



the perfect match

Things fall into place quickly for an Ohio couple.

BY MICHELLE BURNS, AS TOLD TO KATIE MORELL

I've always been one to dread turning the big 4-0, but little did I know that 2010, the year of my cringe-worthy birthday, would be the best year of my life. Just before the calendar flipped to January 1, I was about to discontinue my membership to an online dating site. But then fate stepped in.

I received a message from a woman named Debra asking me to meet for coffee in our hometown of Columbus, Ohio. We met and ended up talking for hours. It wasn't long before both of us knew we were meant for each other. In March, Debra was going to be out of the country on my birthday, so she scheduled a special dinner to celebrate pre-trip. That was the night she asked me to marry her — telling me she didn't want to go to another part of the world without knowing she was coming home to the woman who would be her wife. I happily accepted through tears of joy.

By April, we were in full planning mode, with specific location criteria in mind: We were interested only in states that gave us legality as a same-sex couple — and we wanted a beach. Immediately, Cape Cod came to mind. Even though I'd never visited, I'd read about it and relished the vision of its laid-back lifestyle and natural beauty. Debra, an East Coast native, had visited the Cape many times and loved it.

From there, we scoured the Web for a wedding planner and kept coming across Bernadette Coveney Smith of 14 Stories. As a married lesbian, she'd organized many gay

marriages and captured something special in each wedding she planned. Smith was based on the East Coast, so it was a perfect fit. We soon set our date: September 18, 2010.

Next up was the venue. Our theme was casual elegance — we wanted something private and high-end but easy-going at the same time. We had invited 11 guests and wanted them to be comfortable. After a fair amount of online searching, we settled on a seven-bedroom house in Truro, Massachusetts, right on Cape Cod Bay.

Debra and I drove out a week before the wedding — with a special accoutrement in

ever after

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tow. I am gluten-intolerant but still a major sweets fan, so Pistacia Vera, a Columbus-based bakery, made us a gluten-free pistachio blood-orange cake. The shop couldn't ship it, so we made the 16-hour drive with the cake in a huge cooler with dry ice.

The moment we pulled up to the house (where the cake would survive the week in the fridge), I felt myself switching to low gear. The place was so beautiful and serene. We started each morning with coffee on our beach-view balcony and a relaxing hike. From there, we'd bop around town and mingle with the locals. I'd never felt so welcome in my entire life. Everyone — from restaurant servers to the people at the Provincetown Town Hall — threw us congrats and well wishes.

Our guests arrived on Friday afternoon. Instead of having a rehearsal, we stayed at the house with our guests, dining on catered grilled food and fresh salads followed by s'mores around a bonfire. The evening was relaxed and quiet as we talked and enjoyed the warm early fall weather.

Saturday morning started as the rest of the week had, with coffee and a hike. I got my hair done by one of our guests, my hairstylist from home, while the rest of our party drove into Provincetown to explore and shop. At 6 p.m., everyone was dressed and ready. We met downstairs for champagne and migrated to the bay-view deck.

Debra and I walked out to greet our officiant, Claire Watts, who has done weddings on the Cape for decades. Our guests stood, surrounding us with their love and support.

The ceremony itself was short — about five minutes, exactly how we wanted it.

Our photographer snapped a few group shots before everyone went back into the house for a formal five-course meal of pork tenderloin and seafood served at a long wooden dining table. Then it was time to enjoy our well-traveled wedding cake. As we tasted it, I knew the cake had been worth all the hassle; it was incredible and a huge hit.

After dinner, we all changed into jeans and Cape Cod sweat shirts and started dancing. In the middle of it all, my friend Amber sang us a beautiful rendition of "The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face" — one of the highlights of the evening.

Debra and I look back on our wedding with such joy — it was just what we wanted. Now, at 41 years old, I'll never dread another birthday and have learned a surprising fact: Life just gets better with age. ■



JAG STUDIOS (2)