

Excerpt

Viper's Defiant Mate

Sarafin Warriors book 2

By S. E. Smith

Righteous, New Mexico

"You can do this, girl," Tina St. Claire murmured to herself as she glanced around the room to make sure she didn't forget anything before she opened the door. "Just act cool, calm and collected. Pearl says that as long as you don't sweat, no one will ever know you are bluffing or scared shitless."

She stopped in the doorway to the old, but clean motel room that she had rented for the night and gazed out over the parking lot. She calmly adjusted her sunglasses before she stepped out into the bright early morning sunlight in Righteous, New Mexico. Closing the door behind her, she adjusted her knapsack containing two changes of clothes, some toiletries, and the paperwork outlining her research on her right shoulder before she pulled the strap to the messenger bag she used as a purse over her head and adjusted it across the front of her.

She lifted the tip of her hat to gaze up momentarily at the clear, cloudless blue sky. A pang of grief swept through her as she stared upward. The color reminded her of her sister, Riley's eyes. Pushing the

grief down, she ran her fingers along the brim of the dark brown hat before letting them fall to her side.

Tina ignored the dry heat as it swirled around her. It was hot, but not as hot as she expected; it was just a little dustier than she was used to. A shiver of uncertainty threatened to choke her as she stepped down the sidewalk heading to the small Bail Bond office located on the corner three blocks from the motel. Luckily, it wasn't far from the Greyhound Bus station that was two blocks over. She would get confirmation on the information she had found and get out. The bus would be here in less than two hours. That should be plenty of time to find out if what she suspected was true, that Riley's former boss was more than just a lying jerk, he was a criminal.

A wave of guilt surged up when she thought of what she had been doing behind her Grandmother's back. She knew Pearl was just as worried about Riley as she was, she just showed it differently. She knew deep down that she should have told her grandmother where she was going. The problem was that Pearl tended to shoot first, literally, if she had her shotgun, and ask questions later.

While Pearl had been dogging the Police Department in San Diego to get off their asses and do something, Tina had been doing a little investigating on her own. It was some of the highly questionable accounting practices, aka money-laundering, in Riley's former boss's accounts that made Tina suspect that her sister had discovered more than she bargained for when she accepted the job here.

Most people underestimated her sister, thinking she was a dumb blonde. Riley was good at letting people have their misconception. If there was one thing the St. Claire women had learned, it was not to give a rat's ass about what other people thought of them.

When they were growing up, some of the girls in High School had called her and Riley 'trailer' trash. Personally, Tina found that amusing considering they had never lived in a mobile home. Their mom may have abandoned them to their grandmother, but Pearl had been there making sure they had a nice, clean home, a good education, and while some of the places hadn't been the best, or safest place to live, they had always been immaculate.

Riley, on the other hand, had gotten into her fair share of fights before the school threatened to take them away from Pearl if she didn't quit. Pearl had shown them both how to use their brains, and their mouths, to overcome the bullies. Riley had always been better at it than her, mostly because Tina had a quirky sense of humor and enjoyed watching others put their foot in their mouths.

Plus, she thought as she walked slowly down the sidewalk. I don't have the violent tendencies that Riley and Pearl do.

Focusing back on the matter at hand, Tina thought of Douglas Knockletter and what she had discovered by going through his tax records. She had learned a long time ago that financial records were like looking

at a person's soul. You could learn a lot about them from their spending habits.

What she found out from Knockletter's returns was that there was no way that Knockletter could afford his lifestyle with the income he was reporting. She had noticed that right off the bat. Those findings made her think that all the polite, concerned conversations that she'd had with the bail bondsman about Riley's disappearance were as fake as he was.

Glancing around, she noticed a man wearing the dark tan color of a law enforcement uniform, leaning against the wall outside a small café. He was watching her with an intense stare that sent another shiver through her, this time of warning. Thankful for the hat and sunglasses that shielded her face, she acted as if she was just out for an early morning stroll.

A frown creased her brow and worry made her want to bite her bottom lip, an annoying habit she had developed during her junior year of high school. There was something strange going on around here. She decided that it had more to do with the people in the town, than the location. The kid checking her in at the motel had been okay, but the feeling of being watched this morning sent her internal warning system into high gear.

She let her gaze roam the main street of town. There wasn't much to Righteous, New Mexico. There was an intersection in the center of town where two highways met. The town wasn't far from the Arizona, Utah, and Colorado borders. She would have understood Riley moving back to Denver before

moving to a little hole in the desert like this. Heck, they didn't even have a decent department store! How her sister, Riley, ever ended up in a place like this, Tina would never understand.

Pushing her hair back from her face, she could at least appreciate that in the dry heat, she didn't have to worry about nervous sweat beading on her brow. She tilted the dark brown pleather hat further down over her forehead so that more of her face was shielded from the sun.

Another difference between me and Riley, she thought with an inelegant snort, thankful that she had applied a liberal dose of sunscreen to her face.

She had a very fair complexion, which meant she was constantly having to be careful about getting a sunburn. Unfortunately, she didn't tan... at all. Instead, she had learned one painful summer day at the community pool that she burnt to the color of an ugly red lobster. She had missed three days of school and had been in agony.

No, she was the winter to Riley's summer when it came to colors and personality, it would appear. Riley, with her infectious smile and sharp wit, had taken after their mom and Grandma Pearl in attitude, while Tina decided she must have taken after her father, a quiet, geeky man who had no idea how to handle her existence when she found him less than a year ago. She had pale skin, long, dark brown hair that refused to tolerate even the slightest curl, and boring dark brown eyes. Combine that with a full size fourteen figure, and she was... average, the complete

opposite of her big sister who was bright like the summer, blonde, and beautiful with a kick-ass personality.

Tina briefly held the dark eyes that stared back at her before she turned her head, breaking the contact. Yep, her instincts were telling her that talking to the local police department here would not be in her best interest. It would be better to turn everything over to the police department in San Diego. At least, if her suspicions turned out correct. Pasting a fake smile to her lips, she pushed open the door to the Bail Bond office, listening to the small sound of the bell as it rang.

“Hello,” she called out. “Is anyone here?”

Tina heard the sound of a chair moving before the thud of feet resounded on the floor. Her eyes flickered to the clock on the wall. It said that it was a quarter past nine. She absently glanced down at her cell phone. It was off by almost ten minutes.

“Well, hello beautiful,” a man said from the doorway separating the front rooming containing two plastic chairs and a battered desk, and the back room where he had been. “Please tell me you need to be handcuffed.”

Loathing filled Tina’s eyes at his suggestive comment and the lewd, assessing gaze he was giving her. If nothing else resulted from this visit, there was one thing that was clear to Tina... her sister would have killed the bastard, or at least maimed him, if he looked at her like that. Impulsively, Tina’s eyes

dropped down to look at the hand casually unbuttoning one of the buttons at the top of his shirt.

I wonder if it's my imagination, or does he have a couple of crooked fingers on that hand? She thought with a slightly hopeful look that was concealed by her sunglasses.

"No, fortunately, I don't need to be handcuffed," she replied in a stiff voice before softening it and forcing what she hoped was a sexy smile onto her lips. "I do need help, though."

Tina almost turned tail and ran when the guy pushed away from the door frame and motioned for her to step through the doorway. Instead, she bit her bottom lip and took a step forward. She gave Douglas Knockletter another weak smile as she walked past him.

Yes, I should have told Pearl where I was going so she could come in with her damn gun if this turns out bad, she thought with a sinking feeling in her stomach.