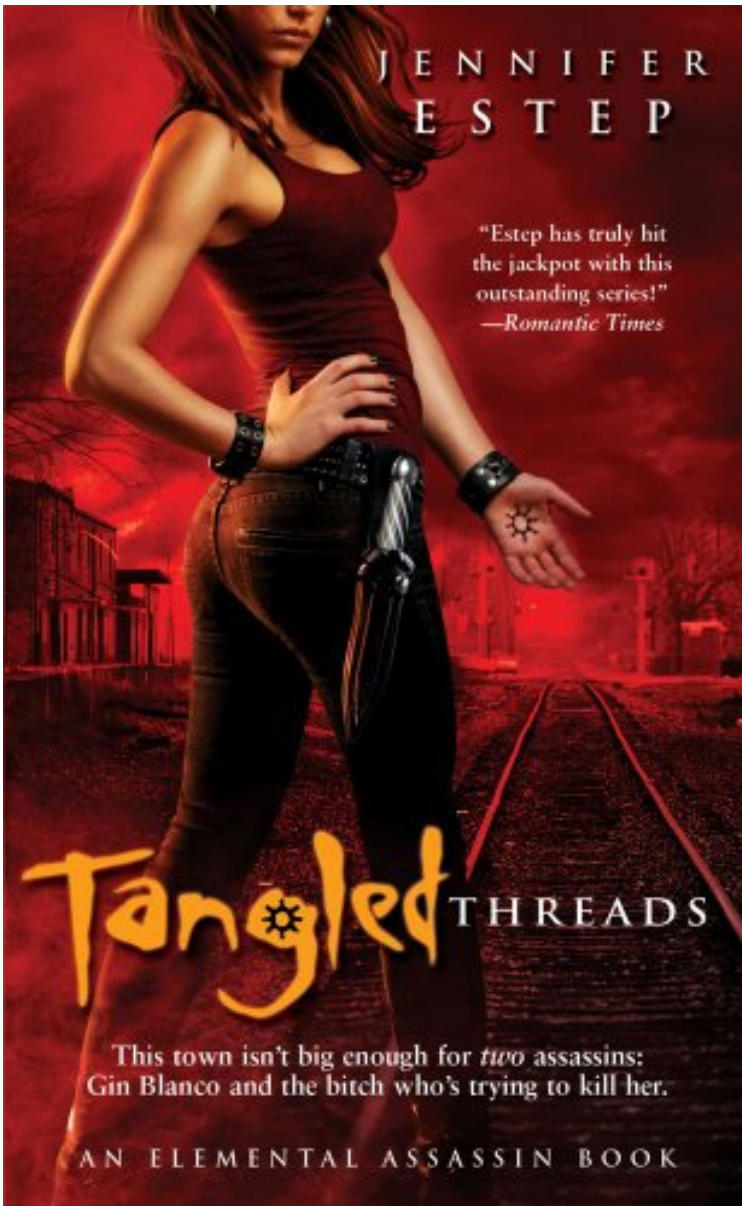


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Tangled Threads



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe fourth book in the outstanding (Romantic Times) Elemental Assassin fantasy series featuring Gin Blaco, who by day is a waitress at a Tennessee BBQ joint, and by night is a tough female assassin.Id rather face a dozen lethal assassins any night than deal with something as tricky, convoluted, and fragile as my feelings. But here I am. Gin Blanco, the semi-retired assassin known as the Spider. Hovering outside sexy businessman Owen Graysons front door like a nervous teenage girl. One thing I like about Owen: he doesnt shy away from my pastor my present. And right now I have a bulls-eye on my forehead. Cold-blooded Fire elemental Mab Monroe has hired one of the smartest assassins in the

business to trap me. Elektra LaFleur is skilled and efficient, with deadly electrical elemental magic as potent as my own Ice and Stone powers. Which means theres a fifty-fifty chance one of us wont survive this battle.

I intend to kill LaFleur or die trying because Mab wants the assassin to take out my baby sister, Detective Bria Coolidge, too. The only problem is, Bria has no idea Im her long-lost sibling . . . or that Im the murderer shes been chasing through Ashland for weeks. And what Bria doesnt know just might get us both dead. . . .

Extrait 1 Are you going to kill this guy? Or are we just going to sit here all night? Patience, Finn, I murmured. Weve been in the car for only an hour. Longest hour of my life, he muttered. I arched an eyebrow and looked over at Finnegan Lane, my partner in crime for the night. Most nights, actually. Just after ten o'clock a few days before Christmas, and we sat in the darkened front of Finns black Cadillac Escalade. An hour ago, Finn had parked the car in a secluded, out-of-the-way alley overlooking the docks that fronted the Aneirin River. Wed been sitting here, and Finn had been grousing ever since. Finn shifted in his seat, and my gray eyes flicked over him. The wool fabric of his thick coat outlined his broad shoulders, while a black watchmans cap covered his walnut-colored hair. His eyes were a bright green even in the semidarkness, and the shadows did little to hide the square handsomeness of his face. Most women would be glad to be in such close quarters with Finnegan Lane. With his easy smile and natural charm, Finn would have already had the majority of them in the backseat, pants off, legs up, steam covering the windows as the car rocked back and forth. Good thing I wasnt most women. Come on, Gin, Finn whined again. Go stick a couple of your knives in that guy and leave your rune for Mab to find so we can get out of here. I stared out the car window. Across the street, bathed in the golden glow of a streetlight, the guy in question continued to unload wooden crates from the small tugboat that hed pulled up to the dock forty-five minutes ago. Even from this distance, I could hear the warped, weathered boards creak under his weight as the river rushed on by beneath them. The man was a dwarf, short, squat, stocky, sturdy and dressed in black clothes practically identical to the ones that Finn and I were wearing. Jeans, boots, sweater, jacket. The sorts of anonymous clothes you wore to go skulking about late at night, especially in this rough Southtown neighborhood, and most especially when you didnt want anyone else to see what you were up to. Or when you were planning on killing someone, like I was tonight. Most nights, actually. I rubbed my thumb over the hilt of the silverstone knife that I held in my lap. The metal glinted dully in the darkness of the car, and the weight of the weapon felt cold and comforting to me. The knife rested lightly on the spider rune scar embedded in my palm. It would be easy enough to give in to Finns whining. To slip out of the car, cross the street, creep up behind the dwarf, cut his throat, and shove his body off the dock and into the cold river below. I probably wouldnt even get that much blood on my clothes, if I got the angles just right. Because thats what assassins did. Thats what I did. Me. Gin Blanco. The assassin known as the Spider, one of the best around. But I didnt get out of the car and get on with things like Finn wanted me to. Instead, I sighed. He hardly seems worth the trouble. Hes a flunkie, just like all the others that Ive killed these past two weeks. Mab will hire someone else to take his place before they even dredge his body out of the river. Hey, you were the one who decided to declare war on Mab Monroe, Finn pointed out. Correct me if Im wrong, but I believe that you were rather eager to kill your way up to the top of the food chain until you got to her. You said it would be fun. That was six hits ago. Now Id just like to kill Mab and give everyone in Ashland an early Christmas present, myself included. My turn to grouse. But Finn was right. A few weeks ago, a series of events had led me to officially declare war on Mab, and now I was dealing with the fallout and the tedious boredom of it all. Mab Monroe was the Fire elemental who ran the southern metropolis of Ashland like it was her own personal kingdom. To most folks, Mab was a paragon of virtue who used her magic, business connections, and money to fund worthwhile charity projects throughout the city. But those of us who strolled through the shady side of life knew Mab for what she really was the head of a moblike empire that included everything from gambling and drugs to prostitution and kidnappings. Murder, extortion, torture, blackmail, beatings. Mab ordered all that and more, practically on a daily basis. But the Fire elemental was so wealthy, so powerful, so strong in her magic that no one dared to stand up to her. Until me. I had a special reason to hate Mab shed murdered my mother and older sister when I was thirteen. And shed been planning on doing the same thing to me and my baby sister, Bria. But first, Mab had captured and tortured me that fateful night so long ago. Which is how Id ended up with a pair of matching scars on my hands. I put my knife down long enough to rub first one scar, then the other with my fingers. A small circle surrounded by eight thin rays was branded into each of my palms. A spider rune. The symbol for patience. My assassin name. And one that Mab Monroe was now seeing everywhere she went. For the past two weeks, Id been stalking Mabs men, getting a feel for her operation, seeing exactly what kinds of illegal pies she had her sticky fingers in. And along the way, Id picked off some

of her minions when I caught them doing things that they shouldn't, hurting people that they shouldn't. A twist of my knife, a slash of my blade, and Mab had one less soldier in her little army of terror. Killing her men hadn't been hard, not for me. I'd spent the last seventeen years of my life being an assassin, being the Spider, until I'd retired a few months ago. Certain skills you just never forget. Normally, though, when I killed someone I left nothing behind. No fingerprints, no weapon, no DNA. But with Mab's men, I'd purposefully drawn the image of my spider rune at every scene, close to every body I left behind. Taunting her. Letting Mab know exactly who was responsible for messing up her plans and that I was determined to pick her empire apart one body at a time, if I had to. Which is why Finn and I were now sitting in the dark down by the docks in this dangerous Southtown neighborhood. Finn had gotten a tip from one of his sources that Mab had a shipment of drugs or some other illegal paraphernalia coming into Ashland tonight. As the Spider, I'd decided to come down here and see what I could do to foul up Mab's plans once more, thumb my nose at her, and generally piss her off. Come on, Gin, Finn cut into my musings. Make a move already. The guys alone. We would have seen his partner by now, if he'd had one. I looked at the dwarf. He'd finished unloading the boxes from the tugboat and was now busy hauling them over to a van parked at the end of the dock. I know, I said. But something about this just doesn't seem right. Yeah, Finn muttered. The fact that I can't feel my feet anymore and you won't let me turn on the heater. Drink your coffee, then. It'll make you feel better. It always does. For the first time tonight, a grin spread across Finn's face. Why, I think that's an excellent idea. Finn reached down and grabbed a large metal thermos from the floorboard in the backseat. He cracked open the top, and the caffeine fumes of his chicory coffee filled the car. The rich smell always reminded me of his father, Fletcher Lane, my mentor, the one who'd taught me everything I knew about being an assassin. The old man had drunk the same foul brew as his son before he'd died earlier this year. I smiled at the memory and the warmth it stirred in me. While Finn drank his coffee, I stared out at the scene before me once more. Everything seemed still, quiet, cold, dark. But I couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. That something was just slightly off about this whole setup. Fletcher had always told me that nobody ever got dead by waiting just a few more minutes. His advice had kept me alive this long, and I had no intention of disregarding it now. Once again my eyes scanned the area. Deserted street. A few dilapidated buildings hugging the waterfront. The black ribbon of the Aneirin River in the distance. The pale boards of the dock. A lone light flickering over the dwarf's head. My eyes narrowed, and I focused on the light. The bright, intact light burning like a beacon in the dark night. Then I looked up and down the street, my gaze flicking from one iron post to the next. Every other light on the block was busted out. Not surprising. This was Southtown, after all, the part of Ashland that was home to gangbangers, vampire prostitutes, and junkie elementals strung out on their own magic and hungry for more. People would just as soon kill you as look at you here. Not a place you wanted to linger, even during the daylight hours. So I wasn't surprised that the streetlights had been broken, probably long ago, by the rocks, beer bottles, and other trash that littered the street. What did surprise me was the fact that there was one still burning—the one right over the van that the dwarf was packing his boxes into. How convenient. You might as well get comfortable, I said, staring at the lone light. Because we're going to be here a while longer. Finn just groaned. We didn't have long to wait. Ten minutes later, the dwarf finished loading the last of his boxes into the van. Once I started watching him—really watching him—I realized that he'd been taking his sweet time about things. Moving slower than a normal person would have, especially considering the bitter cold that frosted Ashland tonight. But then again, this was far from the innocent scene that it appeared to be. Now the dwarf stood beside the van, smoking a cigarette and staring into the darkness with watchful eyes. What's he doing? Finn asked, taking another sip of coffee. If the man had any sense, he'd crank up the heater in that van and get out of here. Just wait, I murmured. Just wait. Finn sighed and drank some more of his chicory brew. Five more minutes passed before a flash of movement along the dock caught my eye. There, I said and leaned forward. Right fucking there. A figure stepped out from behind a small shack squatting at the far end of the dock that jutted out into the river. Finn jerked upright and almost spilled his coffee on the leather seats. Where the hell did he come from? Not he, I murmured. She. The woman strolled down the dock toward the dwarf. Despite the darkness, the single streetlight still burning let me get a good look at her. She was petite and slender, about my age, thirty or so. She had a short bob of glossy black hair, held back with a headband, and her features had an Asian flavor to them—porcelain skin, expressive eyes, delicate cheekbones. She also wore black from head to toe, just like the rest of us. I frowned. No woman in her right mind would walk through this neighborhood alone at night. Hell, not many would dare to do it during the day. Much less wait more than an hour in a run-down shack on a December night when the temperature hovered in the low twenties.

Unless she had a very, very good reason for being there. And I was beginning to think I knew exactly what that reason was. The woman reached the dwarf, who crushed out his cigarette. She said something to the man, who just shrugged his shoulders. The woman turned and scanned the street, much the same way that I'd been doing for the last hour. But I knew she couldn't see us, given where we were parked. The Dumpster sitting at the end of the narrow alley in front of Finn's vehicle screened us from her line of sight. After another thirty seconds of looking, the woman turned back to the dwarf and advanced on him. For a moment he looked confused. Then startled. Then his eyes widened, and he turned and started running away from her. He got maybe five steps before the woman lifted her right hand and green lightning shot out of her fingertips. Finn jerked, almost spilling his coffee again. Even I blinked at the sudden, powerful flash of light. The dwarf arched his back and screamed, his harsh cry echoing down the deserted street, as the lightning slammed into his body. The woman advanced on him, the magical light in her hand intensifying as she stepped closer. And she was so fucking strong. She stood at least a hundred feet away from me, but I could still sense the sharp, static crackle of her power even here in the car. The feel of her elemental magic made the spider rune scars on my palms itch and burn the way they always did whenever I was exposed to so much power, to so much raw magic. And she had plenty to spare. A second later, the dwarf caught fire. He wobbled back and forth before pitching to the cracked pavement, but the woman didn't stop her magical assault. She stood over his body, sending wave after wave of lightning into his figure, even as the green elemental flames of her power consumed his skin, hair, and clothes. When she was done, the woman curled her hand into a tight fist. The bright lightning flickered, then sparked away into nothingness, like a flare that had been snuffed out. Greenish gray smoke wafted up from her fingertips, and she blew it away into the frosty night air, like an Old West gunfighter cooling down his Colt after a shootout. How dramatic. Did you see that? Finn whispered, his coffee forgotten, his green eyes wide and round in his face. She electrocuted him. Yeah. I saw. I didn't add that she'd used elemental magic to do it. Finn had seen that for himself. Elementals were people who could create, control, and manipulate one of the four elements—Air, Fire, Ice, and Stone. Those were the areas that most folks were gifted in, the ones you had to be able to tap into to be considered a true elemental. But magic had many forms, many quirks, and some people could use other areas, offshoots of one of the four elements. Metal was an offshoot of Stone, and electricity was one of Air. One that Finn and I had just seen used to deadly efficiency, thanks to our mystery woman. I was an elemental too. In my case, I had the rare ability of being able to control two elements—Ice and Stone. But I'd never seen someone with electrical power before. And I wasn't so sure it was a good thing that I had now. The woman stuck the toe of her boot into the man's ribs. A large hunk of his body disintegrated into gray ash at her touch and puffed up like some kind of cold, macabre fog. A sliver of a smile lifted her lips at the sight. Then she reached inside her coat, drew out something white, and tossed it down on top of his body before heading toward the van and sliding inside. Thirty seconds later, the woman drove the van down the street, turned the corner, and disappeared from view. But instead of watching the vehicle, I stared at the burned-out body that she'd left behind, wondering what that bit of white was on the dwarf's still-smoking chest. You want me to follow her? Finn asked, his hand hovering over the keys in the ignition. I shook my head. No. Stay here and keep an eye out. I got out of the car and made my way across the street, slithering from shadow to shadow, a silverstone knife in either hand. After about five minutes of careful creeping and lots of pauses to look and listen, I reached the edge of the building closest to the dwarf. I crouched there in the black shadows, out of sight, until I was sure that the mystery woman wasn't going to circle back around the block and see if anyone had come to inspect her shocking handiwork. Then I drew in a breath, stood up, and walked over to the dead dwarf. Even now, ten minutes after the initial attack, smoke still curled up from his body, the elegant, green-gray ribbons wafting up to the black sky. I breathed in through my mouth, but the stench of charred flesh still filled my nose. The familiar, acrid scent triggered all sorts of emotions that were better left dead and buried deep inside me. But they bubbled to the surface, whether I wanted them to or not. For a moment, I was thirteen again, weeping, wailing, and staring down at the ashy, flaky ruined thing that had been my mother, Eira, before Mab Monroe had used her elemental Fire to burn her to death. And the matching husk that had been my older sister, Annabella. Trying not to vomit as I realized the cruel thing that had been done to them. That was going to be done to Bria and me before the night was through. Sweet, little Bria I ruthlessly shook away the memory. My hands had curled into fists so tight that I could feel the hilts of my silverstone knives digging into the spider rune scars on my palms. I forced myself to relax my grip, then bent down on my knees so I could get a better look at the white blob resting on the dwarf's back. To my surprise, it was a single white orchid, exquisite, elegant, and petal soft in the dark. My eyes narrowed, and I regarded the

blossom with a thoughtful expression. I knew what the flower meant and exactly who had left it behind to be found. It was her calling card, her name, rank, and trademark, just as my spider rune was. Something that she put here to announce her presence, mark her kill, and serve as a warning to anyone who dared to get in her way. She was taunting me, just as I'd been doing to Mab Monroe these last two weeks. LaFleur, I muttered, saying her name out loud. Because the simple fact was that an assassin had come to Ashlandone who was here to kill me. 2011 Jennifer Estep *Revue de presse* "Its assassin vs. assassin in the fourth chapter of Estep's outstanding Elemental Assassin series. Gin Blanco is one the most intriguing heroines on the scene today. As the action heats up, Estep thoughtfully reveals additional aspects of Gin's character, showcasing her evolution. If you have not gotten on the Gin bandwagon yet, do so today!" - Romantic Times, Top Pick! (4 1/2 stars) Estep has truly hit the jackpot with this outstanding series! Romantic Times Gin is an assassin to die for. Adrian Phoenix, author of *Etched in Bone*