

OUR BETTER SELVES PREVIEW

A Memoir –From Secrets and Lies to Healing and
Forgiveness

KASEY ROGERS

ONE

A Reluctant Farewell

August 30, 2010, Alexandria, Ontario Canada

The red light flashed on the answering machine. I saw it blinking from the bathroom where I stood drying off from my shower. I wrapped a towel around my body and crossed thru the door to the desk in the room. My hand hovered above the play button. Mentally, I listed the reasons I didn't want to listen to the message. Most likely, it was my husband, Phillip, calling to ask when I was leaving Alexandria. However, after twenty-four years of marriage, I knew that the question he asked and what he really wanted to know were two different things. While the question might be, "When are you leaving," what he wanted to know was if I'd finished packing. I wondered why he always seemed to think haranguing me would make me work faster. What it did, in reality, was piss me off. I stood there, debating whether to listen to the message at all.

I'd been alone for a few days after taking our twins, Jack and Lucy, to Vermont. My brother Jake and his wife Meredith were taking care of them for the week while I packed to move back to the States. While I was reasonably sure Phillip had left

the message, I thought Jake could be trying to reach me, so I pushed the play button. I heard Phillip's familiar voice, heavy with recrimination.

"Well, I guess you've already left to go over to Jenny's. Funny how you always have time to spend with your friends. Don't bother calling me back tonight. I'm sure you'll be staying out late. Well, I have to get up early tomorrow because I work for a living. Call me tomorrow when you finish packing, so we...."

I erased the rest of the message without listening to the end. It would only be another reminder of the countless times during our marriage when Phillip insisted my desire to attend any social function was selfish, claiming that doing so made me a terrible wife and mother. What I finally had realized was that he was manipulating me with guilt. Those hurtful words had prevented me from going to baby showers, birthday parties, and countless other events I had wanted to attend. This latest ploy didn't work now because I'd learned it was another way he tried to control me.

"Screw him," I thought, flipping the answering machine the bird as I walked into the room to get dressed.

Sighing, I sat down and slumped across the mattress that was serving as my temporary bed, berating myself for telling Phillip in an email earlier in the day that I was going out in the first place. I should have known how he'd react. I was thankful I didn't tell him everything. Jenny was hosting a farewell dinner on my behalf and had invited several mutual friends. She'd also suggested I bring my laundry and spend the night. I wondered if Phillip knew that I did that frequently when Jenny's husband was away.

I looked down at Chubby Checkers, our small white Bichon-Lhasa mix, lying on the edge of the mattress. He looked up, wagging his tail.

"I'll bet you're looking forward to this evening as much as

I am, Chub.” I reached over to scratch his head, grateful for his company.

I wasn’t used to being alone anymore. I felt untethered without a business to run and my kids to look after. Both kept me grounded and focused on the present. Now, I had too much time to think while I dismantled our life in Alexandria. Questions about the past and the future rattled around in my head.

I wanted to get to Jenny’s before everyone else showed up to talk with her about the ongoing saga of my troubled marriage. Things I had been blind to for decades were coming into sharp focus. Recollections of seemingly benign events were called into question and took on new meaning. I wasn’t sure who Phillip was anymore. I was starting to think I never knew.

Reaching over, I picked up a small notebook lying on top of a cardboard box I was using as a nightstand. I was so busy over the last few days, I hadn’t even told Jenny what I’d found under the desk. Earlier in the week, I’d received an email from Phillip asking me to help him recall all the dates of family birthdays and anniversaries. He couldn’t locate the notebook where he kept all this information. Then I remembered seeing something on the floor beneath a desk in the office. He must have dropped it there on his last visit, which had been weeks ago.

I was delighted to find that not only did the notebook contain the dates of birthdays and anniversaries, but it also held all his usernames and passcodes. He had a horrible memory for such details. It wasn’t long before I logged into his email account and was reading them without an iota of guilt.

What Phillip had written to various friends and members of his family left me numb. There was a tone of sheer hostility in his correspondence whenever he mentioned me. He made claims about my actions, or inactions, that revealed a resent-

ment that was built on complete fabrications. Of particular note was an email he sent to his sister, Rachel. Phillip claimed I had squandered all the money from the sale of our house in the States on a “failed” business and that I had refused to follow through in contacting an attorney about our residency status in Canada. I wanted to scream when I read that. How dare he!

None of his claims were true. I had countless communications, in writing, from the Ottawa attorney handling filing documents on our behalf. I wondered why he didn’t realize I had all our bank statements that included canceled checks to the attorney, and other financial records, that could show he was lying.

Reading this email allowed me to understand that his lies were another form of manipulation. I was starting to recognize that, by convincing his sister not to betray his confidences, he was assured she would never discuss this with me. His lies were actually a way for him to exert power and control over both of us.

His emails left me speculating, wondering why he was trying to frame the narrative beforehand. I began to wonder if he planned to file for divorce once the kids and I moved back to the U.S. It appeared he was trying to create the illusion I was the one at fault for all the problems between us in recent years. The whole matter made me eager to discuss what he’d written in them with Jenny. I was hoping we could talk in private so I could get her input.

I finished dressing and considered what I should do next. Jenny suggested we all gather around seven. Since it was only a bit after five, it was still too early to head her way. Confronting the piles of packed boxes cluttering the former tearoom, downstairs was too daunting. There was little for me to do other than wait.

Earlier in the day I emptied shelves and disassembled various elements of my business, located on the main floor of the building. It was a bitter reminder of what I’d be leaving

behind tomorrow when I traveled south. Even though the room was hot and stuffy, I avoided the unpleasantness of it all and stayed camped out in a room upstairs that once served as the office for my restaurant, The 2Beans Café and Tearoom.

Most people assumed 2Beans referred to coffee beans. But our twins were the real inspiration for naming the restaurant. We began calling them “the Beans” after Phillip, and I saw their first ultrasound. They looked like two little kidney beans facing one another. It was a happy coincidence when it came time to name the restaurant nine years after they were born.

The opening of the restaurant was prompted by some decisions made after Phillip lost his job as a copywriter in February of 2005. The company he worked for in New Jersey merged with another ad agency and almost every employee was laid off. A year of unemployment forced us to make some hard decisions.

In October of 2006, we sold the old Victorian home we had lovingly restored in Blairstown, New Jersey. We moved into a rented apartment close to where the kids went to school and began looking for a way to start fresh.

We’d owned a vacation property in Quebec years ago, and Phillip’s lifelong dream was to move to Canada permanently to reconnect with his French-Canadian heritage. He convinced me to purchase the property in Alexandria, Ontario, and we planned to open a family business. I thought reinventing our lives there would bring us closer together. Instead, the move fractured us in ways I never could have imagined.

We moved north at the end of June in 2007. Four months after we relocated, Phillip took a job back in the States, leaving the kids and me behind. He claimed it was because we needed the money. I vehemently disagreed because we still had plenty in the bank from the selling of our home in New Jersey. His absence left me raising the twins alone in a foreign country where I was also expected

to operate the new business we were supposed to run together.

Phillip could only travel to Alexandria every few weeks. His visits and our conversations grew shorter and shorter as time and distance came between us.

“Hey. How was lunch today?” Phillip asked when he called each night.

“We were pretty busy,” I would reply. I’d give him a brief rundown of the day and then ask, “How about you? Marco keeping you busy?”

“Yeah, I took work home. I have to work for a few more hours tonight. I was hoping I’d be able to come north this weekend, but it doesn’t look like I’ll have time. It makes little sense to travel six hours each way if I can’t spend time with you and the Beans. Next weekend, though.”

The excuses for why he couldn’t come north were always the same, and I believed him when he said he had to work, but it stung anyway. In the beginning, I tried to hide my frustration.

“That sucks. We all miss you,” I would tell him.

“I know. I miss you, too. Are the kids there? I want to say hi,” he’d reply.

I would put the phone on speaker so Phillip could talk to them both at the same time. I listened to him ask the same questions every night.

“How was school? Do you have lots of homework? What did you guys do today? How’s Chubby?” When the list of banal questions were all answered, and silence filled the air, he’d say “goodnight,” and “I love you. Can you put mommy back on the phone?”

I believed then that the tenderness that came through the phone lines spoke of his loneliness. Back then, it left my heart melting. I both longed for him and hated him for leaving us behind. When I woke in the morning without him, my cycle

of anger would begin again as I went through the day without him by my side.



ONE YEAR HAD TURNED into two, and there was always a reason Phillip said it made little sense for him to move north or for us to return south.

“How is Marco’s business doing? Are things picking up at all?” I asked him often. It was my way of reminding him of his promise.

He responded, “Once the business is stable, you can all move back. Now is not the right time. We need to be sure my job is secure, and the business has been slow.”

It never occurred to me to ask him, if Marco’s business was so slow, why did he always have to work on the weekends?

After years of this, I grew immune to the loneliness in his voice and the hope that he’d visit. It hurt too profoundly to confront the reality that I had a husband I rarely saw and who our now eleven-year-old twins barely knew. He loomed over us like a distant rain cloud providing a break from the heat, but we knew the drenched earth would soon dry up and leave us all surveying the horizon, wondering when he would appear again.

I complained endlessly about the situation and expressed my anger with him to others. In reality, however, I missed him, and his choices hurt me. He was both the person who knew me best and a stranger. After decades of marriage, we had so much history together. Yet our lives had gone in such different directions.

I can’t recall the exact moment it happened, but I suddenly realized I no longer had time to think about Phillip throughout my busy day. I was exhausted from hours of being on my feet. By the time I got into bed each night, the pains that ran down my back erased thoughts of Phillip.

Visits from him became further and further apart as he got busy, too. We were no longer a couple, with our lives immeasurably intertwined. We were two people who were married to one another, leading separate lives.

At first, he didn't need to be there physically to occupy a large part of my day. The rugs that lined the tearoom floor were the rugs that we had spent hours discussing before we purchased them for the formal parlor in our Victorian home. The antique lights that hung above the tables were the same ones we had selected to adorn our dining room years ago. There were family photos and memorabilia that brought to mind warm memories when I glimpsed them throughout my day. The miles between us couldn't withstand the simple march of time. The warmth of him lying beside me was a thing of the past, and the everyday reminders of him faded.

All the same things that were once a part of Phillip and me became part of a different world, one Phillip didn't inhabit. The twins and I had settled into a routine that didn't include him. We adapted and were thriving in the place we had thought of as home. We'd become members of a wonderful community, while Phillip was just a visitor.



I CHECKED the clock on the make-shift night stand to see if it was close to when I could leave for Jenny's. It was approaching six o'clock, so I still had an hour before I could reasonably leave for her house. I picked up Phillip's note book but decided to avoid rereading his emails for a third and fourth time. Instead, I wandered downstairs to get a cold drink. Grabbing a can of club soda from the fridge, I glanced around the galley-style kitchen that had become my sanctuary. Away from Phillip's constant scrutiny, it was here that I found myself reawakening as my passion for cooking slowly reemerged.

Beginning to cook again had also caused me to realize

how much of myself I'd abdicated to Phillip. Rediscovering my culinary flair gave me a sense of joy that had been smothered by the demands of churning out quick meals to feed my family. He always told me any meal that took more than a half-hour to make was a waste of time. Unchained from these demands, the luxury of watching the butter sizzle and brown in a pan to make a roux, and other mundane acts of cooking, became my elixir.

Standing there in the tiny kitchen, my anger boiled over as I acknowledged why moving back to the U.S. was so problematic.

I feared I would revert to the person I was when I had first arrived in Alexandria. The self-doubt and loathing faded only when Phillip wasn't there to present his image of me. I realized I had absorbed all the negative messages Phillip had sent me during our marriage when he attacked my character. In his absence, I had regained my confidence.

The bitterness swelled as I stood there, sipping my drink, wondering why he now wanted us to return to the States. I could only assume the worst because, for years, this arrangement had suited him just fine.

There was a part of me that wanted to go back in time. I yearned to retreat to the days before I had realized that none of the reasons Phillip initially gave me for his living six hours away made sense. I longed to erase the knowledge that he most likely had been lying to me for years. Now that I suspected why he wanted to be so far away; I couldn't shut out the thoughts that forced me to wonder why I didn't see it all along.



IN MARCH, he'd taken a new job as a creative director for an ad firm in Albany, New York. I assumed he would happily continue our awkward arrangement of living separately. That

wasn't the case. His attitude shifted dramatically, and he began overtly referring to the move north as a mistake and suggesting that it had been my idea. He complained bitterly that he was missing the twins' childhood and insinuated it was because the café wasn't making enough income to live on, so it forced him to get a job back in the States to support our family.

His comments alarmed me, but I only began piecing things together when he opened a separate bank account, one I didn't have access to. He said it was because I was "financially irresponsible" since I'd accidentally over-drafted our joint bank account one day. It didn't matter that I'd checked the balance before the withdrawal. We argued bitterly over whose fault it was. He'd made an unrecorded withdrawal which hadn't posted to the account, but he claimed it was my actions that resulted in the overdraft. Shortly after that, he closed our joint account because he claimed he needed to "put his foot down."

In April, he told me he would no longer contribute to paying any of the bills in Canada. He said it was a waste of "his money." The mortgage, taxes, and other building overhead, including all expenses related to his children, were now my sole responsibility. This made me furious, but it was another thing that opened my eyes. Now I knew he was hiding something—I just didn't know what.

When Phillip demanded the Beans and I move to the Albany area, I had to think that had been his plan all along. He made no mention of that before he took the job. He must have known that the property's overhead and expenses would drain any profit I made from the café. This would leave me with no funds of my own, giving him complete control over me once the Beans and I moved south.

At the end of June, I contacted an attorney in Alexandria who convinced me that if Phillip was planning to file for divorce, the only way to prevent a messy court battle was to go

back south. Phillip was pleased that I wasn't resisting the move. Still, I was sure he wondered why I was so cooperative.

There were other things that struck me as significant signs of his intentions. One night, after he took the job in Albany, he called to tell me he'd found a place to live—he had moved into a single room in an expensive renovated mansion close to his job.

“My room is small, but it's close to work, so I don't have an hour's commute anymore. You would love this place. There's a beautiful ballroom the owner converted into a common area for the tenants. I've been coming down here at night to play my guitar. Man, the acoustics are great.”

I expressed concern when he mentioned how much it cost. It was twice the amount he'd spent on rent previously—and, yet, he insisted money was tight.

“If it has no kitchen, what are you going to do about preparing meals? Aren't you going to have to eat out all the time?” I asked him.

“There are plenty of places to eat, and it was the closest place to work that I could find on short notice,” he insisted.

“Okay. I get it. I'm just concerned because you told me your stomach acid is worse, not to mention the cost. It also worries me that the twins and I will have no place to stay when we come down there.”

“I'll get up there again soon,” he told me. “Look, I have to get up early. I'll talk to you tomorrow.” He hung up abruptly without asking to speak to the kids.

By July, we began communicating mostly by email. Phillip's calls became less frequent, and when he did call, I put the kids on the phone immediately, or I let it go to voicemail. His tone of voice had changed. He was cold and business-like.

When the time came to look for an apartment to rent for the entire family, he suggested I look online at apartments forty-five minutes to an hour away from Albany, claiming the rents would be much cheaper. He was evasive when I

asked why it was now okay to live that far away from work again.



AS I STOOD in the kitchen, I realized that for much of my marriage, I had taken Phillip at his word. He always seemed to have a reasonable explanation for spending time away from his family. However, when I began looking back at all the times he was away from us, I had to wonder what he was up to while we were apart.

It was hard enough to accept that our marriage might end, but all his actions made me assume the worst and more. My gut was telling me the miles between us were not the sole reason for his disengagement. I had begun to suspect there was another motive. I couldn't help but recall another time, years before, when we had broken up. His words back then echoed in my mind.

“I've met someone else, Kasey. I'm in love with her.”