

# THE INVITATION

“I remember there was actually a sexual thrill... you hear that little pop when you pull their heads off...” --Edmund Kemper, The Co-ed Killer

Utterly exhausted, emotionally bankrupt and having no desire to do anything but lay on the bottom of a lake... I agreed to go to Mexico with two other women for a vacation. My first concern was that I didn't know one of them and everyone knows that traveling can bring out the worst in people. I knew Nora and I expected she would be as she always is; calm, happy, reassuring, smart and great fun to be with. I did not know her sister-in-law and God knows what she could be like! In retrospect I had no idea of what was coming or how that one decision would change all of our lives.

I was also filled with guilt because it was a girl's only trip and my husband Kevin and I had not been on a vacation since our honeymoon to Mexico nine years prior. Just imagining his kind face when he “encouraged” me to go because he is the best husband ever; made me feel like a proverbial piece of shit. I knew I needed a break, I was struggling with mental health issues, my post traumatic stress syndrome which had been in remission, had resurfaced due to the death of our sixteen-year-old grandson Isaac six months earlier. His suicide had sent me spiraling into anxiety and night terrors. In fact, worse than I had ever experienced before.

Kevin and I had met at a time in my life when I was overwhelmed and wondering how I would manage it all. I was the single mother of four, from oldest to youngest – Brady, Jamie, Dylan and Maria. Maria was sixteen and her oldest brother was thirty-five and father to my grandson Isaac. Kevin had two grown sons of his own and we felt blessed when everyone seemed to get along at our first blended family function. I was grateful that Kevin just jumped into my life and went with it as there was a lot going on when he showed up on a permanent basis. Maria and Dylan were sixteen and seventeen and still living at home, Jamie was twenty-two and living in a recovery house and Brady was a chef at a fine dining restaurant, living and working in Vancouver. Kevin's sons were working and making their own lives, so we only had to focus on getting the three youngest to the same level of independence. It was a not as easy as we thought it would be and the years had been full of trauma, grief and struggle.

Nora's invitation came nine years after Kevin and I had been married and our grandson Isaac was sixteen and a shining light in our lives. He was in school, just made the basketball team and was doing pretty well; we thought. His dad, my son Brady, was living in Montreal and Isaac was living with his mom and step dad. Although Isaac had the usual teenage “issues” and didn't like chores or the house rules, he was doing pretty well. He did have a hard time with a break up from a girl he had dated for several months but when I talked to him about it, he said he had moved on and was doing OK.

We all knew he was mad at his dad for moving to Montreal, but Brady had been there for two years. Isaac had gone for a visit and it seemed he was adjusting fairly well. He was the “lucky” kid, he had lots of people who loved him, a stable home and parents, and no real barriers that typically identify kids as being at risk. I was very grateful for that as my divorce from my first husband had been terrible and my four children really suffered due to the choices their father and I had made. I was happy that Isaac was safe and loved, I mostly just wished

I could see him more as he lived on Vancouver Island and although only a ferry ride away, it had always been a challenge to arrange visits.

The day he died is forever and indelibly etched into my mind. Each time I reflect or think back on it I am flooded with the sounds, the smells, the exact moment that I came to know he was no longer with us. My experience of this could be used as a text book example in a psychological manual on post traumatic stress disorder.

At the time, my daughter Maria had finally left her boyfriend of two years and was moving into our little condo with her son Jayden and I was tickled pink. Although the whole family tried to be supportive of her relationship with Mike, there were tell tale signs that they were in an unhealthy relationship. Maria had her baby on her own at twenty and Mike had been her first serious relationship after she and her baby daddy and parted ways three years earlier. I wanted it to work out between her and Mike but was relieved when she called to say that they were splitting up and asked if our condo was still empty. It was only one bedroom but we had put a separator wall in the living room/dining area so that the tenant could use one side of the long narrow room as an office and she thought she could easily put Jayden's bunk bed in this area ensuring he had his own space. He was only five so it seemed like a good plan. We were off to Value Village that day to find treasures to use in redecorating her "new" apartment and I was happy to be able to support her through a difficult time.

We hit a gold mine at the second-hand store and found a coffee table, end tables for her bedroom, a lamp and several throw pillows. Our greatest challenge was how we were going to get it all into the hatch back SUV I was driving and still get Jayden and his car seat in. It began pouring rain and we were shrieking and laughing while we jammed it all in and around Jayden. Wet and happy we slammed the hatch closed and started the drive back to Surrey. The radio was playing quietly in the background and Maria was chattering happily about her vision of her "new" life when the car phone went off. I hit the hands free to answer the call from Isaac's mom. The rain was torrential and the car was just beginning to heat up so the windows were a bit fogged and it felt like we were in our own little world. I cheerfully told Cheryl that I was driving with the hands free on and that Maria and Jayden were with me, she interrupted me and asked me to pull over. She was very quiet and I knew something was wrong. I quickly found a wide edge to pull over to and eased the SUV over and stopped.

"Lucy, I am so sorry...." she started to sob, not cry, but sob directly from her soul. The sound pierced our happy bubble and Maria and I both whispered back... "What's happened?" Time seemed to slow down, the sound of the rain filled the car and I stared out the window noting the thick rivulets sliding down the window. I could barely make out the passing cars as they were swishing by, the water spray from their whirling tires adding to the sound of the pounding rain.

Cheryl was crying and she was whispering over and over, "I am sorry, I am sorry..." Maria interrupted her, "Oh my god Cheryl, tell us, tell us what's happened!"

She whispered back, "Isaac has died... he died... this morning we came home from Ella's horseback riding lesson and Graham went in to wake him up... he was hanging... oh my god, he's died."

Maria began to sob "No, no, no..." over and over. Jayden cried out from the back seat, "Mommy, Mommy what's wrong, who died?" and she tried to calm down and reassure him. I tried to talk to Cheryl and kept finding myself stuck, as if I'd been hit by a big soft rock, right in the middle of my chest, this huge soft, heavy rock that was pressing me back into my seat and pushing all the air out of my body. The sound of the rain was getting louder and louder, the swish, swish of the cars going by made me flinch.

"Has anyone called his dad?" I asked her finally and she began to cry again, horrible sounds like a wounded animal, "I couldn't do it, I am sorry Lucy, I couldn't do it." and I felt like I had to help her. "I will call him... its OK, I will call him."

“Thank you, thank you so much...” she said, “I have to go now, the police need me.”

“Wait!” I called out... but she had already hung up. Maria reached over and held my hand, we both murmured reassurance to Jayden and watched the rain pour down over our car and eventually I drove the car to her apartment and we unloaded it. Something inside of me broke that day, it was just too much.

Over the years, Nora had listened to me cry, listened to me rage and watched me try to “get over” devastating loss after devastating loss. She had met me nine years earlier at a ball park, I was there supporting my son who was struggling with addiction and she was there as a person in recovery looking for healthy things to do! She was also an amazing ball player and in high demand! It was a clean and sober league and there were strict guidelines around there being no alcohol or drugs allowed anywhere at the ball park so that those who were in treatment or recovery could come out and be in a safe environment.

I was just a dumpy, scared Mom trying to support her kid who said that playing ball made him feel normal. So, when he said he needed a girl for the team or they would have to forfeit their game, I agreed to play! It didn't take long for us to recruit Maria and then her brothers and soon our whole family was playing together and this crazy recreational sport may have saved all our lives. We were broken and devastated by Jamie's addiction and our fear of losing him. Playing ball together provided us with an opportunity to heal and we began to hope again. He was in and out of using and our journey had only really just begun when fentanyl hit the Vancouver area. At the time I felt like he was on the right side of things, that it was starting to stick and maybe he would be okay. We were all playing ball like crazy, I was coaching the team! I had a car and the team trusted me not to get high with the ball fees when they paid it - so I was the natural choice...

Nora was not on our team and I was trying to convince her how much fun it would be... she laughed at me, she was playing on the A and B teams and our little C Division team probably would not have been fun for her, but she was kind and friendly and I soon came to consider her my friend. When she wasn't playing, she would come play for us if we were short.

We heard about the first deaths on a Thursday, two of the guys we all knew and played with had overdosed and everyone was shocked. Both of them had multiple years clean and sober, one was running a clean and sober house. The other was about to start a great new job and was slated to get married in two weeks. The whole ball community was stunned. I was working at the RCMP Canadian Firearms Program and we had had notifications come through our email systems warning that there were toxic drugs being sold and that overdoses had skyrocketed but I didn't put two and two together. We all played ball together that weekend and did a big circle and said the Serenity Prayer to try and deal with the fear and loss. Jamie got high on the Monday and called me to take him to his old recovery house on Wednesday morning. He had been kicked out of his sober house and lost his job for not showing up. I drove him over and he was exhausted and depressed.

We talked about not giving up, that he had been here before and it was hard but he could do it. He hugged me, told me he loved me and grabbed his bag of stuff and went in the house. This proved to be the last time I saw him alive; he was found deceased four days later. There were several other overdoses during the next few weeks and we began hearing a lot more about fentanyl. No one expected the scourge that came and over two hundred and fifty young adults from our ball league died. Eventually, I had to quit playing; I could not handle the loss anymore.

Nora was there through it all, she stayed sober and she helped me to recover as a grieving mom; her and many others. At the ball park I could talk about my kid and no one shied away or averted their eyes, no one asked... “Oh how did he die?” they already knew. At his funeral over two hundred of the kids he grew up with, teachers, coaches and his fellow clean and sober ball friends stood for hours to sign his guest book and to hug my kids and other family members. I will never forget that day... and Nora was one of the people who just rode

it out with me and over time we became better friends. I got a bit better at ball and eventually we played on the same lady's ball team together. She was also there when Isaac died and she really understood me when I said, "I'm so done... I just want to lay on the bottom of the lake. I don't have anything else to give and I can't continue looking after everyone else."

This was how she came to be the one that called me and said, "You need a vacation! Come with me and my sister-in-law to Mexico for a week!" It was her that overcame my objections and guilt and convinced me that taking a break was critical to my getting better. She also convinced me that her sister-in-law would not be a vacation disaster and so Kevin convinced me to go and dropped me off at her sister-in-law Annette's home in Cloverdale.

We had decided to split the cost of a limo on the morning of our flight and go to the airport in style. Annette had drinks and a relaxing evening planned for us to get to know each other. Nora and her had been friends since they were teenagers and she had been married to Nora's younger brother for over twenty years. She was charming and super funny, a real bundle of energy and I soon felt reassured that our trip was going to be a blast. We had a few drinks and went to bed around ten thirty as we had to be up at four thirty to catch our early morning flight. I called to talk to Kevin and he was as happy as I was that things were going so well. I couldn't help but think how lucky I was to have such a good man. We had been through a lot together and although there were continuing challenges in our relationship, I felt like we had the real deal.

When I met Kevin, I was a single mom with three teenagers at home and one adult child returning from time to time. I was working full time and trying desperately to hold it all together. I had been divorced for over ten years and really hadn't had a significant relationship prior to meeting Kevin. I had an on again, off again friend with benefits thing with a guy that Kevin came to call "the boyfriend" but I knew that it was a going nowhere situation. I had broken it off with him a year before I met Kevin and was really trying to figure out what I wanted, what I could handle and I wondered, who the hell would want to get involved with me?

Brady was living in downtown Vancouver and working as a chef, my next oldest Jamie was struggling with addiction and was in and out of treatment and recovery houses. Then the two that were at home were fifteen and sixteen and pretty much off the rails. My daughter had mental health issues and was diagnosed very young but nothing prepared us for her "teenage years" and at that time there was very limited support for parents dealing with these problems. Dylan simply watched, had panic attacks and tried to find a way to deal with all of the pressure that these complex mental health issues had produced in our lives. He tried to help and to find ways to numb out from the pressure that he experienced. To be honest, I think I did too. There was no way to make sense of what was happening. To this day, I believe that if Jamie's addiction issues had been treated as a health problem and if he had gotten some real concentrated health support and treatment that he would be alive today. Instead, all of us fumbled along and we were as much a victim of the system as he was.

My daughter spent some time in a Child Psychiatric Center, was in and out of "programs". Eventually her mental health issues escalated into drug and alcohol problems, she became aggressive and began acting out, in the mean time Dylan and I were stuck in the middle of her psychiatric issues and Jamie's addiction, desperately trying to make our way. Dylan never really got the help he needed. No one talks about the impact that mental health issues have on families. The toll that dealing with addiction and personality disorders takes on siblings and parents just gets touched on and only recently did the medical community start to say things like "PTSD is related to the trauma of dealing with..." In fact, as a single mom the one question I heard the most whenever I asked for help was "Sooooo what is going on at home...?" like I had some kind of "problem" at home that was causing my kids to use or be crazy! Just once I wanted to shout "I'll tell you what's going on at home! I am

falling apart and have no idea how to manage my kids' problems! They are driving me crazy and I need you to help me!"

But I would patiently explain the diagnosis, the steps we had taken, the action plan, the counselors we had engaged, how many treatment programs he or she had attended. When required to, I took the parenting classes they felt would help me to better manage my children's problems so I could be a better disciplinarian and truly "listen" to my kids so they would stop rebelling... yes, I am being sarcastic.

I had a degree in Early Childhood Education and another in Social Work, I had worked in respite care for families at risk for over seven years prior to my divorce and actually taught parenting classes for developmentally challenged parents who needed basic skills and education. I had been as shocked and surprised as anyone when I realized Jamie was using drugs. Maria we had an early inkling about and a diagnosis, but I never expected the drama that occurred. I had tried my hardest to do everything right with the one big exception being that I divorced their dad and although it was an acrimonious divorce it ended quickly and I think to this day it was for the best. I could not imagine what more I could be than the deeply involved, educated, compassionate, loving mom that I was already. I was simply out gunned and undermanned and our community and services let us down. But that is another story for another day, we lived and we moved on and we did better and some of it was hard.

When I met Kevin, I was kind of on a good run, an end run. Jamie was clean and sober for four months; Dylan was sort of going to school and working part time at Blockbusters and Maria was basically defying everything I said or asked of her but there had been some progress made. This was due to the Learning Center she was attending and a great Youth Street counselor who seemed to strike the right note with Maria. We were focusing on our relationship so that we both could feel safe and loved.

I met Kevin at pool. I had played in a lady's league for several years before I met him and my Tuesday night out for four hours had been my only reprieve, my only social interaction for quite some time. I was working full time and doing my Master's degree program and so I spent weekends writing papers and cleaning, shopping and cooking for the week. Then I worked full time all week long at the RCMP Canadian Firearms Program doing tertiary investigations on applicants who had eligibility failures. Weeknights were full of fun things like counseling, parenting classes and tracking down one errant teenager after another. Tuesday night was the exception and I would head out to the local pub at six thirty and be home by eleven. Every Tuesday. Later in life the kids regaled me with stories of their Tuesday night parties and the frantic cleanup that would go down at ten thirty. I was impressed, I never even found a beer cap... I was on again and off again dating a Romanian computer engineer and we both knew he was not a "family" man that would commit to a full-time relationship with me. He was a good friend and very nice to my kids when he interacted with them.

After the "boyfriend" and I broke up, I spent a good year just focusing on what I wanted in life. I did some programs, read some books, journaled and really looked at what I needed to do to invite a healthy relationship into my life. I had decided to join a mixed pool league to see if I could meet a guy... plain and simple, I was taking my mom's advice and doing things I loved with other people so I could meet someone who liked stuff I liked. I won't even bother to tell you about the Internet dating I had tried... not great. Kevin seemed to take a shine to me right away and we were friends for the first six months and then he asked me out one night at pool when I was complaining about having no life... I said sure and the rest was history.

I never really understood what he saw in me, a frazzled, burnt crisp of a woman, overweight and overwhelmed but he said I was super smart, funny and attractive. Eventually he moved in and his calm non-judgmental way of being really helped me and my kids weather the worst of times. By the time my grandson

Isaac passed away, we were all pretty balanced and doing well but it must have been one hell of a ride for Kevin in those first nine years.

I barely remember because I was like a sailor on the helm of a ship at sea, being tossed and thrown every which way by one storm after another. After Jamie died, I really shut down for several years. It shook me to the core that he could pass and I could not “feel” him anymore, my spidey mom senses didn’t pick up his distinctive jingles on my psychic web and I did not believe that to be a possibility before he died. After his death I spent a number of years going through the motions of living and Kevin, probably exhausted too, was willing to let that be our way. By the time Nora asked me to go... I was ready and Kevin probably needed time away from me as much as I needed the vacation but we never spoke of it. He just wished me the best time and I simply thanked him for being such a generous good guy.

I called Kevin that night, feeling guilty and worried but our call went so well, we were so comfortable with each other. He cracked jokes and reassured me that he was fine I was going away. He warned me not to fool around with the Mexican pool boys! I told him that I would miss him and come home a new woman, full of vim and vigor... I hung up feeling sleepy and ready for my adventures to start, I was jetting off to Mexico for a week of fun and sun with two lovely friends.