Single-handed

Veronica Blade

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Cover design by Rose Nomura
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For Ashley, for all that you do

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Immediately following the end of this story, please continue reading for sneak peeks of other books by Veronica Blade.

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Chapter One

Every day at lunch, weather permitting, Laynie, Brittany and I claimed the same table against the outside wall of the school building. The three of us shared the bench since it had the best view to watch everyone else. Today, my two best friends insisted on matchmaking for me. I'd given up on getting asked to prom, but they still had hope for me.

"You're so lucky, Alex." Laynie's gaze landed on a head of short, dark blond hair. She planted her elbows on the lunch table, rested her chin in her palms and sighed. "Tommy's dreamy."

"Lucky? He doesn't like me that way. Trust me," I said, taking a sip of my soda. "You guys are wasting your time."

"Yeah, he does." Laynie craned her neck to see past Brittany who sat between us, then turned to refocus on Tommy. "He can't resist your Latina hotness."

I choked on a gulp of my drink and coughed. "You're
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delusional."

"He's got this scholarly kind of deliciousness about him." Laynie said, still staring at Tommy. "Don't you think?"

Brittany flipped her blond hair over her shoulder and snuck another peek at Tommy. "Doesn't matter how cute he is, you can still kick his ass, Alex."

Yep, I probably could. That was exactly why he'd never ask me to prom. Since last year, guys saw me coming and detoured. It was as if *Caution!* was stamped on a big orange sign on my forehead. I mean, geez, I saved a boy from being ganged up on by Wes Hampton and his posse. Sure, Wes had ended up face down on the concrete with his arms behind him and my knee in his back, but I hadn't hurt him. No bruises or anything.

Incidents didn't happen often, but it only needed to happen once and it spread though school faster than Mr. Fargo could write an 'F' on my calculus quiz.

My single-handed defense of weaker kids had brought our school violence down to almost nothing. The upside was how well the other kids treated me — none who I felt

were prospects for prom though.

When a hundred-pound girl just over five feet neutralizes a guy nearly twice her weight, potential boyfriends tend to write the girl off. And who could blame them? Tommy was the exception, but he'd never flirted with me or hinted that he liked me as more than a friend.

Laynie and Brittany were crazy if they thought Tommy or anyone else would ask me to prom. Lots of girls went dateless. So could I. Not a big deal.

But I wouldn't be opposed to having an escort.

My gaze darted across asphalt, past the picnic benches filled with my classmates, to Tommy. "Yeah, I'm sure I could take him. He doesn't exactly look dangerous," I said. Not with the button down shirt and glasses. Tommy might have had height on his side, but he was a little too lean. "Which means he'll bring the same emotional baggage as any other guy. Haven't met one yet who's cool with a girl being tougher than him."

"Maybe you should bulk up, so they don't feel as bad." Brittany giggled. "At least they could say it was a big, brawny girl, not a willowy short thing."

"I'm not *that* short."

"You're right." Brittany snorted and waved my words away. "I know a couple of freshmen shorter than you."

I rolled my eyes at her exaggeration. Still, I wasn't exactly a giant, which made it even harder on the guys' egos when I knocked them down. Like when Luke Pratt had taken hold of Will Mayer's pants from behind and dragged him backward across the football field. But what else was I supposed to do? Not take a stand? Screw that. Besides, it seemed wrong to let my brown belt in jujitsu go to waste when I could use it to help someone. I refused to make less of myself to please a boy. And that included Tommy — no matter how hot or sweet he was.

"Tommy seems different though," Laynie said as we watched him toss some potato chips in his mouth. "Unlike the rest of them, he's not afraid to talk to you. Maybe he's *the guy*." She gave me a hopeful smile.

"Laynie, not everyone is looking for *the guy*," Brittany said. "Some people don't find him until they're old, like in their thirties. Right now, we're just looking for someone to take Alex to prom. That's it. He doesn't need to marry her."

Laynie's bottom lip jutted out. "No one has to get married right now. But who wouldn't want to meet *the guy* and avoid wasting possibly years kissing a bunch of duds? Oh, looks like Tommy's headed our way." She straightened in her chair.

My stomach pinched. I wouldn't admit it to Laynie or Brittany, but I had a mammoth crush on Tommy. I loved the way he talked to me as though I were one of the guys. But in a good way, like he didn't feel he had to act differently around me. On the other hand, I didn't want to be one of the guys to *him*.

"I'm not sure if he's your forever guy, Alex, but I think Laynie's right." Brittany narrowed her eyes at the approaching figure. "He definitely likes you."

Impossible. Not that I didn't think I was pretty enough, but since guys never asked me out, it was easy to assume Tommy wouldn't either. The fact that I'd shared three classes with him all year and he'd never made a move was proof enough. Maybe he just liked hanging out with me because around me was the safest place to be.

"You guys are imagining things. And would you *please*

stop staring at him?" I whispered as he neared our table. When they ignored me, I nudged Brittany hard enough to start a domino effect. On Brittany's other side, Laynie jolted.

Tommy stopped right in front of me. His dark blond hair looked slightly red under the afternoon sun. "Hey."

I smiled since it was hard not to. He was just so easy to talk to. "What's up?"

He sat on the bench across from us, his hazel eyes focused on me. "Mr. Fargo's got a quiz next period. You ready for it?"

"Of course. I studied last night. You?" I asked, trying to act cool, as though I didn't want more from him than I did. My friends were suddenly silent. They had high hopes for Tommy and me, but I hated that they'd inevitably be disappointed when nothing came of it. Just like I would be.

"Yeah, I studied too." He glanced at Laynie and Alex, then back to me. "Why don't you come sit at our table?"

For some reason, sitting with him and his friends made me want to go crawl in a hole. His guy friends could barely look me in the eye. Why would I want to sit with them *on*

purpose? “We’re good here,” I said. “Thanks, though.”

“The three prettiest girls at school and you’re always by yourselves.” He shook his head.

Laynie and Brittany shrugged in unison. My long, dark brown hair fell over my shoulder as my gaze dropped to the dingy plastic picnic table.

“You guys going to The Bean Pit after school?” he asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“Promised my mom I’d help her bake cookies,” Laynie said.

Brittany shook her head. “No. I have some research to do for *The Journal*. I’m the editor. I can’t slack.”

“Alex was just saying how she was in the mood for a cappuccino.” Laynie grinned and turned to me. “Or was it hot cocoa?”

Wow, way to be obvious. Thankfully, Tommy didn’t seem to notice.

“I’ll buy.” Tommy beamed. Not the dopey kind of smile I’d gotten from guys who think I’m hot — until they realize I’m not fragile and helpless. His smile wasn’t needy or awkward either. He was just… Tommy. A guy I could

totally fall for the rest of the way — if I let myself.

"I'll drive," I offered.

"Great. Meet you in the parking lot after school?" he asked.

He'd only moved to San Diego this past fall and hadn't been around last year when I'd built my tough girl rep. If he didn't already know about it, he'd find out soon enough. In the meantime, I'd spend some time with a guy I liked. "Sure," I said, just as the warning bell rang.

"I have to get something from my locker. See you later." His gaze swept over us, then with one more quick glance at me, he returned to his friends.

"Tommy's got it bad for you." Laynie grinned.

"He must already know about you." Brittany pursed her lips as she stared at Tommy's retreating back, then she turned to me. "Either he doesn't believe it or he doesn't care."

"If he cared about any of that, he wouldn't go through the trouble of arranging a coffee date." Laynie beamed, clearly ecstatic at the possibility that one of us could end up with a prom date.

“He’s just being nice. We’re friends,” I said. Tommy and I may never become more than that. But I’d enjoy spending time with him, until the day he realized I’m not girlfriend material and bolted like every other guy before him. I’d probably live my whole life single and die a virgin.

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The rest of the day, I obsessed on my upcoming coffee date with Tommy. Thankfully, he sat behind me in calculus, where I wouldn’t be tempted to sneak peeks at him. Good thing too or I probably would’ve tanked the quiz and gotten one of Mr. Fargo’s famous ‘Fs.’

After my last class, Brittany and Laynie huddled with me by my ancient, faded blue Honda Civic, speaking in hushed voices in case Tommy snuck up on us.

“Since he’s already offered, let him pay. It helps guys feel manly,” Laynie said.

Brittany grasped my shoulders. “We know you can pay your own way and open the doors yourself, but if he’s on it, let him do it. Just be a girl for a little while.”

“I’ll try, so long as I don’t have to pretend to be frail so
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he'll like me," I said. Any minute now, Tommy would arrive and we'd go out alone, away from school and our friends. A thrill rushed through me, but I squashed it. My last date had been with Ryan who'd stopped returning my calls right after the Wes Hampton incident.

I rolled my eyes. "Like it's going to make a difference in the end."

"Maybe this time it'll work out," Laynie said, brushing a soothing hand down my arm.

"Don't get your hopes up."

"Alex," Brittany said. "We just want you to have a nice time. You deserve it."

I made my lips curve up so they wouldn't worry about me. "Thanks. You guys should get going. Don't want you two to scare him off."

"He doesn't look scared to me." Brittany nudged me with her elbow.

I followed the path of Brittany's gaze to Tommy waving from across the lot. He pointed to his backpack over his shoulder, then to his car and I nodded.

"Even if this goes nowhere and you stay friends, at least

you'll have something pretty to look at." Laynie sighed.

"Would you both stop staring?" I scowled.

Brittany nudged my shoulder. "You can't blame us. He's super cute."

"True." I wiggled my fingers, hoping to shake out the tension. "Oh, hell, here he comes."

"You'll be fine." Laynie squeezed my shoulder. "He obviously likes you exactly as you are. Just roll with it."

Brittany and Laynie waved as they strolled to their own cars. I wiped my palms on my jeans and turned to face Tommy.

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Chapter Two

Tommy gave me a huge grin and, for the first time, I noticed he had dimples. They made him even cuter. "You ready?" he asked.

More than. "Yeah." I reached for the handle on the driver's side to open the door, but Tommy beat me to it. I
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stared at him, unmoving. No guy at school had ever opened a door for me before.

"Now you're supposed to get in." A smile played on his lips.

"Thanks." I blinked, then climbed behind the wheel as he shut the door and rounded the hood. I turned the key and the engine roared to life just as he folded himself into the passenger seat. The Living Dead blared from the speakers.

"Sorry." I turned the volume knob, so I wouldn't have to strain to be heard over the music. "They're one of my favorite bands." I flashed him a smile before glancing over my shoulder and backing out of the lot. "I even got concert tickets."

"No way. They're my favorite band too." He slapped a palm on the dashboard. "I heard they sold out the first day. You're so lucky."

I chuckled. "Not luck. I put it on my birthday wish list."

"I'll have to try that."

Or I could give him the extra ticket, since I hadn't promised it to anyone yet. Going to the concert with a huge fan would be so much more fun than taking Brittany who

said she'd go but merely tolerated the music. Slim chance Tommy would still want to go with me by the time the concert date rolled around next month though. Some girl would surely snatch him up.

I cruised through the gate of the school and a mile later we rolled into the Bean Pit's parking lot.

"What time do you have to be home?" Tommy asked, opening the Bean Pit's door for me. My stomach fluttered at how sweet he was being.

"Doesn't matter. My dad's in a tournament out of town." I stopped in the coffee line. The place was packed. Tiny round tables were crammed in the overcrowded café. A few of them were people I recognized from school. I drew in a deep breath and basked in the scent of roasted coffee and vanilla.

"Right. He owns that jujitsu studio on Broadway, right?" he asked. When I only nodded, he continued, "What level belt are you?"

So he *did* know. "Brown belt. That's just below a black in jujitsu." My face flushed and I waited for Tommy to run.

His eyes bulged. "That's impressive. You worked hard

for it, I'm sure."

"Yeah." I nodded, totally weirded out. He almost seemed enthusiastic over my skills.

"That is so cool. Bet you don't have to worry about walking down dark alleys late at night." He grinned.

I snorted. "Very funny. Actually, I think most people wish I didn't go to their school. Like I upset the natural order of things."

"I heard that you single-handedly cleaned up our school. One bully can terrorize a lot of kids. I'd say there are more people happy to have you there than not."

"I guess so," I said, staring at my feet.

"How old were you when you got your first lesson?" he asked as though girls like me were as natural as oxygen.

"Five," I answered, hope sparking in me for that second date.

"That means you've been training for thirteen years. Wow."

I laughed. "Yes, but school and sleepovers kept me from training a lot."

We stepped up to the counter and ordered, then waited

at the other end. He reached in front of me to get a stir stick, which brought his face inches from mine. He smelled of mint and soap. He was close enough that I'd only have to lean forward just a hair and our lips would touch. They were nice lips too. Full, but not too big. Very kissable.

Stir stick in hand, Tommy withdrew and leaned against the counter to observe the other patrons in the coffee house. I followed suit, noting Wes Hampton, San Diego High's class ass, sitting at the other end of the room in an animated conversation with a couple friends. The same guy I'd made an example of last year.

I'd never have to worry about him again, but his presence only reminded me of who I was. My coffee date with Tommy was a joke and I was just as crazy as my friends if I thought it could work with us. I shouldn't have come.

A barista called our names and set our drinks on the counter. We each grabbed our cup and headed for the only empty table.

"Thanks for the hot chocolate," I said once we'd both sat.

“Thanks for the ride.” Tommy grinned, then he grew sober. His palms wrapped around the steaming paper cup. I liked his hands. They weren’t all soft and pasty, like he never got them dirty. “You live with your dad, right? What happened to your mom?” He stilled. “I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

“It’s okay. She died when I was one, so I don’t remember her at all.” I tasted my cocoa.

“What happened to her?” he asked, sampling his cappuccino.

“Mugging gone wrong. That was when my dad started studying martial arts. He wanted to be able to protect me like he couldn’t do for my mom.”

“And he taught you too, so you could take care of yourself when he wasn’t around?” Tommy asked.

I nodded and took another sip of my drink, letting the sweet, hot cocoa warm me. Whether it was the company, the drink or the dimples, I felt more relaxed than I had in ages. Tommy was good for me. Even if he never became my boyfriend, he’d be a great friend.

I was suddenly slammed forward and cocoa sloshed in

my cup. I set it on the table and spun in my chair to see who'd crashed into me. Wes Hampton stared down at me. "Wh—" I froze at the expression on Wes's face. Pure hatred.

He looked me right in the eye, leaned over and nudged a corner of the table. Without me holding my cup, it toppled and liquid spilled out, dripping over the edge of the table and onto my knee.

I shot out of my seat. "What the hell?"

Tommy's chair scraped against the floor as he rose too. I hoped he would stay there, out of the way, in case things got ugly. "Wes, what are you doing?" he asked, scowling.

Ignoring Tommy, Wes sneered and pushed out his chest, making him seem even taller.

"Some manners would be nice." I pointed to the wet mess on the floor.

"Guess you need to clean it up, huh? Or are you going to cry like a girl first?"

Maybe he was drunk, though I couldn't think how he'd managed to drink since school had only just let out. I studied him a moment, looking for a sign, but he seemed

sober enough. Same with his two friends.

“Wes, what the hell is wrong with you?” Tommy said, standing at my side.

“Yeah, what’s your problem?” I shifted and turned to make myself a smaller target, my limbs on standby to strike.

“As if you don’t know. I’ve seen you all over school acting like you own it, telling people what to do. You’re not tough. You’re just a stupid girl who needs to be put in her place.” Wes snickered and his friends echoed him.

“Walk away, Wes,” I said. Was he on steroids or something and that’s how he figured he’d take me in a fight? If so, could I handle him and his friends if they were all amped up, while still shielding Tommy? I stretched my shoulders back, bringing my eyes level to his wide chest.

“Listen to the girl,” Tommy urged.

“This is none of your business.” Wes glared at Tommy, then his brown eyes fixed on mine. “You’re not the only one who’s been getting karate lessons, Alex.”

Tommy moved to get in front of me and I gave him a warning look. “Tommy, I got this.”

If Wes was on some kind of drug and I didn't do well, I still had a better chance than Tommy. And I really didn't want Wes messing up my favorite café. "Maybe we should go outside."

"I'd love nothing more." Wes flashed me a cocky smile and headed out the door.

I moved to follow, but Tommy grabbed my arm.

"And I'm supposed to just stand here while you guys go at it?" Tommy's hazel eyes burned into mine. "You're kidding, right?"

"I forgot you two are friends," I said. "I'll try not to hurt him, okay?"

He blinked, still gripping my arm. "I helped him with English Lit. That doesn't make us friends. And anyway, that's not the point."

"You're afraid I'm the one who'll get hurt? I can take care of myself."

"Against three guys?" Tommy lifted one brow and eyed me.

"I beat him once, so now he has something to prove. Better to deal with it now than in some dark alley. You

should stay inside." I twisted out of his grasp, whirled around and headed outside to the waiting bully.

I pushed open the door and the bells tied to the handle chimed. A cool breeze greeted me and my long hair tickled my neck. All the parking spots were full and there were a handful of people either getting out of their cars in front of the store next door or moving toward the parking lot. And then there were the coffee house patrons who could easily see us from the other side of the large window. If things went my way, Wes was in for another public humiliation. Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that. If it did though, maybe Wes would learn from it and this would be the last time.

He spotted me and straightened, a smug look on his face.

"You sure you want to do this?" I eyed his friends warily, hoping they didn't plan to jump in. I heard Tommy's steps behind me, but I didn't take my eyes off Wes or his goons.

"You're not going to hit a girl, Wes," Tommy said.

Wes scoffed. "She's not a girl."

Oh, God. "Tommy, stay out of this," I said.

Tommy ignored my request and stepped in front of me. “She *looks* like a girl to me.”

“Well, when she starts *acting* like a girl, I’ll start treating her like one.” Wes sneered.

“Sure, you do that.” Tommy nodded solemnly. “But you’ll have to go through me.”

Wes snickered. “You’re willing to get your ass beat for *her*?”

“I’d hate to see you do something you’ll regret the rest of your life,” Tommy said.

Wes gave Tommy a smug look. “And why would I regret it?”

“Maybe because you’ll go down in history as the guy who hit a girl. More likely, you’ll become infamous for getting beat up *by* a girl. You can kiss your social life goodbye, along with any dates you might’ve had.” Tommy folded his arms over his chest and lifted his chin.

“Whatever. I’m bored with her anyway.” Wes narrowed his eyes. “You’d be more fun to fight.”

“Not really.” Tommy held up a hand. “I don’t give up easily.”

Wes studied Tommy a moment, then his gaze darted to me for an instant before his arm pulled back. He threw a fist toward Tommy and I stepped between them. With my right hand, I hit the inside of Wes's elbow, then struck his neck with the side of my other hand. Wes yelped and jumped back, staring at me with wide eyes. His two friends inched backward, putting distance between me and them.

Wes turned to his friends. "Y-you guys ready to go?" he asked.

And just like that, Wes and his friends made a dash for their car. I kept my eyes on them until they drove away, then whirled around to Tommy, my hands balling into fists. "I could've handled them without you."

"I know that," Tommy growled. "But you shouldn't *have* to."

"But I *do* have to. You could've gotten hurt."

"You think that's worse than watching them try to take you down? I don't think so." His jaw tightened. "Look, I know you're tough and you can handle them. But I can't stand by and watch them hit you. I just can't. And maybe you don't care, but I do."

My jaw dropped and my fists unfurled. “I was betting that they couldn’t hurt me and I was right.”

He inched closer and gently took my hand. “Bodily harm has nothing to do with it. You’re still a girl and someone needs to look out for you in that way.”

So he was worried what would happen to… what… my feminine psyche? More shocking, he was *still there* — and holding my hand.

I’d had it all wrong, thinking I needed a guy to be tougher than me. What I really needed was someone to safeguard the part I put aside to fight. The girl in me.

And that guy was definitely Tommy — who seemed happy to take me on. But I had to ask, just to make sure. “And you’re the guy for the job?”

“Well… yeah.”

“Okay.” My lips curled up. “What else does the job entail?”

“For starters, when you need a date, you can use me,” he said, grinning.

I tilted my head thoughtfully. “Hmm… does that include prom?”

“I’d love to go with you. Thanks for asking.” He chuckled. “Under one condition: *I* will take *you* to prom, not the other way around. Meaning I’ll pick you up and take care of everything.”

My smile widened. “Deal.”

“Hypothetically speaking,” Tommy lowered his voice to a whisper and tugged on my hand to bring me closer, “if I was going to kiss you, would I be risking life and limb?”

“You wait until *now* to worry about your limbs?” I beamed at him as my arms circled his waist. “Why weren’t you worried about them before?”

Tommy cradled my face in both hands. “Because I was only thinking of you,” he said just before his lips touched mine.

THE END

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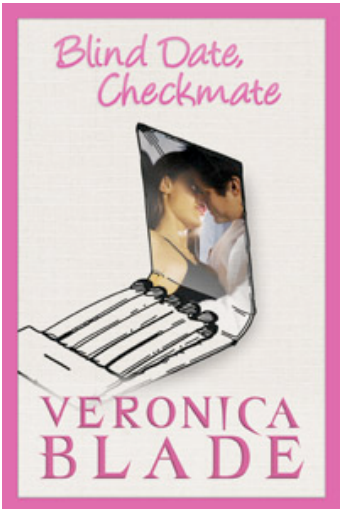

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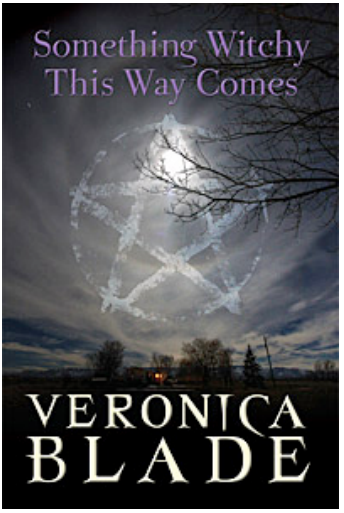

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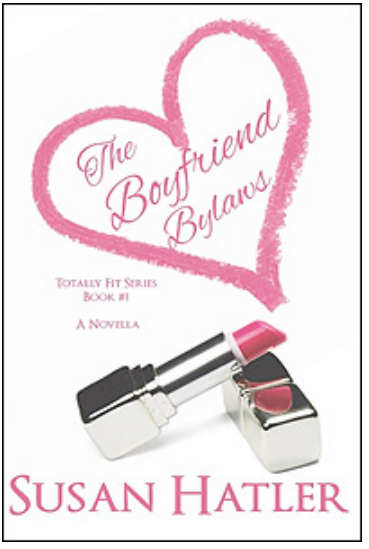

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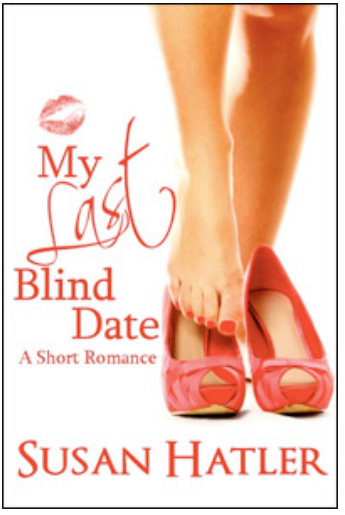

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Author Bio

Veronica Blade lives in Southern California with her husband and whichever of their kids — or someone else's kid — decides to drop in. By day she runs the family business, but each night she slips away to spin her tales.
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She writes stories about young adults to relive her own childhood and to live vicariously through her characters. Except her heroes and heroines lead far more interesting lives — and they are always way hotter.

You can visit Veronica Blade on Facebook and Goodreads or follow her on Twitter as VeronicaBlade. She loves hearing from readers!

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