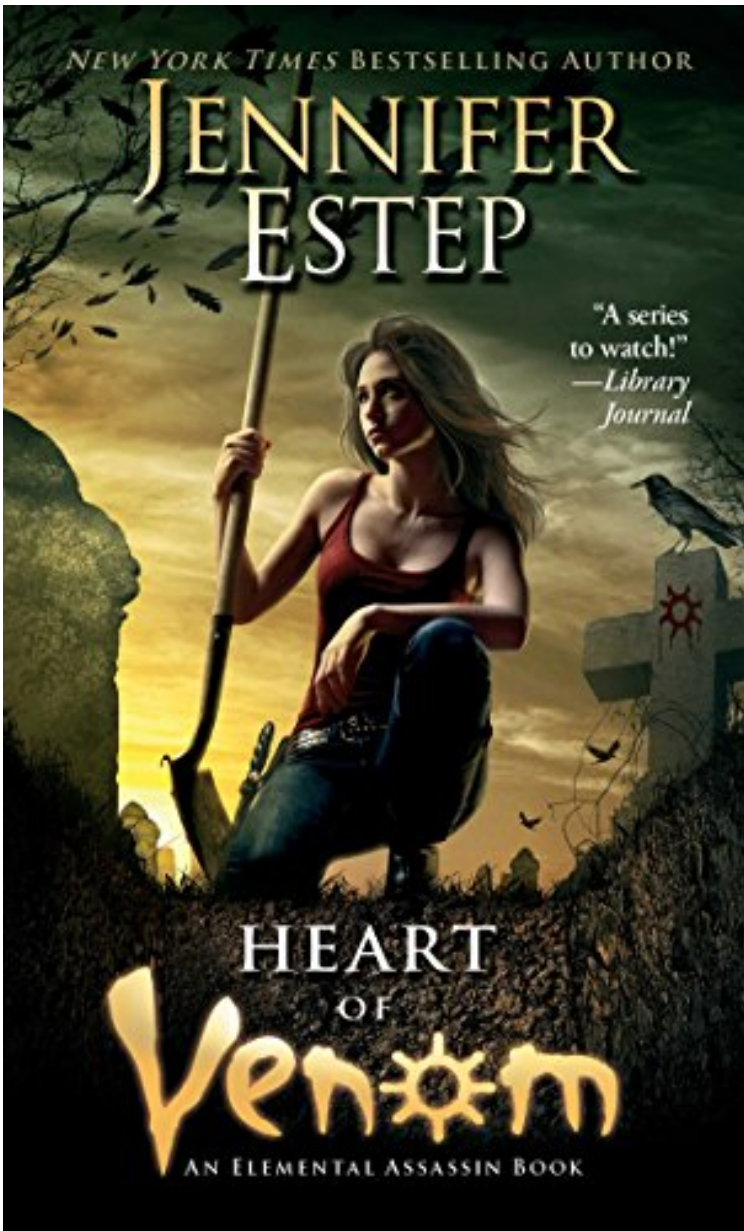


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Heart of Venom



Par Jennifer Estep
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Par Jennifer Estep : Heart of Venom before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Heart of Venom:

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe hotly anticipated ninth novel in the hugely popular Elemental Assassin series finds Gin Blanco on a dangerous mission to rescue a friend. When I say youre a dead man, take that literally. To me, killing people is like a day at the salon: cut and dry. Well, more like rinse and repeat when you moonlight as the assassin the Spider. But my last spa day ended redder than my freshly painted nails after a twisted Fire elemental and his goons kidnapped my close friend Sophia Deveraux and nearly killed her sister Jo-Jo in the process. Up Ashlands most dangerous mountains, and deep into the heart of its blackest

woods I'll track these thugs no matter where they take Sophia. It doesn't matter what kinds of elemental magic they try to throw at me, my Ice and Stone powers can take the heat and then some. I will get Sophia back, over their dead bodies. Because anybody that hurts Gin Blancos family becomes a body. ExtraitHeart of Venom 1 What do you mean, I can't come? I jerked my head down at the heavy weight swinging between us. Do you really want to talk about this right now? I can't think of a better time, he replied, then dropped his half of the load onto the ground. I let go of my half of the weight, put my hands on my hips, and rolled my eyes at the whiny, petulant tone in my foster brothers voice. You can't come because it's a girls day at the salon. No guys allowed. That includes you. Finnegan Lane sniffed, straightened up to his full six-foot-plus height, and carefully adjusted the expensive silk tie knotted around his neck. Yes, but I am not just any guy. More eye-rolling on my part, but Finn ignored me. His ego was pretty much bulletproof, and my derisive looks wouldn't so much as scratch his own highfalutin opinion of himself. Besides, he continued, I'd get more enjoyment out of a spa day than you would. True, I agreed. I don't particularly care how shiny my nails are or how well conditioned my hair is. Finn held out his manicured nails, studying them with a critical eye, before reaching up and gently patting his coif of walnut-colored hair. My nails are good, but I could use a trim. Wouldn't want to get any split ends. Oh, no, I muttered. We wouldn't want such a horror as that. With his artfully styled hair, designer suit, and glossy wing tips, Finn looked like he'd just stepped out of the pages of some high-end fashion magazine. Add his intense green eyes, chiseled features, and toned, muscled body to that, and he was as handsome as any movie star. The only thing that ruined his sleek, polished look was the blood spattered all over his white shirt and gray suit jacket and the body lying at his feet. Come on, I said. This guy isn't getting any lighter. The two of us were standing in the alley behind the Pork Pit, the barbecue restaurant that I ran in downtown Ashland. A series of old, battered metal Dumpsters crouched on either side of the restaurants back door, all reeking of cumin, cayenne, black pepper, and the other spices that I cooked with, along with all of the food scraps and other garbage that had spoiled out there in the July heat. A breeze whistled in between the backs of the buildings, bringing some temporary relief from the sticky humidity and making several crumpled-up white paper bags bearing the Pork Pits pig logo skip down the oil-slicked surface of the alley. I ignored the low, scraping, skittering noises of the bags and concentrated on the sound of the stones around me. Peoples actions, thoughts, and feelings last longer and have more of an impact than most folks realize, since all of those actions and feelings resonate with emotional vibrations that especially sink into the stone around them. As a Stone elemental, I have magic that lets me hear and interpret all of the whispers of the element around me, whether it's a jackhammer brutally punching through a concrete foundation, rain and snow slowly wearing away at a roadside marker, or the collective frets of harried commuters scurrying into an office building, hoping that their bosses won't yell at them for being late again. Behind me, the brick wall of the Pork Pit let out low, sluggish, contented sighs, much the way the diners inside did after finishing a hot, greasy barbecue sandwich, baked beans, and all of the other Southern treats that I served up on a daily basis. A few sharp notes of violence trilled here and there in the brick, but they were as familiar to me as the sighs were, and I wasn't concerned by them. This wasn't the first person I'd had to kill inside the restaurant, and it wouldn't be the last. Come on, I repeated. We've had our body-moving break. You grab his shoulders again, and I'll get his feet. I want to get this guy into that Dumpster in the next alley over before someone sees us. Dumpster? You mean the refrigerated cooler that Sophia hauled in just so you could keep bodies on ice close to the restaurant with at least a modicum of plausible deniability, Finn corrected me. I shrugged. It was her idea, not mine. But since she's the one who gets rid of most of the bodies, it was her call. And why isn't Sophia here tonight to help us with this guy? I shrugged again. Because there was some James Bond film festival that she wanted to go to, so she took the night off. Now, come on. Enough stalling. Lets go. Why do I have to grab his shoulders? Finn whined again. That's where all the blood is. I eyed his ruined jacket and shirt. At this point, I don't think it much matters, do you? Finn glanced down at the smears of red on his chest. No, I suppose it doesn't. He grumbled and let out a few put-upon sighs, but he eventually leaned down and took hold of the dead guys shoulders, while I grabbed his ankles. So far, we'd moved the guy from the storefront of the Pork Pit, through the rear of the restaurant, and outside. This time, we slowly shuffled away from the back door of the Pit and down the alley. Finn and I had moved bodies before, but the fact that this dead guy was a seven-foot-tall giant with a strong, muscled figure made him a little heavier than most, and we stopped at the end of the alley to take another break. I wiped the sweat off my forehead and stared down at the dead guy. Half an hour ago, the giant had been sitting in a booth in the restaurant, chowing down on a double bacon cheeseburger, sweet potato fries, and a big piece of apple pie and talking to the friend he'd brought along. The two giants had been my last customers, and I'd been waiting

for them to leave before I closed the restaurant for the night. The first guy had paid his bill and left without incident, but the second one had swaggered over to the cash register and handed me a fistful of one-dollar bills. I counted the bills, and the second my eyes dropped to the cash register, he'd taken a swing at me with his massive fist. Please. As if no one had ever tried that trick before. But such were the job hazards of an assassin. Yep, me, Gin Blanco. Restaurant owner by day. Notorious assassin the Spider by night. Well, actually, it was more like I was the Spider all the time now. Ever since I killed Mab Monroe, the powerful

Fire elemental who'd owned a good chunk of the crime in Ashland, everyone who was anyone in the underworld had been gunning for me. I was a wild card in the city's power structure, and lots of folks thought that arranging my murder would prove their mettle to everyone else. Tonight's giant was just the latest in a long line of folks who'd eaten in my restaurant with the intention of murdering me right after sopping up the last bit of barbecue sauce on their plates. Since Finn had been sitting on a stool close to the cash register, he'd pulled a gun out from underneath his suit jacket and tried to put a couple of bullets into the other man, but the giant had slapped Finn's gun away. The two of them had been grappling when I'd come around the counter, palmed one of my silverstone knives, and repeatedly, brutally punched the blade into the giant's back, sides, and chest until he was dead. Hence the blood that had splattered all over Finn and me too, although my long-sleeved black T-shirt and dark jeans hid most of it. All right, Finn said. Let's lug this guy the rest of the way. I need to go home and get cleaned up before my date with Bria tonight. I'd just started to bend down and take hold of the giant's ankles again when a mutter of unease rippled through the stone wall beside me, a dark whisper full of malicious intent. I stopped and scanned the alley in front of us. Sophia's rusty cooler stood at the far end, although several more Dumpsters and smaller trash cans crouched in between like tin soldiers lined up against the walls. It was after eight now, and what little lavender twilight remained was quickly being swallowed up by the shadows creeping up the walls. Another breeze whistled down the alley, bringing the scents of cooked cabbage, grilled chicken, and spicy peanut sauce with it from the Thai restaurant down the block. Finn noticed my hesitation. What's wrong? I kept scanning the shadows.

I think we have company. He adjusted his tie again, but his eyes were flicking left and right just as mine were. Any clue who it might be? I shrugged. Probably our dead friend's dinner companion. Finn shook his head. But he left before the giant attacked you. Even if they were partners, once he realized what happened to his buddy, the second guy would have hightailed it out of here as fast as he could if he had even the smallest shred of common sense. A bit of silver stuck out from behind a Dumpster off to my right. I lunged forward and threw my body on top of Finn's, forcing us both to the ground. Crack! Crack! Crack! The bullets sailed over our heads, but I still reached for my Stone magic and used it to harden my skin into an impenetrable shell. I also tried to cover as much of Finn's body as I could with my own. I might be bulletproof when I used my magic, but he wasn't. Footsteps scuffed in the alley behind me, indicating that our attacker felt bold and confident enough to move toward us. Then Crack! Crack! Crack! More bullets zipped down the alley. The guy must have adjusted his aim, because I felt all three of the projectiles punch against my back before rattling away in the semidarkness. They would have blasted out through my heart, killing me and maybe Finn too, if I hadn't been using my Stone power. My body jerked with the impact of the bullets; then I let my limbs go absolutely slack and still as I sprawled over Finn, as though I was as dead as the giant lying next to us. I looked at Finn, who gave me a saucy wink, telling me that he was okay. I felt his hand reach up, then drop from my waist, taking a light, thin weight with it. Finn brought his hand back up, and I wrapped my fingers around his. When he pulled his hand away, he left me holding the knife he'd grabbed from against the small of my back. I slid the weapon partially up my sleeve, hiding it from sight, then closed my eyes and waited—just waited for my enemy to come close enough. More footsteps scuffed in the alley, followed by the harsh, raspy sound of someone breathing in through his mouth. I cracked open my eyes. A pair of mud-covered boots were planted right next to my face. As I watched, one of the boots drew back, and I knew what was coming next. Sure enough, a second later, the giant's boot slammed into my ribs. Despite the fact that I was holding on to my Stone magic, the blow still hurt, like getting beamed in the chest with a fastball, but I kept my body loose and floppy as though I couldn't feel it at all. Still, the force of the blow knocked me partially off Finn, who grunted as my elbow dug into his shoulder. Silence. Then Open your eyes, pretty boy, or I'll put a bullet through your skull, the gunman threatened. Finn sighed, and I saw him open his eyes and slowly hold his hands up. All right, all right, you got me. I'm still alive. I don't care about you, the giant snapped. Is she dead? Or is she faking? Of course she's dead, Finn snapped back, holding his hands out so the giant could get a better look at the bloody smears on his clothes. Do you not see the blood all over the two of us? I'm lucky the bullets stopped inside her instead of going on through and into

me. He shuddered. And now I think I'm going to be sick. So can you please just roll her off me or something? I can't stand the sight of blood. If it wouldn't have given me away, I would have snorted. Finn didn't have any more problem with blood than I did. He just didn't like it being splattered all over one of his precious Fiona Fine designer suits. But you're her partner, the giant said. Everyone knows that. Shouldn't you be, you know, more upset that she's dead? Actually, I'm more like her henchman, Finn corrected. As for being upset that she's dead, well, she's not exactly the kind of woman you say no to, if you know what I mean. Trust me. I'm happy that she's gone. Thrilled. Ecstatic, even. Silence. Then the giant kicked me in the ribs again. Once more, I pretended that I couldn't feel the sharp, brutal blow. The giant kept up with his attacks, plowing his foot into my ribs, my shin, and even my shoulder. I thought he might lean down, press his gun against the back of my skull, pull the trigger, and try to put a couple of bullets into my head just to make sure that I was dead. But for once, my luck held, and he didn't take that final step. Maybe he was out of bullets. Or maybe he just wasn't that smart. Either way, after about three more minutes of dithering around and petulant pleas from Finn to move my body off him, the giant seemed to buy my playing possum. I did it, the guy finally said. I did it! I killed the Spider! Woo-hoo! Okay, I thought the woo-hoo at the end was a little much, but I let the giant enjoy his moment of victory. It was going to be the last thing he ever enjoyed. All right, all right, Finn grouched again. Now, can you please get her off me? Seriously, dude, I'm about three seconds away from throwing up here. I know you don't want that all over your boots. He started making choking sounds. Fine, fine, the other man muttered. Just quit your damn whining, already. The giant reached down, grabbed my shoulder, and turned me over. I surged up and stabbed him in the chest for his thoughtfulness.

The giant screamed in surprise and jerked to one side, making my knife skitter across his ribs instead of slicing into his heart. He staggered back, and my knife cut free of his chest, blood spraying everywhere. The giant brought his revolver up between us and pulled the trigger. Click. Empty. Well, too bad for him. Fatal for him, actually. I scrambled to my feet, raised my knife high, and threw myself forward, but the giant was anticipating the move. He caught my arm in his hand. Given his enormous strength, it was easy for him to keep me from plunging my knife into his chest a second time. So I brought my free hand up, curved my fingers, and clawed at his face. The giant let go of my arm and craned his neck back, trying to protect his eyes from my prying fingers. Gin! Down! I heard Finn yell behind me. I immediately stopped my attack on the giant and dropped to the ground. Crack! Crack! Crack! Crack! Bullets punched through the air where I'd been standing, and the familiar acrid burn of gunpowder mixed with the stench of garbage in the alley. A second later, the giant's body hit the ground with a dull thud. Knife still in my hand, I got to my feet and hurried over to him, but there was no need. Finn had put a couple of bullets through the giant's right eye and up into his brain. His body had already shut down; he wasn't even twitching. I turned to look at Finn, who had a gun clenched in one hand. With his other hand, he was picking a piece of wilted cabbage off his jacket sleeve. He tossed the cabbage aside with a disgusted expression and moved over to me. You okay? I asked. Finn nodded. You? I nodded back and gingerly touched my side. I'll have some bruises from where he played kick-the-can with my ribs, but I'll stop by Jo-Jos on the way home and get her to patch me up. No worries. Speaking of Jo-Jos, I still say that I should get to come to your little soiree, Finn said. Especially after I was so helpful here tonight. I narrowed my eyes. You start up with that again, and I'll be dealing with three bodies instead of just two. Finn gave me a wounded look, but after a moment, he sighed and holstered his gun. Well, at least this one's already halfway to the cooler, he grumbled. I grinned at him. See? We're nothing if not efficient. Finn muttered some choice words under his breath, but he reached down and took hold of the dead giant's shoulders, and I grabbed his ankles. We lugged the two men over to the cooler to await Sophia and her body-disposal skills. Not the first body dump we'd done and certainly not the last.

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)