

By a Thread (Elemental Assassin Series Book 6)

By Jennifer Estep

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The sixth book in the *USA TODAY* bestselling *Elemental Assassin* urban fantasy series featuring Gin Blanco, who by day owns a Tennessee BBQ joint, and by night is a tough female assassin known as the Spider.

I never thought I'd need a vacation from being an assassin….

My name is Gin Blanco, and I'm the assassin the Spider. All the Ashland's lowlifes are gunning for me and trying to make a name for themselves by taking out the Spider. So I think it's a good idea to get out of Ashland for a while until things cool down.

So I'm headed south to a swanky beach town, along with my baby sister, Bria, for a weekend of fun in the sun. But when an old friend of Bria's is threatened by a powerful vampire with deadly elemental magic, it looks like I'll have to dig my silverstone knives out of my suitcase after all. But this time, not even my own Ice and Stone power may be enough to save me from coming home in a pine box…

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Editorial Review

Review
“Gin Blanco is one of the most intriguing heroines on the scene. . . . If you have not gotten on the Gin bandwagon yet, do so today!” —*RT Book Reviews*

“This series kicked off with a bang, and the action hasn’t let up since.” —Fresh Fiction

About the Author
Jennifer Estep is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author prowling the streets of her imagination in search of her next fantasy idea. *Spider’s Bite, Web of Lies, Venom, Tangled Threads, Spider’s Revenge, By a Thread, Widow’s Web, Deadly Sting, Heart of Venom, The Spider, Poison Promise, Black Widow, Spider’s Trap, Bitter Bite, Unraveled,* and *Snared,* along with the e-shorts *Thread of Death, Parlor Tricks, Kiss of Venom, Unwanted,* and *Nice Guys Bite* are the other works in her red-hot Elemental Assassin urban fantasy series. Jennifer is also the author of the Black Blade and Mythos Academy young adult urban fantasy series and the Bigtime paranormal romance series. For more on Jennifer and her books, visit her at JenniferEstep.com and @Jennifer_Estep.

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By a Thread

1

“You need a vacation.”

I looked up from the tomato I was slicing and stared across the counter at Finnegan Lane, my foster brother and partner in so many murderous schemes over the years.

“Vacation? I hardly ever take vacations,” I said. “I have a barbecue restaurant to run, in case you’ve forgotten.”

I gestured with the knife at the rest of the Pork Pit. Most people wouldn’t consider the restaurant much to look at with its blue and pink vinyl booths and matching, peeling pig tracks on the floor that led to the men’s and women’s restrooms. The long counter that ran along the back wall was older than I was, as were most of the cups, dishes, plates, silverware, and stainless-steel appliances. But everything was neat, clean, and polished to a high gloss, from the tables and chairs to the framed, slightly bloody copy of Where the Red Fern Grows by Wilson Rawls that hung on the wall close to the battered, old-fashioned cash register. The Pork Pit might not be some fancy, highfalutin place, but it was my gin joint, my home, and I was damned proud of it. Always had been, always would be.

“A vacation,” Finn repeated, as if I hadn’t said a word. He was rather persistent that way. “Somewhere warm, somewhere sandy, somewhere where nobody knows your name, either as Gin Blanco or most especially as the Spider.”

Finn’s voice wasn’t that loud, but when he said the Spider, the words echoed like gunshots through the

storefront. The folks sitting at the tables behind Finn immediately froze, their thick, juicy barbecue beef and pork sandwiches halfway between their plates and lips. Conversation dried up like a shallow puddle in the desert, and everyone's eyes cut to me, wondering how I would react to the sound of that particular name.

My assassin name. The one I'd gone by for the last seventeen years, when I was out late at night killing people for money and eventually other, nobler reasons.

My hand tightened around the long, serrated tomato knife. Not for the first time, I wished I could use it to cut out Finn's tongue—or at least get him to think before he opened his mouth.

An elderly woman sitting two stools down from Finn noticed my death grip on the blade. Her face paled, and her hand clutched at the collar of her white silk blouse like she was about three seconds away from having a heart attack.

Sighing, I made myself relax and put the blade down on the counter. Fuck. I hated being notorious.

After a lifetime of being invisible, I was suddenly the most well-known person in Ashland. Several weeks ago, I'd done the unthinkable—I'd killed Mab Monroe, the Fire elemental who'd been the head of the city's underworld for years. Mab had murdered my mother and older sister when I was thirteen, and her death had been a long time coming, as far as I was concerned. I didn't know anyone who'd shed any real tears over the Fire elemental's messy demise.

But now, everyone wanted their pound of flesh—from me.

Mab's death had left a vacuum among Ashland's legit and not-so-legit power players, and they were all scrambling to stake their various claims, solidify their shady operations, and position themselves as the city's next top dog.

Some of them thought the best way to accomplish that last feat was by killing me.

Idiot after idiot had come to the Pork Pit in the last few weeks, either singly or in small groups, all with one thing on their minds—taking out the Spider. Most of the elementals came at me straight on, challenging me to duels and wanting to test their magic against my own Ice and Stone power. Everyone else, well, they were content to try to get the drop on me when I was either opening up or closing down the restaurant.

Whatever their method, it always ended the same way—with the challengers dead and me asking Sophia Deveraux to dispose of their bodies. I'd killed more people in the last month than I had in a year as the Spider. Even I was getting a little sick of the constant, not-so-surprise attacks and blood spatters on my hands, clothes, and shoes, but the stream of suicidal lowlifes showed no signs of slowing down anytime soon.

The old lady next to Finn sucked in a breath. I looked down and realized that I'd picked up the tomato knife again and was rubbing my thumb over the smooth, polished hilt. It wasn't as strong or sharp as the five silverstone knives that I had secreted on my body, but the serrated blade would do plenty of damage. Most things would, if you put enough force behind them, and being forceful was one of the many things I excelled at.

"What are you looking at?" I snapped.

The old lady's eyes widened. With a trembling hand, she reached into her purse, threw a twenty-dollar bill onto the counter, slid off her stool, and hightailed it out of the restaurant as fast as her square white heels would carry her.

"Another one bites the dust," Finn murmured, his green eyes bright and merry in his handsome face. He always loved my discomfort, even when he wasn't the cause of it.

I frowned and made a slashing gesture with the knife, but Finn just ignored my cold glare and threats of violence. Instead, he raised his coffee mug and gestured to a dwarf who was chopping long green ribs of celery to add to the macaroni salad she was mixing up.

"Sophia?" he asked. "Pretty please?"

Sophia Deveraux turned to stare at Finn. She was the head cook at the Pit, in addition to her side job of getting rid of any bodies I left in my wake as the Spider. I'd inherited the dwarf's dual services when I'd taken over the assassination business from Finn's father, Fletcher Lane. The old man had been an assassin known as the Tin Man, and he'd taught me everything he knew about how to help people quit breathing.

Sophia grunted and grabbed the pot of coffee that she always kept on for Finn, who usually dropped by the restaurant at least once a day. She topped off his cup, and the warm chicory fumes filled my nose, momentarily overpowering the cumin, red pepper, and other spices that flavored the air. The rich caffeine smell always reminded me of Fletcher, who'd drunk the same chicory brew. I breathed in, hoping that the comforting scent would help relax me, but it didn't—not tonight. Not for weeks now.

The Pork Pit might not be much to look at, but folks couldn't help but stare at Sophia. One by one, their eyes drifted from me over to her. It wasn't that she was a dwarf that drew people's gazes; it was because she was Goth—seriously Goth. Sophia wore heavy black boots and jeans, topped by a white T-shirt that featured a black scythe slashing across her chest. Grim Reaper, indeed. Her hair and eyes were black too, making her skin seem that much paler, despite the bright fuchsia lipstick she wore. The lipstick was the same color as the spiked silverstone collar that ringed her neck.

The good thing about standing next to Sophia was that it made everyone forget about me. After a few more seconds, the customers went back to their sandwiches, along with the baked beans, fried onion rings, and other hearty side dishes.

"Now, back to my vacation idea." Finn grinned, showing off his perfect white teeth. "Just think about it. You, Owen, me, and Bria, all happily ensconced in a swanky hotel by a beautiful beach. Bria in a bikini. You and Owen doing your own thing, Bria in a bikini. Did I mention Bria in a bikini?"

I rolled my eyes. "Geez. Have a little respect. That's my baby sister you're talking about."

Finn's grin widened. "I know."

Along with everything else that had gone down when I'd been waging my final battle against Mab, Finn had finally hooked up with my younger sister, Bria. I wasn't sure how serious the two of them were, but they'd been hot and heavy for weeks now and showed no signs of slowing down. I was happy for them—really, I was—but I could have done without Finn's giving me the play-by-play of their sex life on a regular basis. Hell, I didn't even talk about that stuff with Bria, and she was my sister. But that was part of the sordid charm of Finnegan Lane. He loved talking about women and their attributes just as much as he did sleeping

with them.

Finn opened his mouth to cajole me some more, but I'd had enough—enough of the stares, enough of the whispers, enough of everyone wondering if I was going to kill them for setting foot inside my restaurant. I just wanted to be left alone by everyone right now, including Finn.

"I don't need a vacation," I growled, stomping away from him and the curious customers. "And that's final."

I grabbed a couple of trash bags, pushed through the swinging double doors, and walked through the back of the restaurant. I didn't stop until I opened another door and stepped outside into the alley that cut between the rows of buildings on the block.

It was after seven, and night had already fallen, wrapping the structures in thick, coal black shadows that stretched all the way up to the sky. Wispy clouds flitted by in front of the not-quite-full moon, rolling over the bright silver orb like waves crashing onto a sandy shore and then retreating back out to sea.

My eyes zoomed in on a crack in the alley wall across the way, a tiny sliver of space barely big enough for a child to fit into. My old hiding spot when I'd been living on the mean streets of Ashland back before Fletcher had taken me in. For a moment, I wished that I were still small enough to fit into the crack and hide from all my worries—at least for a little while.

I'd thought killing Mab would solve all my problems, but instead it had just created a whole host of new ones. Sure, business was better than ever at the Pork Pit, but only because people came to gawk at me. Everyone wondered if I was really the notorious assassin known as the Spider and if I'd really killed Mab Monroe like some folks claimed.

Then there were the people who actually knew I'd taken out the Fire elemental—people like Jonah McAllister. He'd been Mab's lawyer and one of her top lieutenants before her death, and he had a number of reasons to hate me, especially since I'd killed his son, Jake, last year. McAllister had even gone so far as to offer a price for my head, sending a variety of bounty hunters my way, but no one had been able to collect—yet.

To many, my taking out Mab had made me something of a folk hero, given all the people the Fire elemental had stepped on, hurt, tortured, and killed climbing her way to the top of the Ashland underworld. A few folks had even been bold enough to offer me an atta girl and other kind words upon her death. But to others, especially those who walked through the shady side of life, I represented nothing more than a fat payday or the means to make a name for themselves.

Either way, I was the center of attention these days—and I hated it.

I breathed in, enjoying the peace and quiet after the tight, nervous tension that permeated the restaurant. It was early April, and the nights were still cold and frosty, although the warm days whispered of spring. I heaved the trash bags into the closest Dumpster, but instead of going inside, I lingered in the alley outside the back of the restaurant.

I skimmed my fingers over the rough brick and reached out with my magic. As a Stone elemental, I could create, control, and manipulate the element in whatever form it took, from making bricks fly out of the wall in front of me to crumbling cobblestones to shattering the foundation of a house. I could even make my own skin as hard as marble, so that nothing could hurt me. I'd relied on that particular trick a lot these past few

weeks.

My power also let me listen to the stone around me and all the emotional vibrations that it contained. People's actions, thoughts, and feelings sink into their surroundings over time, especially stone, as folks live, love, die, and more. Listening to the bricks that made up the Pork Pit was one of my favorite things to do because the sound was almost always the same—one of low, slow contentment, just like the minds, hearts, and stomachs of all the folks who'd eaten in the restaurant. A good meal was one of the few things that could satisfy even the pickiest soul, and the Pit had served up its fair share of fine food over the years. I breathed in again, letting that soft sound fill me and soothe away all the stress of the day, all the stress, turmoil, and worry of the last few weeks.

Calmer, I dropped my hand and turned to go inside when the crackle of magic filled the air.

In addition to humans, dwarves, giants, and vampires, Ashland also had a substantial elemental population. Magic could take many forms, could manifest in all sorts of unusual ways, which meant that elementals in the city and beyond had everything from the ability to create balls of lightning in the palms of their hands to being able to control bodies of water. But to be considered a true elemental, you had to be gifted in one of the four main areas—Air, Fire, Ice, or Stone. I was the rarest of elementals in that I was able to tap into not one but two areas, Ice and Stone.

I narrowed my eyes and focused on the other person's magic, which felt like red-hot sparks landing on my skin. A Fire elemental, judging by the way the scars embedded in my palms began to itch and burn. The marks on both my hands were the same. A small circle surrounded by eight thin rays. A spider rune. The symbol for patience. Something that I was getting real short on these days.

I sighed and turned around. Sure enough, two guys stood in the alley behind me. One was a giant, judging by his seven-foot frame, while the other was human and an elemental. A ball of Fire flickered in the palm of his hand, gently bobbing up and down.

Ding, ding, Gin Blanco wins again.

"Let me guess," I drawled. "You're here to take out the notorious Spider."

The giant started to speak, but I held up my hand, cutting him off.

"I really don't care to listen to your blustering manifesto about what absolute badasses the two of you are and how you're going to make me beg for mercy by the time you're through with me," I said. "I just want to say this—do yourselves a favor. Walk away now, and I won't kill you."

"Did you hear that, Billy?" the Fire elemental cackled. "The Spider's going to go soft on us tonight. Lucky us."

Billy, the giant, cracked his knuckles together, a grin splitting his face. "She doesn't look so tough to me, Bobby."

I rolled my eyes. Most people might not know for sure that I was the Spider, but you'd think by now enough folks had disappeared in and around the Pork Pit for everyone else to realize that it might be a good idea to steer clear of me and my restaurant.

“Let’s get her!” Bobby screamed.

The giant let out a loud whoop of agreement.

Apparently not.

They rushed me at the same time, and Bobby threw his elemental Fire at me. He was strong in his magic but, compared to the blazing inferno that I’d faced when I’d killed Mab, his power felt as weak as a candle flame. Still, I ducked out of the way. I had no desire to have my hair singed off again this week.

I rolled to my left, came up on one knee, and grabbed the lid of one of the metal trash cans in the alley. I held the lid up over my head just in time for Billy to plant his massive fist into it. The sharp, ringing force of the giant’s blow rocked me back for a moment. Billy raised his fist again, and I lashed out with my foot, driving my boot into his knee. Billy grunted and stumbled forward, one hand going to the alley floor, putting him down on my level.

I looked him in the eyes, smiled, and smashed the metal lid into his face as hard as I could.

It took several hard, sharp, ringing blows, but eventually blood started to pour out of Billy’s broken, bulbous nose and the deep, jagged cuts that I opened up on his face. I hit him again with the trash can lid, driving the metal into his square chin, and the giant toppled over onto his back. His head cracked against the ground, and he let out a low groan. Down for the count already. Amateur.

Bobby looked stunned, just stunned, that I’d taken out his friend so easily. But his expression quickly changed to one of concern when I got to my feet and started walking toward him, holding the metal lid out in front of me like a shield. Bobby backpedaled, but he forgot to look behind him. He’d taken only two steps before he was pressed up against the side of one of the Dumpsters. Frantic, he snapped his fingers together over and over again, trying to push past his panic and summon up another ball of elemental Fire.

I didn’t give him the chance.

Two seconds later, I slammed the metal lid into his face. I had to hit him only once before he crumpled to the ground.

When I was sure that neither man was going to get up anytime soon, I put the lid back on the trash can. The bloody dents in it matched the marks on all the other cans. More than one moron had jumped me in the alley this week. I eyed the two men, who were moaning, groaning, and trying to figure out how things had gone so wrong so quickly. I shook my head.

“Idiots,” I muttered, and went back inside the restaurant.

A mirror with a cracked corner was mounted over one of the sinks in the back. I stopped there and washed the blood and grime of the fight off my hands, since I didn’t want to make the customers any more scared of me than they already were. My hair had come loose while I’d been hitting the giant with the trash can lid, so I yanked the elastic band out and shoved my dark, chocolate brown locks back into a higher, tighter ponytail.

The clink-clink and clatter-clatter of silverware and dishes drifted through the swinging doors, along with the savory smells of grilled burgers and fries. Since it was creeping up on closing time, all of the waitstaff had already gone home for the evening, so I was alone in this part of the restaurant. Instead of going out into the

storefront and getting back to work, I put my hands on the sink and leaned forward, staring at my reflection in the mirror.

Cold gray eyes, dark hair, pale skin. I looked the same as always, except for the blood spatters on my cheek from the fight and the purple smudges under my eyes. I wiped the blood off with a wet paper towel easily enough, but there was nothing I could do about the circles and the matching exhaustion that had crept over me these past few weeks.

All the stares, all the whispers, all the knock-down, drag-out fights. They'd all worn me down, until now I was just going through the motions. Hell, I hadn't even pulled out my silverstone knives tonight and permanently sliced up those bastards in the alley like I should have. Tangling with the Spider once was enough for most folks, but those morons would probably be stupid enough to make another run at me.

I let out a frustrated sigh. Weariness was a dangerous feeling, especially for an assassin. If I didn't do something about it, eventually I'd slip up and make a careless mistake. Then I'd wind up dead, my head served up on a silver platter to Jonah McAllister or whatever lowlife finally got the drop on me.

Much as I hated to admit it, Finn was right. I needed a vacation—from being the Spider.

I pushed through the double doors, stepping into the restaurant storefront. Once again, everyone froze at my appearance, as if they expected me to whip out a gun from underneath my blue work apron and start shooting. I ignored the curious, fearful, suspicious looks, went back over to the counter, grabbed my knife, and started slicing tomatoes again for the last of the day's sandwiches.

"Took you long enough," Finn said. "I was beginning to think you'd gotten lost back there."

"Not exactly. I had another pair of unexpected visitors I had to entertain."

He raised a questioning eyebrow. "Injured or dead?"

"Merely injured. What can I say? I was in a charitable mood tonight."

Finn arched his eyebrow a little higher at my sarcasm. Charity was one thing that assassins, even semiretired assassins like me, couldn't afford to have too much of. Especially not these days, when every wannabe hood in Ashland wanted a piece of me.

It took me the better part of a minute and two tomatoes to work up to my next words. Finn might be right, but I hated to let him know it. He tended to gloat about things like that.

"You know that vacation you were talking about?"

"Yes?" Finn asked, a sly, satisfied note creeping into his smooth voice.

I sighed, knowing that I was beaten. "When do we leave?"

Users Review

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