

## THE MEETING THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

*I was living in Traverse City, Michigan at the time. I had been there since 1994.*

I looked forward to the end of the dull days of the winter of 2001. On an especially boring evening, I searched the Internet for dating websites. I wanted a site that wasn't only about sex and marriage. Of course, if sex was involved, that would be an additional benefit.

I browsed the typical singles websites. Most were cheesy and focused on kinky sex or immediate marriage. I was over both of those things...well, one of them. I searched for Christian or conservative sites in an attempt to weed out the cheese. I found more cheese with a different flavor until I stumbled onto a site called *Singles with Scruples*. The focus was on a slightly older and more conventional crowd. I paid nine dollars and ninety-five cents for a month-long membership and logged on as Alex in a thin attempt to avoid detection by friends and relatives. After all, Alexander is my first name, although I have always been "Stan" to all my friends and family.

I reasoned that I should keep my search local in Northern Michigan so that if I found someone, we could meet for dinner, a movie, or a drive in the country...or rowdy, reckless sex in the Northern Michigan woods! I narrowed my search to ages 45 to 60.

Most women in Northern Michigan were pictured in army fatigues or a plaid shirt standing by a pickup truck, rifle in hand, and a deer hanging head down on the front porch. That might work for some people. I widened my search to include all of Michigan. I found an attractive professional lady in Farmington Hills in suburban Detroit. She claimed that she was an entertainment attorney. I sent her a message.

*Where are you?* The lawyer lady asked.

*I'm in Traverse City.*

*Where is Traverse City?*

I was bewildered. She had allegedly passed the bar exam but evidently flunked geography. We lived in the same state.

*I know where Farmington Hills is. You don't know where Traverse City is?*

The conversation was over. That issue was on my list. My perfect woman must possess some knowledge of the world around her.

I widened my search, realizing that whomever I might meet would be a pen-pal due to the probable geographic separation.

The search went on for two weeks until Saturday, April 9, 2001, when I found a pretty lady standing on a sand dune with her hair blowing in the wind. Her nickname was *La Boheme*. I read her short profile, and something about it caught my interest. She said that the person she most admired was her father. I liked that. She wrote that she spoke English and French as well as her native Spanish. I assumed that we would never meet, but we could write back and forth, if she would only respond. I sent her a message.

On Sunday morning, my roommate Cyndi announced that she was moving out in two weeks to an apartment in Elk Rapids, just north of Traverse City. I had the place to myself...Mama and me. Cyndi was a good friend, but I was pleased to have the apartment to myself, even if it was tough to pay the rent alone. I would convert her bedroom into a studio and stop using my bedroom closet as a sound booth. If I did find a lady who enjoyed sharing a night of lust, I wouldn't have to worry about our noise.

On Sunday afternoon, I logged onto the dating site. There was a pleasant note from “La Boheme.” She wanted to know more about me. I surmised that this might be a short conversation.

## Four?

La Boheme started out with the usual banter, and the conversation evolved into personal questions about height, weight, and age. I lied. Just a little. In La Boheme's profile, she indicated that she was interested in someone between 45 and 58. I was over the limit. I had just turned 60 but in my profile, I said that I was 58. After a couple of days of e-mailing each other, I finally felt comfortable enough to tell her my real age.

*Alex, you don't look like you are 60 in your pictures.*

*Thank you. I take good care of myself.*

I didn't mention that only six months earlier I had almost died of alcohol poisoning.

*How old are those pictures?* She inquired, demonstrating her distrust, now that I had admitted lying about my age.

The first picture that I had sent to La Boheme was a Glamour Shot from five years earlier. Not a huge deal, but my candid pictures looked different.

I liked La Boheme. She was charming with a quick sense of humor. However, I didn't break any ice with my less-than-perfect honesty. She was more forthcoming, or so it seemed. She divulged her real name, Marta Ramirez. Her family called her Martica, which in Spanish means little Marta. I suspected that she might be a poor Latin lady seeking an easy path to the USA.

However, she claimed that she came from a successful and artistic family. She said that her father had owned a business for almost sixty years and that she and her family had traveled throughout the world. She claimed that she had been educated in Europe.

I wanted to ask why she was on a dating website. After all, she was attractive (unless her picture was twenty years old, or it wasn't her picture) and part of a seemingly secure, creative family. She alleged that her mother was a renowned painter, and she had a brother who was an opera singer in Milan. That wasn't all. She told me that a brother-in-law was a senior member of the Colombian government, rubbing shoulders with the country's president.

I, on the other hand, was a 60-year-old man sharing an apartment with a 10-year-old gray cat and struggling to make a living in a bedroom closet with my voice-over business. I had little to offer, and I had admitted to lying about my age and sending an old Glamour Shot. I decided that from this moment forward, I was going to be completely honest and up front. My truth-in-advertising timing couldn't have been worse.

*Alex, in your profile, you said that you are divorced?*

Oh, no! This was going to be the beginning of the end. *Yes, that's right.*

Maybe I should simply say good-bye and sign off.

*Just once, right?*

*No...*

*Twice?* Her font size increased to maybe a 14.

*No, I'm afraid not.* I was more than afraid.

*Alex! Three times?* The font blew up to a 20 bold.

*No...*

I thought I heard a countdown like when the space shuttle is about to take off.

It took what seemed like two hours for the response to come back to me on Yahoo Messenger.

I waited.

Across the width of the screen, huge bold red letters jumped out at me.

*FOUR TIMES?*

I hesitated and finally wrote *yes* in the tiniest font I could find.

I waited. I stared unblinking at a blinking cursor. Had La Boheme logged off for the last time? My heart sank. I liked her. Okay, so I hadn't actually met her yet, but from what I could tell during our several days of conversation, she seemed like a gentle soul. She was also educated and creative, and to my surprise, she loved country music, or was she toying with me in an attempt to get closer? Maybe she was a talented actress? Maybe hens were pecking their way through her adobe casa and a mule was tied up out back.

How could I know for sure? Well, she did have a computer. I knew that the dating sites were rife with women in foreign countries who were clever at duping North American men to gain a fast track to citizenship or their money. The money part wasn't an issue for me. I didn't have any.

*FOUR TIMES? Alex, you've been married four times?* The words blazed across my screen, still in red. At least she was still talking to me.

I typed another tiny *yes* in my reply space. I wanted to lie and tell her that my ex-wives were all drug-crazed, serial-killer psychopaths. I waited. Maybe she needed to confirm that shocker before she said good-bye. At least I hoped that she would say good-bye and not simply disconnect. Again, I waited. I could not take my eyes off the screen. I didn't blink. I feared that I would see, *La Boheme has logged out.*

*Alex, are you divorced now?* She was back in black type.

*Yes, six months ago.*

Then the question came that exonerated me. *How long did your marriages last?*

*The first one was seven years, the second one was also seven years, the third was five years, and the last one to Susan was thirteen years.*

*You were serious about the last one. You stayed together for thirteen years.*

We continued talking and talking and talking...for three weeks. One Sunday we chatted online for seven hours non-stop. Well, we weren't talking. We were typing. In 2001, Internet voice communication around the world was erratic.

I thought that I should surprise her. One evening in late April, I called her on the phone. We both laughed with embarrassment at finally hearing each other's voices. I did my best to impress her with my richest radio voice. It was then that she dropped an ultimatum.

"Alex, we have chatted on Yahoo Messenger as much as we can. If we are to go any further, we need to meet. Why don't you come here to Colombia and meet my family and my friends?"

"Uh, why don't you come here?" I countered.

I instantly recalled stories of murder, kidnapping guerrillas, drug lords, and Pablo Escobar while visualizing sinister pictures in my head when I heard the city name, Bogotá. It almost sounded like boogiemán.

"No, I think that since you are the man, you should come here first. Besides, you will love my country."

"But you have family in St. Louis and Montana."

I was also aware that a flight to Colombia would be expensive. I could barely pay the rent with the money from my one-man business.

"No, I can't come there right now. I cannot leave my father's company, and my daughter Natalia needs me here while she is finishing University."

I relented. "Okay. I will think about it tonight."

"Good! You won't be disappointed," she whispered with her sexy Latin accent.

That did it. I would find a way. I had to check my one and only credit card balance. Did I really have the courage to travel all the way to South America...to see a woman? What about the violence? What if she was a front for the Marxist guerrillas or the drug lords? I had heard about women who entice a guy into a trap in a foreign country, and then he is never heard from again. Then again, I had been honest with her. I had told her that I was living a frugal life with barely enough money coming in to pay the rent and buy groceries. Maybe after our conversations about working in L.A. and Nashville and rubbing shoulders with big stars, she might have thought that I was really rolling in dough and that *I* was the one playing the game, pretending that I was a poor boy.

I was torn. Should I go? What if I didn't go? I would have to say good-bye to this seemingly adorable lady. I slept on it. I told Cyndi. She didn't mince words. She told me that I had lost my mind. However, I was 60 years old. I had lived an unruly, foolish life up to that point. What did I have to lose?

Only my life.

## Kidnapped

I signed my Will. I was prepared to die. I boarded my flight from Traverse City, Michigan, to Bogotá, Colombia, with a stop in Miami. I was excited and fearful.

The A320 lined up to land on the runway at El Dorado International Airport in Bogotá. I had read that about eight million people lived in this sprawling city on the highest plateau in the Andes.

My fear rose as the wheels touched the tarmac. What the hell was I doing? My ex-boss Richard was right. I might die here. Cyndi told me that I was crazy. Maybe. It was too late to turn back. The flight attendants opened the cabin door.

Passengers from my flight filed out into the airport. Everyone around me spoke Spanish. I knew *hola, como estas?*, and the most important phrase, *donde esta el baño?*, in case I needed a quick escape to the men's room.

I picked up my one bag and got into the long line for Colombian Immigration. I spotted two intimidating men in uniform with what looked like AK-47s at the ready. I assumed that they were there to protect us, but the fact that they required that kind of weaponry didn't exactly make me feel warm and fuzzy.

I was next. I handed the immigration guy behind the glass my Canadian passport. He said nothing, examined my picture, and flipped through several pages and then ran it under a scanner. I was afraid that he might ask me a question in Spanish, and I would have to give him the dumb look.

"Sir, what is the purpose of your visit to Colombia?" he asked in surprisingly good English.

I think that is when the unsettling reality struck me that I was actually in Colombia, South America, notorious for violent drug lords and guerillas.

I spoke softly, hoping that the American couple behind me wouldn't hear me. "Uh, I'm here to meet a woman."

"Sir, you will have to speak up."

"I am here to meet a lady."

"What is the lady's name, Señor?"

"Marta Lucia Ramirez," I answered, this time a bit louder, trying to show off how well I could pronounce *Ramirez* with a Spanish accent.

He didn't seem impressed.

"How do you know this woman?"

"We met on the Internet." I whispered again.

He paused scanning his computer screen.

He smiled ever so slightly. "Go ahead, Señor. Enjoy your time in Colombia." He handed me my passport.

I was relieved that I was not escorted to a dirty concrete room by menacing men with AK-47s and rubber gloves for an in-depth interrogation.

I was about to meet her face-to-face. I suddenly felt more fearful of this encounter than of a kidnapping. Then again, this *could* be a kidnapping. Maybe her amigos waited out there in the shadowy city? Nevertheless, I was there, and I was ready for whatever fate awaited. Almost. I was also dressed for the occasion, as directed.

\* \* \*

A week before my flight, Martica had made a request.

"Do you have a black suit?" she asked.

"Yes, I have a double-breasted black suit."

"What about a pink shirt?"

"A pink shirt? Are you kidding? No!"

"I want you to wear a pink shirt and tie."

"A pink shirt *and* a pink tie?"

"Yes, please."

"Okay...I will have to go buy one. I hope nobody I know sees me."

I found a pink dress shirt, and to balance it a bit I found a cool Jerry Garcia tie with some pink in it. I even found a pink handkerchief.

One other issue came up in our many conversations over our six weeks of chatting. We had talked about family, ex-spouses, friends, work, philosophy, and our spiritual and religious beliefs. I rarely attended Mass anymore but instead, spent more time at the New Hope Community Church, which was essentially non-denominational Christian. In a discussion about our beliefs, I described myself as Christian. Martica seemed uneasy with that. Her encounters with Christians in Colombia had been unpleasant. They were apparently the extreme fundamental variety that condemned all forms of fun, including television, movies, music, sex, and dancing. You do not tell Latinos to stop dancing!

That Christian label came close to being a deal-breaker when I exited the secure area and out into the main Bogotá terminal to search the waiting crowd for a sign with my name *Alex* on it. An imposter almost changed my life.

Martica stood behind the glass in the main terminal with the assembled masses waiting to greet loved ones and business associates. She held her *Alex* sign aloft. She scanned the crowd exiting the baggage claim area searching for a man in a black suit, pink shirt, and pink tie. She waited. Hundreds exited. There were black suits but no pink ties, until she spotted a short, rotund man in a black suit and a pink shirt. He appeared angry. Then she noticed that the grouchy man in the black suit and pink tie sported an enormous cross around his neck, extending down to his midsection. He looked like he could be an anti-dancer if ever there was one! She swiftly yanked the *Alex* sign down out of sight. Dejected at first, she watched him as he passed by her. He seemed to know exactly where he was going. He met with an equally crabby friend.

Relieved, she raised her sign again in time to see another black suit, pink tie, and pink handkerchief. This guy was not quite as short or as round. She smiled. I smiled, kind of the way that a baby does when he poops in his diaper. I was relieved and terrified.

I stopped. I thought she appeared different from her picture. She was pretty but taller than I expected. We hugged uncomfortably, stopped, and looked at each other again and exited out into the forbidding Colombian world.

She had a car with a driver waiting outside. Martica and I slid into the backseat. As we left the airport and drove out into the surprisingly dark streets of Bogotá, I wondered if the quiet man driving was really a driver, or an *accomplice*. Now that I had met Martica in person, she was unusually silent. So was I. It was as if we had never engaged in those long, intimate conversations just days earlier.

Martica had arranged a hotel room for me. Before I left home, I suggested that maybe I could stay at her place. That idea was flatly rejected. As we drove on and on, I hoped that we were on our way to a hotel, and not to a shallow grave on the mountain above Bogotá. As we drove through dimly lit streets and neighborhoods I noticed that every house and business was protected by heavy bars on the windows and doors.

I felt more relaxed when we reached a brightly lit neighborhood with a large shopping mall on the right and fashionable apartments and condos on the other side, and my hotel. We pulled into the underground parking at the La Fontana hotel. I breathed a sigh of relief, until a man with an automatic weapon stepped out of the shadows. For a heart-stopping moment, I thought that was it! He was in fact a hotel security guard, who politely motioned us to a parking spot. No one holding an AK-47 had ever smiled at me before.

Our driver unloaded my bag. I relaxed as I watched him drive away. Checking in was easy with Martica's help. We walked up to the second floor to my room, which was a nicely-appointed suite overlooking a courtyard with a tiny white domed mission church in the middle. I sat on a couch. Martica sat across from me in a wingback chair. A massive coffee table separated us. We stared at each other. Now what?

## Once More With Fear

After Martica left, I barred the door with a table and a chair to prevent the bad guys from crashing through and robbing me of my Timex watch, a maxed-out credit card, and fifty thousand pesos, which amounted to twenty dollars. I felt nervous. I heard noises in the hallway. I suspected that it was *them* preparing to blast through my door.

Martica and I had spent three hours seated, facing each other across the room, engaged in conversation about every mundane subject we could fabricate. We didn't kiss. We didn't hug or even hold hands. No romantic talk. Our nervous conduct contrasted with our highly intimate online conversations. We had both already uttered the *love* word online. There was no love apparent in room 223 at La Fontana that night.

We laughed nervously and told stories, but we acted like friends who had lived next door to each other many years earlier. We engaged in an unromantic kiss and a hug as we said good-

night. As soon as she was out the door, I fortified my room and brushed my teeth with bottled water. I slept fitfully with the window slightly open.

*"En el nombre del padre, del hijo y del espíritu santo..."*

Oh, my God! Had I died and gone to heaven? I awoke to voices reciting what sounded like the rosary in Spanish. I felt my face. Yes, I was still alive. I could still hear women's voices, and I heard the words *Ave Maria*. It sounded familiar like *Hail Mary*, which my mother had taught me.

I jumped out of bed and ran to the window and peered into the entrance of the white mission-style chapel in the courtyard, where a group of ladies kneeled in prayer. Instead of fear, I felt moved. It was a beautiful scene, interrupted by the phone.

A lady asked in broken English, "Señor, would you like your breakfast now?"

I had forgotten about that part. Room service was included, and not only delivery.

"Oh, yes, please give me ten minutes while I get dressed."

The ladies reciting the rosary put me at ease, if only a bit. It took me back to my childhood in Cape Breton, yet this was a long way from Jamesville West.

Ten minutes later, there was a knock at my door. I cautiously glanced through the peephole to see a pretty lady holding a tray. I opened the door cautiously, still wary.

"Buenos dias, Señor Campbell! Did you sleep well?"

"Buenos dias, Señora! Si...yes," I answered, switching to English in case she might switch to Spanish.

She made coffee in the room, cooked eggs, set the table, and served breakfast. I could get used to this. Someone knocked at the door again. My heart stopped. I peeked through the peephole expecting to see a gang of armed banditos. It was Martica, grinning from ear to ear, ready to show me around Bogotá.

After a shower and breakfast, Martica and I set out. We walked and walked. I had an important mission. I needed to visit the Canadian Embassy. I was told back home that I should register with my Embassy, just in case I was killed or kidnapped. I rode the elevator up to the 14th floor in a modern building on Carrera Septima while Martica sat outside in the sun. A security guard stopped me at the door and scanned me for God knows what.

"No pistola?" He laughed.

"Huh? No! No pistola." I chuckled with him.

He was obviously Colombian and friendly. That is where the friendly zone ended. Legally, I was in Canada. A picture of Prime Minister Jean Chrétien hung on the wall along with a prominent Canadian flag and a picture of a red canoe. It felt like home until I introduced myself.

"Excuse me. I need to register as a visitor in Colombia."

I expected a smile and a welcome to Colombia. Instead, a scowling lady tossed me a paper through a slot in the glass.

"Fill in the form and bring it back here," she said curtly.

"Thank you." I expected a response.

There was none.

I answered the questions on the form and handed it back with a smile.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Yes." She didn't look up

I offered a friendly, "Bye."

She turned her back to me.

Canadians like to boast of their friendliness. It was not evident at the Canadian Embassy.

For the next few days, Martica and I walked, flagged down taxis, and rode in her car through gridlock Bogotá traffic, where stopping at stop signs and red lights is simply a suggestion.

On a personal level, Martica and I became closer and then, much closer. I adored this Latin lady with the positive, fun attitude. The feeling was obviously mutual, but the stress level suddenly intensified when it was time to meet her mom, and under nerve-racking circumstances.

Before I had left Traverse City, Martica convinced me that I should show off my culinary talents by preparing dinner at her place. Not solely for her but for her entire family. It was my fault for bragging about my kitchen talents, which in reality were mediocre to good but lacking in consistency.

We scheduled the big dinner with la familia on Saturday night with Mom and Dad, brother Juan, two sisters, Pilar and Amparo, with their husbands, and Natalia, Martica's youngest daughter. The general consensus was that if Natalia didn't like me, I was toast.

On the day of the dinner, the first vote came in. Mama voted me down. She made it clear that she would not endorse this shoddy, quickie relationship and therefore would not attend. She

was not aware that we had met on the Internet. Martica had fibbed, telling her that we had met through a mutual business acquaintance. Papa, otherwise known lovingly to the family as *Tato*, agreed to come. I had heard that he was a likable man.

I chose a menu that I assumed would be novel to them...a mix of Indian and Thai dishes. It was an unwise decision. I discovered too late that they had traveled throughout the world, so I was not about to impress them with my exotic menu. As I arrived at Martica's apartment, I met her 22-year-old daughter Natalia for the first time. She was beautiful and adorable like her mom. We seemed to connect.

My bill of fare consisted of tandoori chicken, saffron rice, and something I called a New Delhi deli salad. Dinner was set for 7:00 p.m. At 6:50 the intercom buzzed. The family was downstairs with a surprise. Mama was with them. Holy crap! This was going to be a nail-biter. Her imposing reputation preceded her. A minute later, there was a knock at the door. I hid in the kitchen.

Sisters Pilar and Amparo strolled into the kitchen with their husbands. They were gracious. Then Tato entered the room. He could have floated in. He radiated an aura of tranquility. I liked him immediately. It was obvious that he was highly respected and loved. Then she walked in. Bertha, Martica's mother. She was fashionably attired. I felt as though I was in the presence of royalty as I shook her hand.

Twenty minutes later, after drinks, we served dinner. The family approved of my culinary efforts. Everyone beamed and declared how delicious it was. I found out later that they had not been completely truthful. Apparently, they burped cardamom for a week! It was not an ideal introduction to the family.

During dinner, I was under observation. I got along well with Martica's brother Juan. He had lived in the USA for several years, so we were able to connect easily. He displayed a zany, dark sense of humor. Most significantly, the family noticed that Natalia and I enjoyed each other's company.

The family left around midnight, but the jury was out. Had I won anyone's heart? More importantly, what did Mama think? We would have to wait. Martica drove me back to my hotel. Sleeping overnight at her house was forbidden, especially with her daughter living at home. There wasn't much sleeping back at the hotel, either. I tossed and turned, belching cardamom.

The phone woke me out of bad dream about a disastrous radio show. I had a lot of those.

"You're not going to believe this!"

I was in fog but woke up at once.

"What happened?" I asked.

Martica sounded like she might have good news.

"My mom called this morning."

"Oh, crap!" Maybe it wasn't good news after all.

"She has never done this!"

At 60 years of age, I felt like a teenager on my first date. It was as though I needed her parents' blessing before I could date their daughter, but as Martica had expressed in her profile, she admired and respected her father and mother.

"Well, first of all, my father really likes you," she said, as she apparently braced me for the rest of the news.

"I also like him, but I don't think your mom likes me very much, or she doesn't approve of me."

"Well, she called this morning and asked if I thought that you might care to come to lunch at her place tomorrow."

We were both thrilled, but I then had something new to worry about. It was just lunch, but I had a feeling that I was going to be grilled.

I was wrong. It was a somewhat formal but pleasant lunch at which Martica's mom served her home-made soup, *Ajiaco*. It was delicious and contained no cardamom. Juan came to lunch too, which made me feel more comfortable.

My time in Colombia was ending, but I could not end my relationship with Martica. I had fallen in love with her and was not about to let her go. I could not leave without a commitment, yet, here I was, scarcely six months out of a divorce, and I was doing it again! Again! I asked myself if I had ever felt like this before. Something told me that this was out of the ordinary. Besides, this time it wasn't because I was afraid to be alone. I was much more comfortable in my own skin. I asked Martica if she would move to the USA with me so that we could simply live together. The idea of another marriage terrified me. She rejected the proposal but offered an option.

"Why don't I come and visit you and meet your family and friends, and I can see how you live?"

Her reasoning was based on the maxim, *show me who your friends are, and I'll tell you who you are.*

"Okay, deal! Let's buy your ticket right now."

I was unwilling to let this opportunity slip away. I called my travel agent friend in Michigan. I bought a ticket for Martica to visit me in Traverse City for ten days in July. It was done. So was my credit card.

On June 5th, I said a gloomy good-bye to Martica at the El Dorado International Airport and farewell to a country that I had begun to love. It was not as scary as I had been led to believe. Colombia and Marta Ramirez were in my heart. I arrived back in Traverse City on Tuesday night, missing Martica immensely and yet hopeful.

I became particularly irritating to all my friends, including Tracee, Barry, Gail, and Chelsea, nattering non-stop about Martica and Colombia. I played Latin music at home and in my car incessantly with the sun-roof and windows wide open. I played it for my friends, over and over, and expected them to love it as much as I did.

I was in love, and I wanted to flaunt my new Latin love. Martica and I burned up the phone lines and Internet discussing our plans. I wanted to take her to visit Canada, my home and native land. Therein began my second bad experience with the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá.

Colombians require a visa to visit the USA and Canada. She already had a U.S. visa. That was easy. However, obtaining an approval to visit Canada was a long, exasperating process dealing with exceptionally rude Canadian immigration personnel in Colombia. I was compelled to send the Embassy my bank records, my birth certificate, rent receipts, police records, and a picture of the birthmark on my butt. (Okay, that last one was an exaggeration). The paperwork requirement was as frustrating as their rudeness was infuriating. As a Canadian, I was ashamed that these people represented Canada abroad.

Martica arrived at the Detroit airport on Tuesday, July 17th. I booked a hotel room in Windsor, Ontario, across the border from Detroit. The next day we drove to Montréal for a few days and returned through Ottawa, North Bay, and on through Sault Ste. Marie to Traverse City. The weather was perfect, and I was blissfully happy with Martica by my side. What could go wrong?

When we arrived at my apartment in Traverse City, there was a message from Martica's older, married daughter Penelope in Missoula, Montana. Although Natalia was carefree and fun-

loving, Penelope was much more serious. She wanted to fly to Traverse City to visit her mom. I knew that this wasn't only an opportunity to see Mom, but she wanted to check out the dubious new boyfriend that her mother had met on the Internet. I'm sure she thought that her mother had lost her mind, especially when she found that that I had been married four times previously.

When Penelope arrived, I was sure that she was going to attempt to talk her mom out of this foolish Internet relationship. I sensed her analyzing my every move and phrase. To her, my previous marriages were troublesome, as they should have been. After several days, Penelope returned to Montana, and Martica packed. I was not going to let her go away from me without planning the next step, so I did something that I had never done before. I got down on bended knee and asked her to marry me. She tearfully said yes.

We set a date. I loved her madly, and yet I was apprehensive about getting married again...and so soon. I had no choice. I was not about to let this angel fly away. Martica was equally determined that she was not going to go through the rest of her life alone. She had been divorced eleven years earlier and had seriously dated only one man during that time, until she caught him in bed with another woman. She needed to know that I would never do that to her.

Could I truly do this? My history was appallingly stained with affairs in my previous marriages, yet there was something exceptionally different about this woman apart from the obvious. Or, was it just my imagination? Hadn't I been sure before?

I felt in my heart and soul that she was *the one*. I felt more convinced than at any time in my life that no other woman could entice me. I made a promise to myself and to her that I would never lie to her about anything, no matter how trivial. We made a plan, one that was swift and dramatic.

Upon Martica's arrival back in Colombia, she would sell or rent her condo immediately and come back to me in the USA for good. We set our wedding date for October 27, 2001, only three months hence. It was a colossal leap of faith on her part. For me, the idea of wedding number five was frightening and truthfully, embarrassing. I knew that my family and friends would either laugh or groan with derision.

Martica had never been away from home for an extended period, other than when she attended University in Europe for a year. She was about to leave her mom and dad, her sisters, a brother, devoted friends, and most of all, her daughter Natalia, who was still attending University

in Bogotá. The enormity of her life-changing decision did not impact me until I began to write this book. For her, it was an enormous leap of courage, faith, hope, and above all, love.

Almost immediately, she found a renter for her condo. She sold or gave away most of her possessions (another heartbreaking choice) and bought a ticket to fly to Detroit, Michigan, on September 12, 2001. Fate would intervene.

*The rest of the story is in my book, "The Ugly One in the Middle." It's available on Amazon in print and in Kindle form, and also as an audio book. You can ask a bookstore to order it, if you wish*