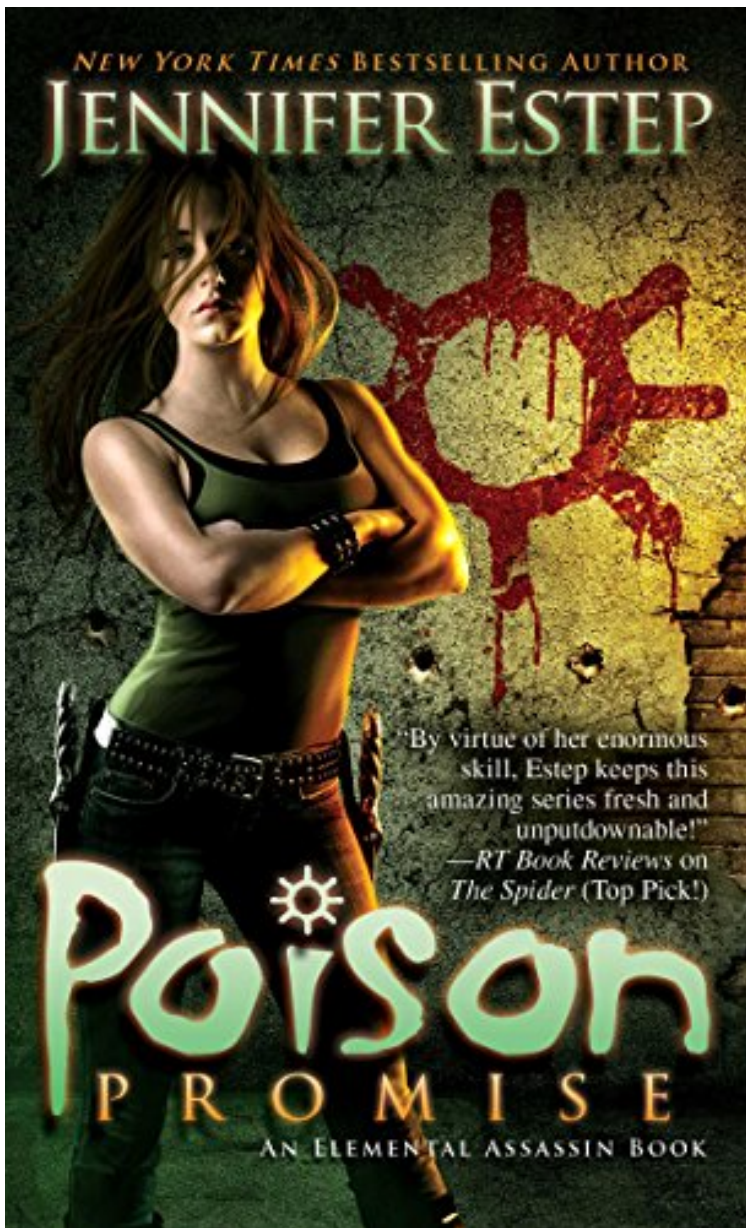


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Poison Promise



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn book eleven of her New York Times bestselling Elemental Assassin series, author Jennifer Estep continues one of the best urban fantasy series going on the market (Fresh Fiction).Gin Blanco is hard-nosed, sexy, and lethal. Nicknamed The Spider, shes a stone elemental assassin who brings her unique mix of magic and tact to every assignment, no matter the target. Theres a new drug on the streets of Ashland, and its name Burn sums up the potent effect it has on its users. When one of her restaurant employees is threatened by dealers of the drug, Gin steps in to set things straightExtraitPoison Promise 1

Someone has a birthday coming up. The voice in my ear rumbled in a low, slow way that was as sexy as all get-out, but I still grimaced at his words. Don't remind me, I grumbled. I've been trying to forget about that particular date on the calendar for weeks now. Holding a backpack in one hand and my phone in the other, I stopped inside the doorway, letting the college students stream out of the classroom and move into the corridor. They hurried toward the exit, along with the professor, all eager to get away from the hallowed halls of learning as quickly as they could, but I stayed where I was until the sounds of their cheerful chatter had faded away and I could resume my own conversation. What's so bad about turning thirty-one? Owen asked. Even though he couldn't see me, since we were talking on the phone, I still shrugged as I stepped out of the classroom and ambled toward the doors at the end of the corridor. Nothing, on the face of it. It's just another day and just another number. I won't feel any different before, during, or after that day than I do on any other. But this time of year... bad things always seem to happen around my birthday. Oh. My lover's voice slipped from sexy and teasing to quiet and serious in a heartbeat. He didn't say anything else. He knew exactly what bad things I was referring to. My mother and my older sister being murdered. Thinking that Bria, my baby sister, had also been killed. Fletcher Lane, my mentor, being tortured to death. I just... don't want to jinx things by talking about my birthday, I said. And I don't even want to think about the surprise party Finn is planning. Silence. What party? Owen finally asked, three seconds too late to be believable. The always party. What? he asked again, genuinely confused this time. The always party. The party that Finn always plans for me. The one I always tell him I would rather do without. The one the sneaky bastard always manages to surprise me with anyway, just when I think that I'm finally safe from him and his shenanigans. Finnegan Lane, my foster brother, thought that birthdays were a time of great celebration, jubilation, and excitement and should always be marked with cake, presents, and people hiding in a dark room waiting to jump out and scream at you the second you turned on the lights. I was fine with the cake and the presents, but people jumping and screaming in my direction always made me reach for one of my silverstone knives. Such were the instincts of an assassin. He always manages to surprise you with a party? Owen asked. Every single year? I find that hard to believe. Yeah, well, I am no match for the mercurial wiles of Finnegan Lane. Three years ago, he threw the party a week before my birthday. Two years ago, he waited until three weeks after my birthday. Last year had been the only one in the last ten that Finn hadn't thrown me a party, since Fletcher had been murdered right around that time. Neither one of us had felt like celebrating anything then. I skirted around a janitor who was mopping the linoleum floor. The sun slanting in through the windows made the smooth surface gleam like a new penny, but the longer I stared at the drying streaks of water, the darker they became, turning a dull, rusty red and morphing into another liquid. Blood. Fletcher's blood, oozing all over the blue and pink pig tracks on the floor of the Pork Pit. Gin? Owen asked. Are you still there? I shook my head to get rid of the unwanted memories. Sorry, I'm still in one of the buildings. The reception is terrible in here. Hang on a second, and let me go outside. I reached the end of the corridor and pushed through the doors, stepping out onto one of the quads at Ashland Community College. Stone buildings ringed the open grassy space, and a couple of maples towered up out of the ground, their red- and orange-streaked leaves providing patches of dappled shade that danced over the lawn. After the intense air-conditioning inside the building, the humid heat of the September evening felt like a warm, welcome blanket wrapping around my body. I tilted my face up to the sun, enjoying the sensation, before it turned into the inevitable, muggy, stifling burn. Students moved back and forth across the quad, staring at their phones as they headed to other buildings or stepped onto the cobblestone paths that wound through campus and over to the parking lots. It was after seven now, and this was the last class period of the day, so everyone was ready to go somewhere else for the night, whether it was to the library to study, home to Mom and Dad's to do laundry, or to a nearby bar to soak their overworked brain cells in enough alcohol to make them forget everything they'd learned today. I stopped long enough to heft my backpack, with its pens, notebook, and copy of *You Only Live Twice* by Ian Fleming, a little higher on my shoulder. The book was for the spy-literature course I was taking. I liked learning new things, so I was something of a perpetual student at the college, always signing up for a class or two every semester. When I was younger, the classes had helped kill the time between my assignments as the assassin the Spider. Now the classes helped kill the time between people trying to murder me because I was the Spider. Funny how much my life had changed in the last year. Gin? Owen asked again. Are you still there? I meandered toward the parking lot where my car was. Anyway, as I was saying, every year, I beg and plead for Finn to forget about throwing me any sort of party, and he always pays absolutely no attention to me whatsoever. Do you want me to talk to him? I snorted. You can try, but he won't listen. Owen laughed. Yeah, probably not. Just try to rein him in a little bit, okay? I don't

need some enormous party with streamers and balloons and stuff. A nice, quiet dinner with you, Finn, and Bria would be great. Streamers and balloons? Sounds like he really goes all out, Owen teased. You have no idea, I grumbled again. Those parties? Yeah... One of them featured a petting zoo. Finn rented a bouncy house for the other one. Set it up on the lawn outside Fletchers house. I went over there after work one day, and surprise! Owen laughed again at my snarky tone. Ill see what I can do. We started chatting about other things, and I let his voice wash over me, enjoying the deep, familiar rumble of his words. All the while, though, I focused on my surroundings, scanning the quads, peering into doorways, and easing around corners in case anyone was lying in wait for me. A vampire baring his fangs in anticipation of sinking his incisors into me. A giant flexing her hands, eager to wrap them around my throat and strangle me. A dwarf rolling his shoulders, ready to tackle me and beat my head against the ground. A Fire elemental cupping flames in the palm of her hand, preparing to roast me with her magic. Just because no one had attempted to kill me at the community college yet didnt mean that some enterprising fool wouldnt have the bright idea to try. Theyd certainly made the effort pretty much everywhere else I went. So many people had tried to murder me at my barbecue restaurant, the Pork Pit, that Id lost count of how many of them Id offed instead. People had been trying to take me out ever since I killed Mab Monroe, the head of the Ashland underworld, back in the winter. With Mab gone, there was an opening for a new king or queen of crime in the city, and many folks saw my murder, the Spiders murder, as a stepping-stone to the throne. Me? Well, at first, Id just been trying to fly under the radar and survive all of the assassination attempts. But now people were really starting to piss me off. Youd think that I had killed enough lowlifes for all the others to get the message to leave me the fuck alone already, but apparently, brains were not in abundance in Ashland. Shocking, I know. But I made it over to the parking lot without anyone jumping out of the shadows, shouting, screaming, and trying to shoot, stab, bludgeon, or magic me to death. Still, I remained vigilant as I approached my car, since this area was close to Southtown, the dangerous part of Ashland, home to gangbangers, hookers, their pimps, and down-on-their-luck homeless bums. And those were some of the nicer folks around here. They wouldnt care about murdering me because I was the Spider. Theyd be more than happy to kill me for my phone, my car keys, and what might be in my wallet. I stopped at the end of the path and scanned the lot in front of me. Like most places this close to Southtown, the area was a bit worse for wear. Jagged cracks zigzagged across the pavement, before collapsing into wide potholes, while the white paint that marked the parking spaces was so faded that you could barely make out the lines. Fast-food bags, crushed cigarettes, and jumbo-size soda cups overflowed out of the trash cans, and the steady breeze sent them gusting along the blacktop, along with the tinkle-tinkle-tinkle of glass from broken beer bottles. A variety of gang runes and graffiti tags had been spray-painted onto the concrete barriers that cordoned off the lot from the construction site next door. The words Vaughn Construction were embossed on a metal sign hanging on the chain-link fence that ran behind the barriers, although the V in Vaughn had been turned into a giant red heart, thanks to some taggers artistic talents. I made a mental note to get Finn to find out what Charlotte Vaughn was building here. Or perhaps Id pay Charlotte a visit one night and ask her myself. I didnt see anyone, but instead of moving forward, I held my position and reached out with my magic. Peoples feelings, actions, and intentions sink into whatever stone is around them, and as a Stone elemental, I can hear and interpret all of those emotional vibrations. Like, say, if someone was lurking behind one of those concrete barriers, a gun in his hand, ready to rise up and shoot me the second I was in range, then the barriers would mutter to me, the same way a man might mutter under his breath as he impatiently waited for me to hurry up and get here, already. But the concrete and the pavement only grumbled with displeasure about all of the spray paint, cracks, and potholes that marred their surfaces. No one was here to try to kill me. Good. Perhaps I would actually get through one day without having to fight for my life. I strolled through the lot, listening to Owen and still looking for any signs of trouble, but my silver Aston Martin was right where Id left it. Id bought the car a few weeks ago at Finns insistence. He had demanded that I have my own Aston, since I had a bad habit of getting his keyed, beaten, dented, bloodied, and generally destroyed. I glanced around a final time, still half-expecting some idiot to pop up from between two cars, yell, and charge at me with a weapon, but I was the only one here, so I focused on my conversation with Owen again. So whats on tap for tonight? I asked. Well, he said, I thought we would stay in and have a quiet evening. You, me, a nice dinner, perhaps some quality time watching TV in my bedroom. Watching TV? Really? Well, if you absolutely insist, we can skip the TV-viewing portion of the evening, Owen suggested in a husky tone. Even though he couldnt see me, I still smiled. Lets. He laughed, and we kept chatting as I pulled my keys out of my jeans pocket and unlocked the car door. Where do you think youre going? The harsh words and the smug tone that went with them made

me stop and look over my shoulder. While I'd been talking to Owen, three twenty-something guys had entered the parking lot, all of them wearing jeans, polo shirts, and sneakers. A girl the same age hurried along in front of them, her arms crossed over her chest and her head down, her speed increasing with every step as she tried to get clear of the guys. The girl's backpack bounced on her right shoulder, and a large pin shaped like a pig holding a plate of food, all done in blue and pink crystals, winked at me. I frowned. I knew that pin. It was a rough approximation of the neon sign that hung outside the Pork Pit. Sophia Deveraux, the head cook, had ordered a whole box of the pig pins and given them to the restaurant's waitstaff to wear. I focused on the girl and realized that I knew her too. Long, wavy black hair, hazel eyes, bronze skin, pretty features. Catalina Vasquez. She worked as a waitress at the Pit and took classes at the college, just like I did. And it looked like she was in trouble, just like I was most days. Catalina scurried forward, moving as fast as she could without actually running, but the guys weren't going to let her get away that easy. One reached forward and grabbed her backpack, jerking it off her shoulder and making it fall to the ground. Books, notepads, pens, and more tumbled out of the bag. Catalina scowled, but she didn't make a move to bend down and pick up her stuff. Instead, she stood her ground, her hands clenched into tight fists, as though she wanted to throw herself at the guys and give them a good pounding. I leaned against the side of my car, watching the situation unfold. Listen, Troy, I've told you before. I'm not into drugs. I don't use them, I don't buy them, I don't sell them, and I sure as hell don't date guys who do, Catalina said. Troy, the guy who'd grabbed the backpack, stepped forward. He was around six feet tall, with dirty-blond hair, brown eyes, a beefy build, and a mean smile. My own lips curved in response in a smile that was far meaner than his. Ah, come on, Cat, Troy purred, stepping closer to her. Don't be like that. We used to be friends. We used to be a lot more. I remember how good we were together, don't you? Troy reached out, as if he were going to curl a lock of Catalina's hair around his finger, but she slapped his hand away before he could touch her. That was a long time ago, she snapped. Before I knew better. Troy's eyes narrowed. You know, given our history, I was going to be nice about this. Not anymore. He snapped his fingers. One of the other guys stepped forward, unzipped the black backpack he was holding, and pulled out a fistful of plastic bags, all filled with pills. He handed the bags to Troy, who held them up so that Catalina could see them. All you gotta do is take these pills over to that barbecue restaurant where you work and pass them out to the waiters and the customers, Troy said. Give them out here on campus too. Think of them as free samples. He snickered, and so did the other two guys. Catalina's jaw clenched tight, and she glared at Troy, her hazel eyes almost black with anger. I'm not pushing your pills. Forget it. Find someone else to sell that poison for you. Troy reached toward her a second time, but Catalina slapped his hand away again. Troy surged forward, and the other two guys stepped up behind him, the three of them crowding Catalina and forcing her to back up against the chain-link fence on that side of the lot. Troy's two minions were actually older guys—vampires, given the glint of the fangs in their mouths as they leered at Catalina. You move out of the neighborhood, and you suddenly think you're better than everyone else. Well, not so high and mighty now, are you? Troy sneered. Not when there are three of us and one of you. She coldly looked from one guy to the next, not a flicker of fear showing in her face. Impressive. Catalina was tougher than she'd ever let on at the restaurant. Actually, I'd say that there are just two of you, Catalina said, jerking her head at the vampires. From what I remember, you don't like to get your hands dirty, Troy. A flush crept up Troy's neck, spreading into his cheeks. Well, you'd know all about being dirty, wouldn't you? Since all you do is clean up other people's shit all day long. Catalina stiffened, but she didn't respond. You know, if you won't play ball, then you aren't leaving me a lot of options, Troy said. I can't have you going around school after turning me down. That would send the wrong message to a lot of people. Last chance, Cat. Take the pills or else. The two vampires crept a little closer to her, smiling even wider and showing off even more of their fangs. Troy's meaning was clear: get with the pill-pushing program or get drained. Catalina lifted her chin and glared at Troy. She wasn't backing down, no matter what. I admired her for it, really, I did, but it was also stupid of her. She should have just accepted the pills and flushed them later. Oh, I knew that Catalina didn't want to take the pills and get sucked in with Troy and his thugs, but it was too late for that. This was about to get very ugly for someone. Good thing ugly was what I specialized in. Gin? Owen asked. I realized that he had asked me a question, probably more than once, and I focused on his voice again. Sorry, babe. I've gotta go. Is something wrong? he asked. Nah. I just see a bit of trash that needs to be taken care of. I'll be there soon. Owen and I hung up, and I slid my phone into my jeans pocket, before opening the car door and throwing my backpack into the passenger's seat. Then I slammed the door shut. The sharp crack reverberated through the parking lot, and the three guys turned to stare at me. Catalina tried to edge away, but the two vamps spotted her furtive movements and flanked her, keeping her

pinned against the fence. I pushed away from my car, stuck my hands into my pockets, and strolled in their direction. Catalina recognized me, her boss, at once. She let out a small gasp, her face paled, and she started shaking her head no-no-no, although I couldn't tell if she was trying to warn me off or worried about what I was going to do to the three guys hassling her. But Troy didn't see her reaction. Instead, his gaze slid past me to my car. When he realized that I was driving an Aston Martin, a greedy smirk slashed across his face. Hey, hey, foxy lady, he called out. You lookin for some action? You lookin to score a little sumthin sumthin? I smiled back at him, showing almost as many teeth as the two vampires were. Sumthin like that. Behind Troy, Catalina kept shaking her head no-no-no. She opened her lips, but one of the vamps rattled the fence beside her, a clear sign for her to keep her mouth shut. But there was no need for her to waste any more of her breath on these fools, especially not to try to tell them who they were messing with. Besides, Troy wouldn't have heeded any warning. He was completely focused on me, a potential customer, and I could almost see the dollar signs churning in his head as he calculated how much he could take me for. Well, you are in the right spot, baby. Because I have got just the thing for you. He held out one of the bags, and I took it from him. A single pill lay inside the plastic, its deep, dark red color making it look like a drop of congealed blood. I flipped the bag over and realized that a rune had been etched into the surface of the pill: a crown with a single flame arching up out of the center of it, the symbol for raw, destructive power. Still, despite the bloody color and the symbol, the pill looked more like a kid's vitamin than a dangerous drug, but I knew all too well how deceiving looks could be. Most people didn't think that I seemed anything like a dangerous assassin until my knife was cutting into their guts. What's this? I asked. Troy's smirk widened. It's the latest, greatest thing on the market, baby. It will rock your world. Nah, scratch that. It'll just burn it down instead. The two vamps snickered at his cheesy lines. Catalina rolled her eyes. Yeah, that's what I wanted to do too, but I decided to let things play out. I tucked the pill into my jeans pocket. Not because I had any intention of taking it but because Bria would no doubt be interested in it. Detective Bria Coolidge, one of Ashland's few good cops, actually cared about things like trying to keep drugs off the streets. I tried to help her out whenever I could, despite my own life of killing and crime. Now that you've seen the goods, let's talk about payment, baby, Troy crooned. Normally, a hit like that is fifty a pop. My eyebrows shot up in my face. Fifty bucks for one pill? That must be quite a joyride. Oh, it is, Troy said. Believe me, it is. But if you don't have that much cash on you, don't sweat it. I'm sure we can work out some other form of payment. His brown eyes tracked up and down my body, taking in my black boots and dark blue jeans and the tight green tank top I had on under my black leather jacket. Behind him, the two vampires did the same thing, licking their lips like I was a bottle of booze they were going to pass around. Oh, everybody was going to get a taste of Gin Blanco, all right, just not the kind they expected. I bared my teeth, all pretense of a sweet smile long gone. You call me baby one more time, and you'll be eating through a straw for the next six months. Catalina sucked in a breath, but confusion filled Troy's beefy face. When he finally realized that I'd threatened him, his brown eyes narrowed to slits. Those are big words coming from a little lady, he snapped. You should be more respectful. Think about who you're talking to. Oh? And who would that be? His chest puffed up with self-importance. Troy Mannis, that's who. Never heard of you. He blinked, and his shoulders slouched. I couldn't have deflated his ego any faster if it was a balloon I'd popped with a pin. But anger rose up to fill the empty space inside him. Well, you should, he said, his voice dropping to a low growl. Because I run this campus, and if you're looking to score here, then you have to go through me. You don't have a choice. Nobody here does. Oh, there's always a choice, I drawled. Like me going through you and leaving nothing behind but bloody little smears on the pavement. Troy threw back his head and laughed. So did the two vampires, who had moved away from the fence and were now flanking him. Behind them, Catalina eyed me with a wary gaze. She'd heard the rumors about me being the Spider, just like everyone else who worked at the Pork Pit. Well, she was about to see how true they were. You must be on something already, flying high, to say something like that, Troy said. Maybe you don't know who I am, baby, but you don't want to piss off the people I work for. This time, my smile was a little more genuine. Actually, I love pissing people off. Important people, rich people, dangerous people. I'm an equal-opportunity pisser-offer. You know why? Why? He asked the inevitable question. Because the bigger and tougher they think they are, the more they bleed. Just like you will. Troy opened his mouth, but I was tired of talking, so I didn't give him a chance to insult me again. Instead, I snapped my fist up and sucker-punched him in the throat. Troy's eyes bulged in surprise, even as he choked and gasped for air. The bags of pills fluttered out of his hand, and he stabbed his finger at me over and over again, in a clear kill-that-bitch-right-now gesture to his friends. The vampires charged at me, but I was ready for them. The vamp on my right was quicker, and he reached for my neck,

probably so he could snap my head to one side and bury his fangs deep in my throat. But I darted forward, turned my body into his, grabbed his right arm, and flipped him over my shoulder. His head cracked against the pavement, and he moaned with pain. He rolled over onto his side, and I kicked him in the ribs. The vampire started dry-heaving. He wouldn't be getting up anytime soon. A hand wrapped around my waist from behind as the second vampire yanked me back up against his body. I let him pull me toward him, using his own momentum to help me drive my elbow deep into his stomach. While he gasped for air, I slammed my boot onto the top of his foot, then grabbed his arm and flipped him over my shoulder too. The vampire landed on top of his buddy, making the other man's head crack against the pavement again. I lashed out and kicked the second man in the ribs too, just so he could have the same stomachache as his friend. While the two of them were coughing and wheezing, I turned back to Troy. He'd managed to suck enough air back into his lungs to do something supremely stupid: pull a switchblade out of his pants pocket. I laughed. A switchblade? Really? Doesn't your boss have enough money to buy you a gun? Troy growled and slashed at me with the weapon. I let him swing at me, easily sidestepping his wild blows. Hold still, you bitch! he screamed. I grinned again. Why, all you had to do was ask, sugar. I stopped. Troy came at me again, and this time, I knocked the blade out of his hand, then tossed him over my shoulder the same way I had his two friends. And for the third time, I followed it up with a hard kick to the stomach. By the time I finished, the three guys were a moaning, groaning pile on the pavement. I circled around them, debating whether to keep kicking them, but Catalina stepped forward and held up a hand. Gin, she said. Don't. Please. I looked at her, then at Troy and his friends. Considering. If these punks had jumped me in the alley behind the Pork Pit, I would have pulled out one of my knives and finished the job. But I was out in the open in broad daylight, with Catalina here to witness any slicing and dicing that I might do. I tried to avoid traumatizing innocent folks whenever possible. Besides, Troy and his loser drug-dealing friends weren't worth getting blood on my clothes. So I gave her a sharp nod. Catalina let out a relieved sigh. Troy groaned again and rolled off his two friends. He started to get up, but I put my boot against his neck, not hard enough to crush his windpipe but with more than enough pressure to get his attention. Eyes wide, he stared up at me, pain and rage darkening his brown gaze. I think we've established that you are not, in fact, the prince of this particular kingdom, I said. But I am certainly the queen bitch around here. And if I ever see you selling drugs or hassling anybody anybody at all then what I did to you today will feel like a foot massage. Are we clear? Whoever the hell you are, you're going to pay for this, Troy snarled, his angry gaze cutting to Catalina. And you too, Cat. I promise you both that. Catalina let out another sigh, although this one sounded more sad than relieved. I removed my boot from Troy's neck and leaned down so he could see that my gray eyes were even colder and harder than the pavement around us. My name is Gin, I growled. Like the liquor. I'm sure you can figure out the rest. You think you're such a tough guy? Well, come look me up, and we'll find out. He snarled and grabbed at my ankle, so I kicked him again, even harder than before. After that, the only thing Troy was capable of was wheezing, kissing the asphalt, and desperately trying not to throw up. I grinned, knowing that my work here was done.

Revue de presse 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 s)"Bodies litter the pages of this first entry in Estep's engrossing Elemental Assassin urban fantasy series. . . . Urban fantasy fans will love it." (--Publishers Weekly on Spider's Bite)This series kicked off with a bang, and the action hasn't let up since. (Fresh Fiction)"Watch out world, here comes Gin Blanco. Funny, smart, and dead sexy." (-- Lilith Saintcrow, author of Redemption Alley)"A raw, gritty, and compelling walk on the wild side, one that had me hooked from the first page." (-- Nalini Singh, New York Times bestselling author)"When it comes to work, Estep's newest heroine is brutally efficient and very pragmatic, which gives the new Elemental Assassin series plenty of bite. Shades of gray rule in this world where magic and murder are all too commonplace. The gritty tone of this series gives Estep a chance to walk on the darker side. Kudos to her for the knife-edged suspense!" (Romantic Times)