

The book cover features a blue background with a close-up of a human eye. A vertical column of red and blue spheres, resembling a DNA double helix, runs down the left side. The title 'DECODED' is printed in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the middle. The author's name 'Sara Marx' is written in a white, cursive font at the bottom. The overall aesthetic is scientific and technological.

DECODED

Sara Marx

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by

Sara Marx



2011

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Other Bella Books By Sara Marx

Before I Died

Insight of the Seer

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my dear editor, Katherine V. Forrest for the real work she put into this book. I hope we've created something they'll love. I like our chances.

Dedication

To Mary, Christian, Macy and Roxy, of course.

About The Author

Sara Marx lives on a Florida beach with her partner, Mary. They are parents to a brood that include two political/peace activists, an actor and a United States presidential candidate for 2044.

CHAPTER ONE

Fifteen years Special Agent Shay Cooper had known Roger Holloway. For fifteen years he'd dragged her from one haphazard, dangerous assignment to another until she wondered why she still considered him to be her mentor and friend. Holloway painted the events as "career opportunities," but she had a different name for it: The Old Holloway Maneuver. It was a miracle she'd survived their relationship to this point.

Shay—or Coop, as she was called—no longer reported to Assistant Director Holloway and figured a wiser woman probably would have changed her number at least thirteen years ago. So why she was standing in line for a security check at the Bureau's Chicago Division instead of preparing training assignments for a batch of Academy new bloods, she couldn't say. He'd said lunch, what could go wrong?

“The Old Holloway Maneuver,” she muttered to no one.

The agent manning security regarded her with obvious mistrust when she set off the walk-through detector. Shay knew the drill, dumped the contents of every pocket into a silver dish and fished out her badge that identified her as brethren. Despite it all, she didn’t seem to be winning any confidence from him. Post 9/11, nobody took chances. She jumped through the additional security measures hoops like a trained circus cat, but shifted impatiently as he repeatedly waved his wand near her nether regions.

“Belt,” he declared. Disappointed at the mundane nature of the security flag, he waved her through.

Shay collected her things and moved aside to re-shoe, re-dress and reload her pockets. She looked around for any sign of her old AD. He’d promised her he’d meet her in the lobby promptly at noon. At ten after twelve, she took matters into her own hands and forged through the crowd on a mission to hunt him down. Holloway caught her before she hit the directory. He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her through a group of college interns, toward a bank of elevators.

“I don’t see you for six years and you welcome me back to the state with a cafeteria lunch?” she asked with faux annoyance. “What a guy.”

“Welcome to Chicago.” He grinned, but didn’t look at her directly. “How’s life in the little burg—what’s it called?”

“Pleasant.”

“Ah yes, Pleasant.” His tone turned whimsical and he sounded like a commercial announcer when he said, “Home to the plush new Agent Training Academy.”

The ATA was actually a former drug warehouse seized by the government and converted to a training facility for the FBI. With its high ceilings, mismatched plank floors and outdated, drafty windows, it was the furthest thing from plush. Shay thought about Pleasant, a burg, just as he’d called it, population of only a few thousand residents. The measly forty miles that separated it from Chicago might as well have been an entire world. She actually relished her new slow-lane lifestyle and it

was evident in her relieved tone when she mumbled, “I can tell you that I don’t miss this place.”

Holloway patiently waited for the doors to close before swiping his ID card through a reader. The car lurched unexpectedly, causing her knees to wobble. She leaned against the metal railing to steady herself. The light feeling in her stomach said they were descending, though the illuminated floor numbers didn’t indicate that there existed a basement level. Her eyes flicked to his.

“Secret downstairs? Seriously, James Bond much?”

“I want you to meet someone.” He looked across the dimly lit car as if he were seeing Shay for the first time. His features softened somewhat as he remembered his manners. “You look good. Has it really been six years?”

“I would know,” she answered dryly. The last time they’d laid eyes on each other had been a grim day in New York in what seemed like another lifetime. She didn’t care to discuss it now. Instead, she gave her old boss the once-over, took inventory of his full head of dark hair, spray-tanned skin, and a hard-earned physique that was evident even under drab FBI blues. He looked too good for a man approaching sixty. She made a playful smirk. “You look wretched as hell.”

Holloway gave her a stunning grin.

“Love the tie.”

He toyed with the knot of his designer paisley blue tie. “Armani.”

“Brought to you by Simon and Schuster, I suppose?” Shay grinned at him. “How is the big tell-all, anyway?”

“Number eight on the *New York Times* bestseller list, six weeks running.” He shot her a look. “I sent you a signed copy.”

“Yeah.” She nodded. “It’s number eight on my to-do list, also six weeks running.”

A grin flashed across his face, but disappeared as the doors opened and he was instantly refocused on their journey. “This way.”

The air felt cooler, recycled, like inside an airplane cabin. High ceilings were congested with extensive ductwork and oversized ancient pipes that Shay assumed were plumbing. A

loud noise tunneled toward them, growing louder upon its approach before sounding with a twanging shot directly above them. Her knee-jerk response caused her to slightly duck as the sound traveled past them.

“Capsular messaging system,” Roger vaguely explained the racket as he walked on.

“Isn’t there some OSHA policy requiring hard hats at these depths?”

“Nobody’s got a harder head than you do, Coop.”

An evenly spaced line of neon bulbs sizzled overhead casting one perfect spotlight after another, dotting an otherwise dark, narrow passage. Adding to the ominous atmosphere was the deep hum of the ventilation system as it started up and vibrated through them to their bones. Holloway calmly raised his voice to be heard over the sound. “Few years back we were forced to absorb a local field office thanks to a budget reallocation.” He sarcastically finished with, “Thank you, Homeland Security.”

“Yes. The same budget reallocation that founded our own little Agent Training Academy right here in Illinois—*my* new job.” Shay smiled and smugly added, “Thank you, Homeland Security.”

He ignored her. “Anyway, we had to set them up in the basement.”

“I’ll bet that made them feel right at home.”

Holloway marched on, his words matching the same business-like syncopation as his footsteps. “Tony Williams—they called him Iron Will, you know where you’ve heard that name?”

She summarily recounted the story. “Agent disappears, no leads, no evidence.” Shay’s eyes weren’t adjusting quickly enough to the low light and she lumbered along gracelessly, almost blindly behind him. A different thought occurred to her. “Are there rats down here?”

“Might have been.” Holloway’s answer insinuated a different kind of rat.

Just ahead was an office door and she wondered if they’d finally reached their destination.

“I’m taking you to meet Agent Kate Harris, Williams’ partner. Her office is a little farther down.”

They bypassed the door and wound around another corner, down yet another similarly darkened hallway toward what was quite possibly the remotest office in the building. They were literally in the bowels of the Bureau.

“Jesus, Rog, did she do something wrong?” The ventilation system decided to cycle and went abruptly silent in the middle of the question she’d yelled over the noise. Shay heard the tinny echo of her own voice as it bounced off the cement and metal ductwork all around them. She felt her cheeks grow warm and her voice dropped to a whisper. “Why the isolation?”

Holloway stopped so suddenly she nearly smacked into him. He turned around, inhaled deeply, puffing his cheeks with air. In the shadowy hallway she could see his eyes flit upward then to the left, and Shay wondered if she was about to hear a lie. He did an exhale and eye-roll combo making it difficult to analyze. She could only assume that while Agent Harris might not have necessarily done anything wrong, she probably hadn’t done anything altogether right.

After several seconds, Holloway found his voice. “Agent Harris is complicated.”

“How so?”

“She was Williams’ big defender here at the Bureau. He had a habit of operating so far beneath the radar he was barely detectable. In turn, Harris had mastered every trick shot in the Bureau bylaws to keep his ass out of hot water.”

“Behavioral science, right?”

“Specializing in missing persons,” he clarified.

“Were they any good?”

Holloway smirked. “He was good at getting into trouble. And out of it, thanks to Harris. When Williams’ case leads ran dry, we shelved it. Harris never forgave me for that.”

Shay shrugged. “Well, it doesn’t exactly validate that theory about the Bureau taking care of its own.”

“Exactly what she said. But that case is ice cold. No evidence to speak of. Nothing.”

Shay thought it was absurd that they were whispering in the hallway only feet away from Harris’s office. The soft glow that emanated from the marbled glass window gave the hallway an

even creepier feeling. “When you say she never forgave you, why you, specifically?”

Commencing the aforementioned complications, Holloway sighed.

“I brought her into the Bureau myself.”

“You brought me into the Bureau,” Shay put in. “But this feels different. Cut to the chase. You two have an affair?”

“She’s my goddaughter.” The impatience in his tone said it wasn’t the first time he’d fielded such a question. He tamped it down, got on with it. “You and Harris are like night and day. You never let your private life get in the way of your work, even when your work invaded your private life.”

True. Shay Cooper had been called the Bureau’s perfect recipe, handling the collision of her worlds with a trained sense of removal that was nothing short of miraculous. Shay didn’t like to be reminded of the past, especially what Holloway was referring to. She rifled her fingers through her dark, jagged-cut hair and was suddenly nervous. She shifted, kept her sour feelings about Bureau-grade professionalism in check. She was only too glad to be educating agents these days instead of working alongside them.

“So she’s a wild child? A slacker? You don’t want your ass in a sling over it?” She was losing patience. “Rog, am I approaching warm on any of this?”

Holloway’s mood swings surrounding the subject bordered bipolar. “She’s a damned good agent, don’t you forget that.” He softened his posture again, and again looked troubled. “I think she was involved with Williams.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time a partnership made its way outside these hallowed halls.”

“I didn’t think he was her type, if you know what I mean.”

She didn’t. “Why am I meeting her?”

“I don’t know what to do with her.” His expression suggested he might have meant only to think the statement, not say it. He self-corrected. “I want your take on her.”

“My take,” she echoed suspiciously.

“Just meet her. Then we’ll get lunch and you go back to your cushy Academy office with your outrageous pay grade.” He patted her shoulder, smiled. “That’s all.”

Coop didn't like his tone and liked the mention of her salary even less. What she liked least of all was that whenever Holloway said "that's all" about anything, it was always only the beginning.