

I should have known it was not going to be a good day. Saturday was usually my favorite day of the week. Whether it was running errands, playing with the dogs, or just cuddling on the sofa with my husband—Saturdays always filled me with a sense of home and peace that I enjoyed and cherished. Now with summer approaching, I was looking forward to barbecues and afternoons in the pool, as well. As I approached the mailbox at the end of our driveway, I breathed in a whiff of orange blossoms from the neighbor's front yard and sighed. If we really can create our own heaven when we die, orange blossoms were definitely going to be a part of mine.

The Arizona sun was already warming the morning air and it felt good on the back of my neck. I decided it would be nice to eat supper on the deck that night. Since moving here from Philadelphia, I never tired of the warm weather. Sure, Phoenix was becoming congested and was downright oppressive in the summer, but as long as we stayed in our little suburb, I could pretend the city was far away. The stifling summers were a small price to pay for the more than pleasant rest of the year. I definitely didn't miss the snow. I daydreamed about our romantic dinner. I'd make my chicken recipe that Paul loved. We'd have some wine, cuddle under the stars and just see where it took us.

Thoughts of romance quickly vanished, however, when I pulled out the day's mail offerings and saw the letter on top.

A letter from Mona.

Sweet Mona.

Sweet, vindictive, conniving Mona.

Yes, the signs for upcoming trouble had definitely been there that day. I had risen early while Paul was still in the shower. I threw on a pair of sweats and put a pot of coffee on. I wanted to get an early start on a report for work that was due in a few days. I pushed the start button on the coffeepot and let the dogs out into the back yard. They ran and chased each other while I went back into my office, booted up my computer and spent a few minutes going through my e-mail.

When I heard Paul get out of the shower, I thought I would surprise him with a cup of hot coffee and spend time with him before he rushed off to do some errands. As I approached the kitchen, I wondered why I didn't smell the coffee, though.

As soon as I saw the coffeemaker, I realized why. I had forgotten to put coffee grounds in the basket. I now had a pot of very hot water.

Paul just smiled. "I'll grab a cup of coffee on the way to the junk- yard." He was going to look for parts for an antique car he was working on.

"I don't know how I could have done that." "Sara, it's okay. Things happen."

No, they don't. Things happen for a reason. I truly believe that the Universe sends us messages. Some are subtle. Some are as obvious as the Italian nose on my face. But the signs are there.

I watched Paul while he pulled on his jeans. He was standing in front of our walk-in closet in the bedroom. At fifty-two, he was still handsome. Since he had started his own construction firm, he didn't do as much manual labor as he used to but he worked out and kept his body trim. He was much taller than I was (just about the entire rest of the world was, it seemed) and I liked the way I fit under his chin when we hugged. His chocolate colored hair was getting thinner and, in retaliation, he had recently grown a beard. I thought it made him look distinguished, especially when it started to come in a little gray. But it wasn't his hair or his height that I was admiring. I watched him shrug his tight butt into the jeans and fantasized about ripping them off and dragging him back to bed. It had been a while since we had made love and my hormones were in overdrive.

Paul stopped zipping up his fly. "What?"

My daydream ended in mid-rip. "Hm? Oh, nothing. Go. Enjoy your junkyard adventure." I kissed him on the mouth, lingered just a second longer than usual.

Paul hugged me closer. "You sure you want me to go? I could put this off if you have something else in mind."

"It'll keep."

Paul kissed me again. "Remember where we were when I get back."

I could hear the dogs barking in the yard as his car drove off. Afraid the dogs would annoy the neighbors, I let them back in the house and went back to work. Paul loved shopping for car parts as much as I loved shopping for shoes so I knew I would have a few hours to myself. An hour later, my computer locked up. I rebooted and reloaded my document only to find that I had lost two pages the report, which was almost all of the work I had done that day so far.

Cursing myself for not saving my work more frequently, I started back at the beginning. Minutes later, I heard the mail truck rumble up the street and decided I needed a break. Despite all the electronic communication I received, I still looked forward to the daily snail mail.

As I walked down the hallway, I tripped over a dog squeaky toy and twisted my ankle.

“Toby! Did you do this?” Toby was our rescue dog from the local animal shelter. His breed could best be described as “hairy”. As I dangled the offending toy in front of him, he put his head down, more in response to my voice than any idea that he had done something wrong. The look of doggie contrition melted my heart but my ankle still hurt. I hung onto the wall and rubbed my sore foot.

Today just wasn’t going right. First the coffee, then the computer, and now my ankle. I limped slowly to the mailbox at the end of our driveway, working the kinks out of my foot. I absently kicked some gravel from the driveway back onto the lawn. Arizona lawns were certainly an anomaly. Nowhere else had I seen “lawns” made entirely of gravel and stones. When we first bought this house I had thought all the earth colors were boring but now I had come to love them. And the critters! My city roots hadn’t prepared me for our almost daily visitations from jackrabbits, coyotes, javelinas, and quail. Especially the quail. Their silly noises as they scratched under the feeder in the front yard never failed to make me smile. Paul had hung the feeder on the tree outside my office window just for me. No matter how often I heard them, they always sounded ridiculous and brought a smile to my face. Today was no exception.

But my smile froze and my stomach knotted as I grabbed the batch of envelopes from our box and immediately recognized the handwriting on the top one. The envelope said it all. It was addressed to Paul in Mona’s usual perfect handwriting and the return address only said MLW.

No name.

No address.

Just the initials.

MLW.

Mona Louise Weber.

I saw it as an implied intimacy that he would know it was from her. That she still used his last name after all these years (and her re- marriage and subsequent divorce) was not lost on me, either.

Oh, crap. What did she want now?

Paul and I had been married for fifteen years and we still fought over Mona, his ex-wife. Emphasis on the ex in my book. Emphasis on the wife in hers. I felt he let her get away with so much because of Claudia, the child they shared.

It was amazing how a simple #10 envelope could throw my emotions into a tailspin. Mona had trained me well, though. I had learned from bitter experience that most communication from her was going to be trouble.

Like when she sued us for more child support right after I landed a new job a couple of months before our wedding and then had the papers for child support modification hand delivered to our apartment the day of my bridal shower.

Or the time when she just “happened” to be cleaning out some old boxes and came across some baby pictures of Claudia that she thought Paul “would just love to have.” So she sent them to him.

For Father’s Day.

Right after I had a miscarriage.

Or the letter from Mona’s attorney demanding payment for braces that Paul never said he wouldn’t pay for.

Right after we signed the mortgage on our new home in Arizona.

Or the umpteen demands for more child support, or private school, or dance lessons.

No, no letter from Mona was ever good news. She had a knack for turning my home into a battleground, often for no other reason than what seemed like her sheer joy in causing trouble. I swore she was addicted to the drama. Even when Paul agreed to whatever she wanted, she felt the need to involve her attorney and threats of court. It had gotten to the point that I dreaded every piece of mail from her, knowing full well what it was going to mean.

“It’s going to be all right. Trust me,” he had said more times than I could count. “I won’t let Mona interfere. You’ll see.” But Paul was incapable of seeing her for the controller that she was. It amazed me how blind he was regarding her. And he never admitted the role that he played in any of it. When I complained, the problem then became my fault.

Mona manipulated. Paul caved. We fought.

It was a vicious dance that had been going on for years.

At forty-seven, I had expected my life to be more settled. No little girl played “Second-Wife” when she was young. I wasn’t prepared for the role. My life seemed to be clearly divided. To the outside world, I was a successful and happy businessperson, a nurse consultant, a wife, a confident woman. But inside, I felt frustrated. Sometimes angry, often unhappy. I loved my husband. In my heart, I knew he loved me. It was just that one little area...

I had even gone into therapy over it, in the third year of our marriage. I wanted to make things better. The therapist was a woman, a second wife herself.

“Sara, you need to stand up for yourself. Help Paul to see that you and he are a team and you’re on his side. He needs to put your relationship with him first.”

She even brought Paul into the sessions but it didn't help.

"I do put my marriage first," he had insisted. "If I give in to Mona, it's because, in the long run, it makes things easier for me and Sara. I know it looks like I'm placating her, but it's only so she doesn't take us back to court and we can see Claudia more. It really is the best way to reduce the stress, not add to it."

He never saw that his plan never worked. The more he gave in to Mona, the more she took. After six months of trying to convince him otherwise, I gave up and quit therapy. I knew that once Paul got an idea in his head, it was hard to change his mind.

My desire for a passionate dinner evaporated. The kink in my ankle returned as I walked slowly back to the house. The day was going to hell quickly and it wasn't even lunchtime yet. I placed the mail on the breakfast bar in the kitchen, making sure Mona's letter was on top. I wanted Paul to be sure to see it first. I poured myself another cup of coffee (I had made another pot by this time, grounds included!) and came back to stare at the letter again, as if staring at it would give me some clue as to its content.

I opened the other letters, threw away the junk, and left the bills for Paul to look at. I told myself I should go back to work. But Mona's letter drew me like a magnet. I had to admit that I was more than a little fixated when it came to her. Paul wished I was less obsessed but I couldn't help it.

"Let it go, Sara," I had heard on more than one occasion.

My answer was always the same. "I feel better if I know what she's up to. If I make contingency plans, she can't hurt us as much." Paul would just shake his head and retreat, usually to the garage.

I ran through all the possible reasons why Mona would be writing to Paul at this particular time. She used e-mail occasionally, but only just to send short chatty news about Claudia. Important information (meaning demands for money) was always sent via regular mail and was always cc'd to her attorney as well. I assumed she wanted the paper trail and didn't trust e-mail copies. So, I knew this letter had to contain something that was going to prove to be upsetting. Braces were long over with. Claudia wasn't planning a visit any time soon that I was aware of, so it couldn't be that. I stared at the envelope and willed it to burst open. No luck.

Jesse, our Golden Retriever, ran up to me and started whimpering so I let him out the back kitchen door to relieve himself and chase the birds. As soon as I did, Toby wanted out, too. I watched as they scampered and ran in the yard, like the two best buddies they were. I tried going back to work but my mind kept wandering back to Mona's letter.

I gave up on getting the report finished. Instead, I tried to focus on the day ahead and made a mental list of the things I wanted to do.

1. Shop for groceries

2. Take the dogs to the dog park
3. Color my hair (the gray was starting to win over the brown again!)
4. Clean out the pantry

I loved my lists. I loved making them. I loved crossing things off them. Sometimes I added things I had already done just so I could cross them off. Paul considered it more than a little weird. I even had a computerized list that I used when it was time to pack for trips. He laughed at me on more than one occasion while I checked things off as they went into the suitcase but he never arrived somewhere missing a tie or a belt or those navy socks that he just had to have, thanks to me.

I found a certain comfort in my lists. Once something was crossed off, I knew I didn't have to deal with it again. And when my world was out of control, I compensated by making more lists.

I did that when I had divorced Kevin.

1. Call attorney
2. Find place to live
3. Hire moving truck
4. Move my savings to a safe new account
5. Forward mail
6. Pack my things
7. Pack up the cat
8. Place note to Kevin on fridge
9. Leave

No, it wasn't very nice to just leave a note. I wanted to write:

*Dear Kevin,*

*Life with you sucks. See ya.*

*Bye, Me.*

But I didn't. Instead, I took the blame. I said I hoped we could work things out.

We didn't.

Life with Kevin had not always been bad. He and I had met a few years after I graduated from nursing school. I was working on a medical floor in a hospital in New York City. Kevin was one of the new batch of residents starting that July. I wasn't

looking for a new love. I had just broken up with a fellow nurse that I had been dating for over a year. But Kevin and I struck up a friendship and within a few days of our first meeting he asked me out to dinner. Within weeks, it was obvious to everyone that we were a couple. He took me to the best restaurants. We vacationed in exotic places. After a year of whirlwind courting, he asked me to marry him. We married in a small church in the city. I planned everything right down to the color of our napkins (I was a list maker back then, too). My mother was there, beaming at all the relatives. My sister was maid of honor but I was The Bride. I thought I couldn't be happier. I only wished my father had been there to see me, to walk me down the aisle.

After a week's honeymoon in Mexico, Kevin and I settled into our apartment in a high rise in Manhattan on the fashionable East Side. I threw myself into the role of the happy housewife. Kevin opened a city practice in internal medicine. Soon, however, what had started out as networking meetings turned into weekly drinking. A year and many drunken nights later, I had to face the fact that Kevin was battling alcohol and the alcohol was winning. His angry outbursts were frequent. His practice deteriorated.

Kevin blamed it on the stress of the heavy competition in the city. Thinking a change of location would help, we moved to a town outside Philadelphia to be near his elderly parents.

It worked, at first. I wanted desperately to make my marriage succeed. We tried for babies. To our sorrow, I lost two of them. Kevin was there for me but after the second miscarriage, he started drinking again. He had car accidents. He got into arguments at the hospital. His practice was failing again.

When his rages became physically violent, I knew it was time to leave. I secretly found a place to rent and one day, while Kevin was at work, I packed up my belongings, put Mr. Smudge in his cat carrier and left a note on the refrigerator.

My happiest list was the one I made when I married Paul.

1. Ask Lea to be Maid of Honor
2. Buy dress
3. Hire caterer
4. Find a judge to marry us
5. Invite/tell immediate world

Crossing things off that list had been a lot more fun.

I also made a list when I started my own legal nurse consulting business. That was a scary time and having that list made it a lot easier. It was my lifeline whenever I thought I had to be crazy to consider my own business.

1. Incorporate

2. Design stationery
3. Make marketing packet
4. Talk to my boss about working from home
5. Market to other attorneys in town
6. Clear office space in spare bedroom
7. Succeed

Paul didn't know it, but I had a secret list for when his child support ended. It only had one item on it, though, and it was only for me.

1. Celebrate

Maybe it was mean, but I felt I owed myself that one indulgence. No more child support meant no longer dealing with Mona. I had been marking down the time in my mind. Two more months. Then, Claudia would be eighteen years old and out of high school. Claudia was planning on going to a community college in New Hampshire where she and her mother now lived. As far as we knew, no provisions had been made for Paul to contribute to that as costs would be minimal. Mona wasn't very good about keeping Paul informed. But regardless of what Claudia did after graduation, it would not be something we had to contribute to. Paul and I could decide what we wanted as a couple. No more edicts from Mona.

I shut down the computer for the day and went out on the back deck. Once again, I was allowing Mona to gain control over me. I could almost hear my therapist warning me. "Sara, stop giving her rent-free space in your head." But with no one there to scold me, I let my thoughts run free. I sighed in frustration. I didn't expect Paul back for a few more hours. That letter was going to sit on the kitchen counter and bug me until then.