

ACCLAIM FOR DAVID RAWLINGS

“*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!”

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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 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
BAGGAGE
HANDLER

THE
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HANDLER

a novel

DAVID RAWLINGS



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Baggage Handler

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What weighs us down is not our baggage but the
decision to keep carrying it.

The sense of dread that began with Becky's email pressed Gillian Short deep into her seat as passengers filed past her down the aisle, a line of eye-rubbing yawns and bouncing impatience.

Gillian lifted the clasp on her still-tight seat belt. Her next moves should be simple: stand up, grab her carry-all from the overhead bin, and start her trip. That's what everyone else was doing with ease.

But they weren't spending five days with her sister.

A young mother leaned across the aisle as she slid her sleeping infant into the sling across her chest. "Are you okay?"

Gillian adjusted her glasses and sighed. The answer bounced around inside her head. *No. I'd rather be anywhere*

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but here. But the words wouldn't come out. What sort of person wasn't excited about a family wedding?

Her.

The young mother slung a bag over her shoulder and grabbed the hand of her patient toddler.

Gillian's impolite silence filled the space where an answer should have gone. She changed the subject—a tried-and-true reflex.

"You have beautiful children. Do you need any help?"

"No, but thanks for offering. Have a great day." She grabbed a tiny backpack with her free hand and took her brood down the aisle.

Gillian shook her head in amazement. *I wish I was a mom like that.* When the boys were young, just wrangling them into high chairs seemed to require military precision and a week's worth of planning. Flying them anywhere would have been out of the question. Perhaps it was even now. Sure, the boys were older, but just thinking about the havoc they could wreak brought out a cold sweat.

The ratchet in her stomach clicked tighter.

Gillian pulled out her phone. Becky hadn't texted—yet. The siren song of Facebook, a song she could never deny, called to her. A flood of wonderful achievements flew past as she thumbed through holiday photos from

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afar and quotes designed to inspire her to greatness, ironic hashtags and political insights into how to fix a broken world, and photos of smiling families doing life together. The best of everyone. Facebook asked what was on her mind, a question she never answered with complete truth. *Had a great flight, now here for the wedding! Gonna have an amazing time!* The self-loathing washed over her the second her finger posted this sculpted thought into life.

The cabin was empty of people and full of stale air. She was stalling. Gillian sighed hard and stood.

Here goes.

After being summoned by her sister's email, she had made it. *You simply have to be here for your niece's wedding. Jessica is the first grandchild to marry, the whole family is coming, and goodness knows you haven't seen most of them in a while.*

It had been a whirlwind few days, organizing her husband so the boys could cope without Mom for three days and filling the freezer so they wouldn't starve.

She reached into the overhead bin for her large, floral carryall, and the ratchet in her stomach gripped her again. It had tightened the closer she got to her old hometown, and the turbulence hadn't helped. Some time away from the madhouse at home should have brought peace and some relief. Time to step outside an unrelenting

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schedule to catch up. Time to breathe. Time to enjoy the celebration and the closeness of family. But the whisper arose again in her ear. It had begun with Becky's email and persisted ever since.

You just need to get through it.

David Byrne sprinted to the heart of baggage claim, nestled under a web of steel spokes and polished metal. He skidded into a wall of bodies and chatter as five planes' worth of passengers crowded the baggage carousels.

David swore under his ragged breath. He wasn't in the mood for people getting in his way. Not after what happened last night.

He dodged through the crowd as he scanned each carousel for his flight number. Then, at the carousel farthest from the exit, the screen fizzed and crackled, and his flight number appeared above the static, black belt.

David swept away the beading sweat from his brow. He couldn't face the board as anything but cool. At least he'd have a chauffeured ride to the showdown meeting, his thoughts given clean air to run through the presentation that would show the board just how wrong they

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were. And the minibar would give him courage. He had given Sisyphus Financial his heart and soul for the last ten years. What more did they want?

His phone was silent. Nothing from Sharon. How could she misunderstand his ultimatum? *You need to promise me it's really over.*

Sharon was silent then and silent now.

David thumbed through his phone, looking for a text with the details for his arrival. His thumb came up empty. Twelve months ago the board had rolled out the red carpet: a limousine and a full minibar for the most profitable branch manager in the country. He winced. The last twelve months had been tough for business. They'd been tough for a lot of things.

His thumb hovered over a family photo from a happier time, the day Caitlin got her Elsa dress and his small family's obsession with *Frozen* began. Sharon was smiling—he could carbon-date the picture from that fact alone—but Caitlin was beaming. David's heart still seemed to swell when he thought of how happy he'd made his daughter that day. He'd hunted all over the city for the smallest dress size to turn his own princess into Disney royalty.

The more familiar hammer beat of stress took over as the reason for his trip shadowed across that happy thought from another time. If he lost his job, Caitlin's

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smile would fade. How could he let that happen to his six-year-old daughter?

A line of twelve suited men stood in the distance, their jaunty chauffeur's hats perched above a row of white cards held at their chests. *Which one is mine? Probably the big guy with the beaming white smile.*

The carousel, a winding, slumbering beast in black and silver, defied him. Behind the walls engines roared and tires squealed with the internal traffic of an airport. The other carousels were a hive of busyness too. Everyone but him got their suitcases and a release to start their day.

A throat politely cleared behind him. "Excuse me, sir?"

David glanced over his shoulder. A young man in a navy-blue cap and overalls leaned on a gleaming silver baggage cart. A white badge branded one breast: Baggage Services.

"Yes?"

The young man tipped his cap, and thick, black, curly hair threatened to burst free. He rose on the balls of his feet. "I'm the Baggage Handler. Do you need some help with your baggage?"

A stroke of luck. For the first time in a while.

David spun to face him. "Actually, buddy, I need to get out of here in a hurry, so if you could make my suitcase appear, that would be ideal."

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The Baggage Handler smiled. "I'm afraid I can't make it appear, sir. But I am available to help you with your baggage when you're ready." His deep-blue eyes sparkled above a kind smile.

The nerves again launched a fresh assault on David. What was the holdup with his suitcase? He needed his sales reports to have any chance of keeping his job. Why couldn't the airline just do their job?

The Baggage Handler again rose on the balls of his feet. "The minute you want any help, you just let me know." He pushed his cart to the other end of the carousel.

What a strange guy.

The crowd swelled around him as the passengers from his flight meandered over, eroding his advantage and negating his sprint from the plane. David huffed and reached into his pocket for another antacid. The indigestion was getting worse, an obvious symptom of fighting to save his future and preparing to justify his existence before a board of twelve uninterested men whose concern for him stopped at his ability to make them money.

At least that was David's self-diagnosis of indigestion, with the help of Dr. Google.

A woman sidled next to him and, sweating, hefted a large, floral carryall over her shoulder. She looked like she wanted to be anywhere but there. A kindred spirit.

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David leaned across to her. “A good flight?”

The woman replied only with a pasted smile to shut down the conversation. David was used to that smile. Sharon had perfected it in the past few months.

The carousel shuddered once, and David swung back to the gaps in the heavy rubber flaps. Vague shapes moved between them, and the sound of brakes slipped out, a curling finger of enticement to his impatience.

The carousel moved at an arthritic, glacial speed. A baggage sticker—stuck to the belt for all eternity—moved past him on a mesmerizing crawl and bent around a corner out of sight. Still his baggage remained a prisoner in the bowels of the airport.

Come on!

Gillian’s phone beeped with a text, and in an instant she became an observer in her own life.

I’m walking in. Will be there in a minute to carry your bag.

Becky, always the protective older sister. A superhero who loved the cape.

A squeal burst over her shoulder, and she turned to see a young woman throw herself into the arms of a young man carrying a huge bouquet.

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I wish Rick would meet me like that.

Her phone rang in her hand, and Becky's voice somehow sounded in her ear before she even answered the call. "Gilly, I'm at baggage claim. Where are you?"

Her big sister teetered on her tiptoes three carousels away, searching the crowded baggage area. Then she waved in recognition and rushed over, shoving her way through the throng.

"I'm so happy you made it." Becky held Gillian by the shoulders. "Let me see you."

Gillian didn't want to be seen. Her gaze hit the floor as she once again stood in the shadow of her sister—a tall frame wrapped in a pencil dress, perfection from styled blond hair to painted toenails poking through Dolce & Gabbana open-toed shoes. She squirmed under the inspection, acutely aware of hair that was the victim of a predawn start, makeup still in her suitcase, and under her eyes, bags that wouldn't have been out of place on the carousel.

"How are you?" Becky enveloped Gillian in a powerful hug. "A silly question to ask. I know you had a great flight. I've got to drop off my designs for the floral arrangements for our rehearsal dinner, so I'll drop you home and then do that. I've booked Marcellinas for lunch so we can catch up. It's been awhile. Anyway, much turbulence? You got to the airport okay?"

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As always, Becky jumped from topic to topic like a *Jeopardy* contestant on an espresso bender. She disengaged with a jolt.

“Anyway, it’s terrific to have you here. I’m so thrilled you could come. It’s been too long, and it will be a great week, and we’re all so excited about Jessica’s wedding. She is the first grandchild to get married.”

So it began. Five days of Becky not only gushing like a fire hose about her life, but also about how much better she was at life than Gillian was.

“Where’s your bag, then?” Becky looked over the heads crowding the carousel. Through a heady waft of Chanel, Gillian focused on a hot-pink button on Becky’s shoulder, which was at Gillian’s eye level: “Mother of the Bride. This is my day too.”

Her big sister elbowed her way through the crowd, shoving aside a young man in a hoodie, and then perching, vulture-like, over the carousel.

It was going to be a long few days.

Michael Downer picked himself up from the cold, buffed floor as his stomach, ignored on a morning flight that required a small loan to buy air-dried fresh sandwiches

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or ten-dollar breakfast bars, rumbled. His father had paid for this flight and given him cab fare to and from the university, plus thirty dollars to buy a Clarendon University sweatshirt so he could impress the coach. But nothing more.

The trip was the next step in a plan for Michael's life that he had no say in. Yet this was his single chance for college—an opportunity for a track scholarship at Clarendon University and the reason he'd flown in a hoodie and track pants rather than in his more comfortable jeans and cherished Jackson Pollock T-shirt. But the scholarship would keep open a door to his dream of studying art, the only way he could keep his dream alive and his father happy. Two uncomfortable bedfellows.

Michael's body and spirit had been created in two different workshops. His seventeen-year-old lithe frame was built for running, but his spirit soared with sketching pencils in hand. Yet his father saw only one side of him, and that was why he was here to meet the great Coach Crosswell. A track scholarship was part of the plan to become an Olympian and "make it." Whatever that meant.

He didn't know what was worse—getting a scholarship that would push him down a path he didn't want or missing out and getting a life sentence working in hardware. The latter would mean downshifting his passion

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to a hobby and selling it for next to nothing on eBay, in between shifts of stocking shelves with things he cared little about. A “real” job. Soul-dissolving, but “real.” And with his father as a boss.

Still, this was his best—maybe only—chance. If he could get the track scholarship, art could become his major. That was the only way to shoehorn his artistic dream into his father’s vision of sporting glory. He was sure he wouldn’t be good enough for an art scholarship, despite the confidence of his art teachers.

Michael, you’re a talented artist. You need to believe in yourself.

Michael, you were born with a special gift, and your best will be more than good enough.

But the ever-present thought lurking in the shadows of his mind lurched forward and gripped him. *No, it won’t be. My best won’t be good enough.*

Michael batted it away, but it left its numbing residue on him as it had for years.

There was no escaping it; his father would never approve his studying art, which would lead, in his words, nowhere.

He had one chance.

The road to being an artist ran through Coach Crosswell at Clarendon University. He would meet the

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man whose name his father dropped almost constantly and run a great time to impress him. And then he would sneak away from the track to see the art school. His art teacher had emailed some samples to a friend—who also happened to be an associate art professor at Clarendon—and encouraged Michael to drop in. The school was just behind the athletics facilities anyway.

One chance.