to talk with the old Daniel—her husband and not the go-to counselor who fixed people. They had spent more than a decade talking about anything and everything, but now the only safe topic of discussion was ferrying Milly around.

Milly.

Her daughter who each day took a step away from her as she disappeared into herself. Kelly had read every parenting book she could. There had to be more to Milly than the first seeds of teenage rebellion. It looked more like a quiet resignation as if accepting a sad inevitability.

A failing mother. That's what she felt like.

Kelly left the freeway as the song ended abruptly on aggressive three-part harmony and made way for softer piano. She shut off the radio. Another quick glance in the rearview mirror, and she blinked hard to clear her eyes as she threaded her way through suburban traffic.

Just another few months.

Giving the "110 percent" required of her at work was more than impossible when her heart was somewhere else. In the excitement of receiving the advance from Daniel's publisher, they'd bought the house on Clifftop Drive. Her dream home, with a kitchen big enough to start her own catering business, had been bought on a promise—his second book being a bestseller too. But it was taking Daniel far longer to write it than he said it would. Longer than she needed. So she'd taken the job

offered through her best friend. At least she would be helping people—families in particular. At least it was that way at the start.

Just another few months. But Milly didn't need her in a few months. She needed her now.

Kelly swung into a parking lot, her car sputtering a little as if cringing in the company of Audis and BMWs. She reached across the seat and grabbed her sample bag emblazoned with Rubicon Pharma. Branded, like all cattle were.

Kelly pulled down her sun visor to look into its mirror. As she dabbed at runaway mascara, she tried her best customer-service smile. It sagged under the grief of the day and placed another brick in her wall of resentment toward work. More than anything, she wanted to draw a big line through that day's calendar square, to hold Milly, to be held by Daniel. But the choice wasn't hers. In so many ways.

Gramps burst back into her thinking, regaling her with the importance of honesty—a crusade he'd championed in the final year of his life. His gentle voice, firm but insistent: *The truth will set you free.* And in those last few months, he had said things to her—things with such clarity—that she wondered where he was getting his information. Whispered secrets with Daniel out of the room, based in truth she dared not speak aloud.

The lid on her emotions bubbled as more tears welled.

With a deep sigh, Kelly pasted a smile on her face as she

strode toward the clinic, the doors gliding open as she ran through the script in her head. The script that would promise a wonder drug for grateful parents losing the battle against a tiny screen for their child's hands.

A script that was getting harder to deliver and impossible to believe in.