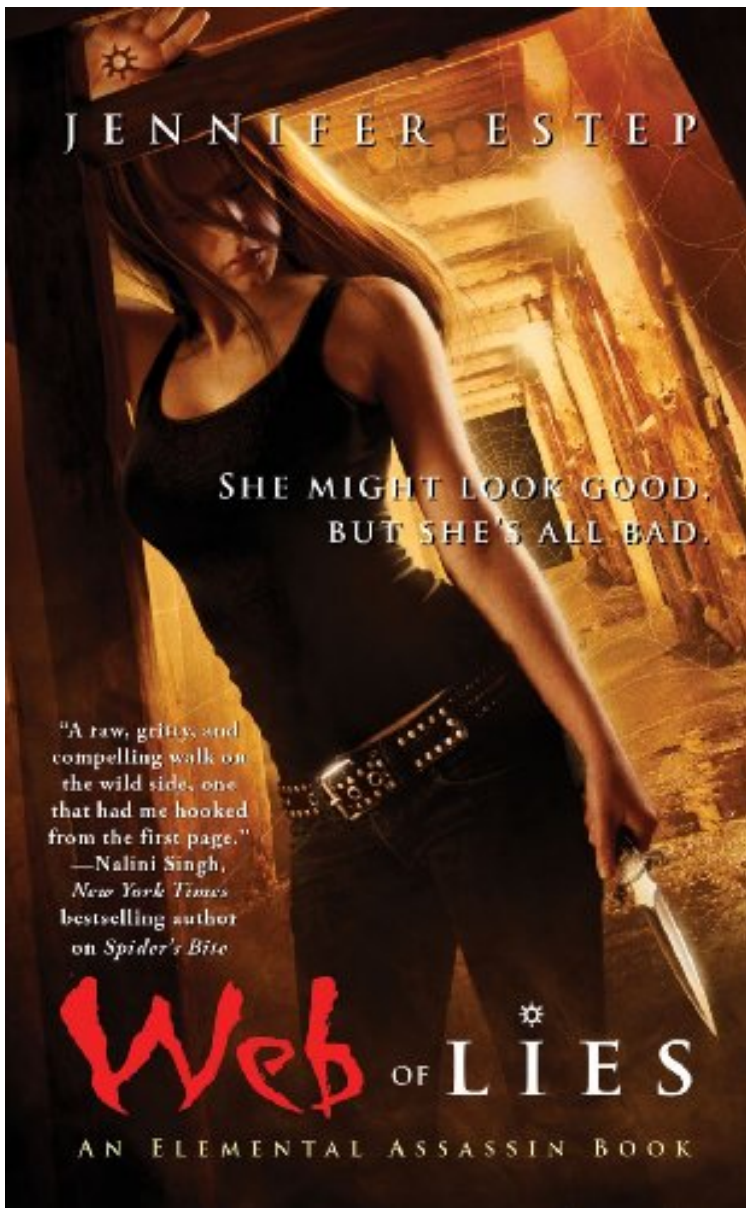


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# Web of Lies



*Par Jennifer Estep  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurCuriosity is definitely going to get me dead one of these days. Probably real soon.I'mGin Blanco.You might know me as the Spider, the most feared assassin in the South. Im retired now, but trouble still has a way of finding me. Like the other day when two punks tried to rob my popular barbecue joint, the Pork Pit. Then there was the barrage of gunfire on the restaurant. Only, for once, those kill shots werent aimed at me. They were meant for Violet Fox. Ever since I agreed to help Violet and her grandfather protect their property from an evil coalmining tycoon, Im beginning to wonder if Im really retired. So is Detective Donovan Caine. The only honest cop in Ashland is having a real hard time

reconciling his attraction to me with his Boy Scout mentality. And I can barely keep my hands off his sexy body. What can I say? Im a Stone elemental with a little Ice magic thrown in, but my heart isnt made of solid rock. Luckily, Gin Blanco always gets her man . . . dead or alive.Extrait 1 Freeze! Nobody move! This is a robbery! Wow. Three clichs in a row. Somebody was seriously lacking in the imagination department. But the shouted threats scared someone, who squeaked out a small scream. I sighed. Screams were always bad for business. Which meant I couldnt ignore the trouble that had just walked into my restaurant or deal with it the quick, violent way I would have preferred. A silverstone knife through the heart is enough to stop most trouble in its tracks. Permanently. So I pulled my gray eyes up from the paperback copy of the Odyssey that Id been reading to see what all the fuss was about. Two twentysomething men stood in the middle of the Pork Pit, looking out of place among the restaurants blue and pink vinyl booths. The dynamic duo sported black trench coats that covered their thin T-shirts and flapped against their ripped, rock star jeans. Neither one wore a hat or gloves, and the fall chill had painted their ears and fingers a bright cherry red. I wondered how long theyd stood outside, gathering up the courage to come in and yell out their trite demands. Water dripped off their boots and spread across the faded blue and pink pig tracks that covered the restaurant floor. I eyed the mens footwear. Expensive black leather thick enough to keep out the November cold. No holes, no cracks, no missing bootlaces. These two werent your typical desperate junkies looking for a quick cash score. No, they had their own moneylots of it, from the looks of their pricey shoes, vintage T-shirts, and designer jeans. These two rich punks were robbing my barbecue restaurant just for the thrill of it. Worst fucking decision theyd ever made. Freeze! the first guy repeated, as if we all hadnt heard him before. He was a beefy man with spiky blond hair held up by some sort of shiny hair-care product. Probably a little giant blood in his family tree somewhere, judging from his six-foot-six frame and large hands. Despite his twentysomething years, baby fat still puffed out his face like a warm, oozing marshmallow. The guys brown eyes flicked around the restaurant, taking in everything from the baked beans bubbling on the stove behind me to the hissing french fryer to the battered, bloody copy of Where the Red Fern Grows mounted on the wall beside the cash register. Then Beefcake turned his attention to the people inside the Pork Pit to make sure we were all following his demands. Not many folks to look at. Monday was usually a slow day, made even more so by the cold bluster of wind and rain outside. The only other people in the restaurant besides me and the would-be robbers were my dwarven cook, Sophia Deveraux, and a couple of customerstwo college-age women wearing skinny jeans and tight T-shirts not unlike those the robbers sported. The women sat shocked and frozen, eyes wide, barbecue beef sandwiches halfway to their lips. Sophia stood next to the stove, her black eyes flat and disinterested as she watched the beans bubble. She grunted once and gave them a stir with a metal spoon. Nothing much ever bothered Sophia. The first guy raised his hand. A small knife glinted in his red, chapped fingers. A hard, thin smile curved my lips. I liked knives. Chill out, Jake, the second guy muttered. Theres no need to scream. I looked at him. Where his buddy was blond and beefy, robber number two was short and bone-thin. His wispy hair stuck up due to uncontrollable cowlicks instead of an overabundance of product. The locks were a bright red that had probably earned him the nickname Carrot at some point. Carrot shoved his hands into his holey pockets, shifted on his feet, and stared at the floor, clearly wanting to be somewhere other than here. A reluctant sidekick at best. Probably tried to talk his buddy out of this nonsense. He should have tried harder. No names, Lance. Remember? Jake snarled and glared at his friend. Lances bony body jerked at the sound of his own name, like someone had zapped him with a cattle prod. His mouth dropped open, but he didnt say anything. I used one of the days credit card receipts to mark my place in The Odyssey. Then I closed my book, straightened, slid off my stool, and stepped around the long counter that ran along the back wall of the Pork Pit. Time to take out the trash. The first guy, Jake, saw me move, out of the corner of his eye. But instead of charging at me as Id expected, the half giant moved to his left and jerked one of the girls up and out of her bootha petite girl with a pixie haircut. She let out another squeaky scream. Her thick beef sandwich flew from her hand and splattered against one of the storefront windows. The barbecue sauce looked like blood running down the smooth, shiny glass. Leave her alone, you bastard! the other woman shouted. She jumped to her feet and charged at Jake, who backhanded her. He might only have been a half giant, but there was still enough strength in his blow to lift the woman off her feet and send her careening into a table. She flipped over the top, hit the floor hard, and let out a low groan. By this point, Sophia Deveraux had become a little more interested in things. The dwarf moved to stand beside me. The silver skulls hanging from the black leather collar around her neck tinkled together like wind chimes. The skulls matched the ones on her black T-shirt. You take right, I murmured. Ive got left. Sophia grunted and moved to the other end of the counter, where the second woman

had been thrown. Lance! Jake jerked his head at the injured woman and Sophia. Watch those bitches! Lance wet his lips. Pure, uncomfortable misery filled his pale face, but he stepped around his friend and trotted over to the injured woman, who had pushed herself up to her hands and knees. She shoved her wild tangle of blue-black hair out of her face. Her pale blue eyes burned with immediate hate. A fighter, that one. But Lance didnt see her venomous look. He was too busy staring at Sophia. Most people did. The dwarf had been Goth before Goth was cool a hundred years ago or so. In addition to her skull collar and matching T-shirt, Sophia Deveraux sported black jeans and boots. Pink lipstick covered her lips, contrasting with the black glitter shadow on her eyelids and the natural pallor of her face. Today, the color motif extended up to her hair. Pale pink streaks shimmered among her cropped black locks. But Jake wasnt so dumbstruck. He pulled the first woman even closer, turned her around, held her in front of him, and raised the knife to her throat. Now he had a human shield. Terrific. But that wasnt the worst part. A bit of red sparked in the depths of his brown eyes, like a match flaring to life. Magic surged like a hot summer wind through the restaurant, pricking my skin with power and making the scars on my palms itch. Flames spewed out from between Jakes clenched fingers, traveling up and settling on the knife. The blade glowed red-orange from the sudden burst of heat. Well, well, well, Jake the robber was just full of surprises. Because in addition to being a petty thief, Jake the half giant was also an elementalsomeone who could control one of the four elements. Fire, in his case. My smile grew a little harder, a little tighter. Jake wasnt the only one here who was an elemental or very, very dangerous. I cocked my head, reaching out with my Stone magic. All around me, the battered brick of the Pork Pit murmured with unease, sensing the emotional upheaval that had already taken place inside and my dark intentions now. I said nobody fucking move. Jakes earlier scream dropped to a hoarse whisper. His eyes were completely red now, as though someone had set two flickering rubies into his baby-fat face. A rivulet of sweat dripped down his temple, and his head bobbed in time to some music only he could hear. Jake was high on somethingalcohol, drugs, blood, his own magic, maybe all of the above. Didnt much matter. He was going to be dead in another minute. Two, tops. The red glow in Jakes eyes brightened as he reached for his magic again. The flames flashing on the silver blade flared hotter and higher, until they licked at the girls neck, threatening to burn her. Tears streamed down her heart-shaped face, and her breath came in short, choked sobs, but she didnt move. Smart girl. My eyes narrowed. It was one thing to try to rob the Pork Pit, my barbecue restaurant, my gin joint. Down-on-their-luck elementals, vampire hookers, and other bums strung out on their own magic and jonesing for more could be excused that stupidity. But nobodynobodythreatened my paying customers. I was going to enjoy taking care of this lowlife. As soon as I got him away from the girl. So I held up my hands in a placating gesture and kept the cold, calm violence out of my gray eyes as best I could. Im the owner. Gin Blanco. I dont want any trouble. Let the girl go, and Ill open the cash register for you. I wont even call the police after you leave. Mainly because it wouldnt do me any good. The cops in the southern metropolis of Ashland were as crooked as forks of lightning. The esteemed members of the po-po barely bothered to respond to robberies, especially in this borderline Southtown neighborhood, much less do something useful, like catch the perps after the fact. Jake snorted. Go ahead. The police cant touch me, bitch. Do you know who my father is? In addition to being a Fire elemental, Jake was also a name-dropping prima donna. A wonder hed survived this long. Dont tell them that! Lance hissed. Jake snorted and turned his red eyes to his buddy. Ill tell them whatever I want. So shut your sniveling mouth. Just let the girl go, and Ill open the cash register, I repeated in a firm voice, hoping my words would penetrate Jakes magic high and sink into his thick skull. His red eyes narrowed to slits. Youll open the cash register, or the girl diesand you along with her. He jerked the girl back against him, and the flames coating the knife burned even brighter, taking on an orange-yellow hue. The silverstone scars on my palmsthe ones shaped like spider runesitched at the influx of magic. I tensed, afraid he was going to do the girl right here, right now. I could kill himeasilybut probably not before he hurt the girl with his magic. I didnt want that to happen. It wasnt going to happen. Not in my restaurant. Not now, not again. Jake, calm down, Lance pleaded with his friend. No ones making any trouble. Its going just like you said it would. Quick and easy. Lets just get the money and go. Jake stared at me, the flames dancing in his red eyes matching the movement of the ones on the knife blade. Pure, malicious glee filled his crimson gaze. Even if I hadnt been good at reading people, that emotion alone would have told me that Jake enjoyed using his magic, loved the power it gave him, the feeling of being invincible. And that he wasnt going to be satisfied just stealing my money. No, Jake was going to use his Fire power to kill everyone in the restaurant just because he could, because he wanted to show off his magic and prove he was a real badass. Unless I did something to stop him. Jake? The money? Lance asked again. After a moment, the fire dimmed in Jakes

eyes. He lowered the glowing blade a few inches, giving the girl some much-needed air. Money. Now. I opened the register, grabbed all the wrinkled bills inside, and held them out. All Jake had to do was let go of the girl long enough to step forward and grab the cash, and I'd have him. Come on, you bastard. Come and play with Gin. But some sense of self-preservation must have kicked in, because the beefy half giant jerked his head. Lance left his post by the injured woman, tiptoed forward, snatched the money out of my hand, and stepped back. I didn't bother grabbing him and using him as a hostage. Guys like Jake weren't above leaving their friends twisting in the wind or stuck on the end of my blade. Jake licked his thick, chapped lips. How much? How much is there? Lance rifled through the green bills. A little more than two hundred. That's it? You're holding out on me, bitch, Jake snarled. I shrugged. Mondays a slow day. And not many people like to get out in this kind of cold weather, not even for barbecue. The Fire elemental glared at me, debating my words and what he could do about them. I smiled back. He didn't know what he'd gotten himself into or whom he was messing with. Let's just go, Jake, Lance pleaded. Some cops could come along any second. Jake tightened his grip on his flaming knife. No. Not until this bitch tells me what she did with the rest of the money. This is the most popular restaurant in the neighborhood. There had to be more than two hundred dollars in that cash register. So where did you hide it, bitch? You wearing a money belt underneath that greasy blue apron? I shrugged. Why don't you come and find out, you pathetic fuck? His eyes grew darker, redder, angrier, until I thought the sparking flames flickering inside might actually shoot out of his magic-tinted irises. Jake let out a furious growl. He shoved the girl away and charged at me, the knife held straight out. My smile widened. Finally. Time to play. I waited until he got in range, then stepped forward and turned my body into his. I slammed my elbow into his solar plexus and swept his feet out from under him. Jake coughed, stumbled, and did a header onto the floor. His temple clipped the side of one of the tables as he went down, and a resulting bit of blood splattered onto my jeans. The sharp blow was enough to make Jake lose his grip on his Fire magic. The prickling power washing off him vanished, and the flames snuffed out on the knife in his hand. The hot metal hissed and smoked as it came into contact with the cool floor. I looked to my right. The woman Jake had thrown across the room scrambled to her feet and prepared to launch herself at Lance. But Sophia grabbed the girl's waist and pulled her back. The woman started to struggle, but the Goth dwarf shook her head and stepped forward, putting herself in front of the customer. Lance swallowed once and backed up, ready to turn and run. But Sophia was quicker. The dwarf punched him once in the stomach. Lance went down like an anvil had been dropped on him. He crumpled to the floor and didn't move. One down, one to go. I turned my attention back to Jake, who'd rolled over onto his side. Blood dripped down the side of his head where he'd cut himself on the corner of the table. The half giant saw me standing over him, curled halfway up, and slashed at me with his cooling knife. Idiot. He didn't even come close to nicking me. After Jake made another flailing pass with the blade, I crouched down and grabbed his wrist, bending it back so he couldn't move it. I eyed the weapon in his locked hand. Fuck, I said. Get a real knife. You couldn't even peel potatoes with that thing. Then I plucked the blade from his chapped fingers and snapped his thick wrist. Jake howled in pain, but the noise didn't bother me. Hadn't in years. I shoved him down onto his back, then straddled him, a knee on either side of his beefy chest, squeezing in and putting pressure on his ribs. Giants, even half giants like Jake, hated it when they had trouble breathing. Most people did. I adjusted and tightened my grip on the knife, ready to drive it into his heart. A flimsy weapon, but it would do the job. Just about anything would, if you had enough strength and determination to put behind it. I had plenty of both. A small, choked sob sounded, drawing my attention away from Jake and his high-pitched, keening howls. My gray eyes flicked up. The girl huddled underneath a table a few feet away, her knees pulled up to her chest, her eyes as big as quarters in her face, tears sliding down her flushed cheeks. A position I'd been in, once upon a time. A couple of months ago, the girl and her tears wouldn't have bothered me. I would have killed Jake and his friend, washed the blood off my hands, and asked Sophia to get rid of the bodies before I closed up the Pork Pit for the night. That's what assassins did. And I was the Spider, one of the very best. But I'd had an epiphany of sorts two months ago when my mentor had been brutally tortured and murdered inside the Pork Pit in the very spot Jake and I were in right now. The old man, Fletcher Lane, had wanted me to retire, to take a different path in life, to live in the daylight a little, as he was so fond of saying. I'd followed Fletcher's advice and quit the assassin business after I'd killed Alexis James, the Air elemental who'd murdered him. Hmph. Behind me, Sophia grunted. I looked over my shoulder at the dwarf, who still had hold of the other woman. The girl was unsuccessfully trying to pry the dwarf's stubby fingers off her waist. Good luck with that. Sophia had a grip like death. Once she had you, she didn't let go. My gray eyes locked with Sophia's black ones. Regret flashed in her dark gaze, and she

shook her head just the tiniest bit. No, she was saying. Not in front of two witnesses. Sophia was right. Witnesses were bad. I couldn't gut Jake with the two girls watching and get rid of the body afterward. Not in my own restaurant. Not without blowing my cover as Gin Blanco and leaving everything behind. And I wasn't going to do that. Not for a piece of trash like the Fire elemental. But that didn't mean I couldn't let Jake know exactly whom he was dealing with. I waited until there was a lull in Jake's howls, then tipped his head up with the knife point and gazed into his eyes. They'd lost all hint of their red, fiery magic. Now his brown irises were wide and glossy with panic, fear, pain. You ever come to my restaurant and fuck with me or my customers again, and I'll carve you up like a Thanksgiving turkey. I slashed down with the knife, breaking the skin on his beefy neck. Jake yelped at the sting and clawed at the slight wound with his sausage-thick fingers. I slapped his hand away and nicked him again. The smell of warm, coppery blood filled my nose.

Something else that hadn't bothered me in a long, long time. Every time you move, I'm going to cut you again. Deeper and deeper. Nod your head if you understand. Hatred flared in his gaze, taking the edge off the pain and panic, but he nodded. Good. I clipped his temple with the knife hilt. Jake's head snapped to one side and fell onto the floor. Unconscious. Just like his friend Lance. I stood up, wiped my fingerprints off the knife, and dropped the weapon on the floor. The half giant didn't stir. Then I got to my feet and headed for the girl, still crouched underneath the table. She shrank back against the legs of a chair at my approach, like she wanted to melt into the metal. Her pulse fluttered like a mad butterfly in her temple. I put my friendliest, most trustworthy, charming, Southern smile on my face and crouched down until I was eye level with her.

Come on, sweetheart, I said, holding out my hand. It's over. Those men aren't going to hurt you now. Her chocolate eyes darted to Jake lying on the floor. Her gaze flicked back to me, and she chewed her lip, her teeth white against her dusky skin. I'm not going to hurt you either, I said in a soft voice. Come on, now. I'm sure your friend wants to see how you are. Cassidy! the other woman called out since Sophia still wasn't letting her go. Are you all right? Her friend's voice penetrated Cassidy's fearful daze. She sighed and nodded her head. The girl reached out, and I grabbed her trembling hand. Cassidy's fingers felt like thin, fragile icicles against the thick scar embedded in my palm. I tugged the girl to her feet. She eyed me with understandable caution, so I kept my movements slow and small, not wanting to startle her. I'm fine, Eva, Cassidy said in a low voice. Just a little shook up is all. Sophia let go of the other woman, and I stepped back. Eva rushed forward and caught her friend in a tight hug. Cassidy wrapped her arms around the other woman, and the two of them rocked back and forth in the middle of the restaurant. I walked over to Sophia, who was watching the two women with a flat expression on her pale face. Friendship. Aint it a beautiful thing? I quipped. Hmph. Sophia grunted again. But the corners of the Goth dwarf's lips turned up into a tiny smile. The two girls hugged a minute longer before Eva pulled a cell phone out of her jeans. You call the cops, Eva told her friend. I need to let Owen know I'm okay. You know how he is. Hell freak when he finds out about this. Cassidy nodded her head in sympathetic agreement and pulled her own phone out of her jeans. The two women started dialing numbers, instead of asking me, the restaurant owner, to do it for them. Not surprising. If you wanted the cops, you called them yourself. You certainly didn't depend on the kindness of strangers to do it. Not in Ashland. I frowned. Cops. Just what I needed. Some of Ashland's finest getting an eyeful of me, the former assassin, a Goth dwarf who liked to dispose of dead bodies in her spare time, and the two guys we'd so easily dispatched. Not the kind of attention I wanted to draw to myself, even if I was retired. Nothing I could do about it now, though. Sophia went back to the stove to check on her baked beans.

Eva spoke in a low voice to someone on her phone. Cassidy finished her 911 call and sank into the nearest chair. The girl stared at Jake on the floor; then her brown eyes flicked to the bloody knife. Her lower lip quivered, her eyes grew glossy, and her hands trembled. Trying to hold back the tears. Something else I'd had to do, once. I walked over to the counter and picked up a glass cake plate filled with the black forest cookies

I'd baked this morning. Here. I took the top off and held the plate out to her. Have a cookie. They've got plenty of sugar and butter and chocolate in them. They'll help with the shakes. Cassidy gave me a wan smile, took one of the treats, and bit into the concoction. The bittersweet chocolate melted in her mouth, and her eyes brightened with pleasure instead of worry. Eva finished her call and sat down next to her friend. Her hands didn't tremble as she snapped her phone shut, and she looked at Jake with a thoughtful expression. The only sign anything had happened to Eva was a red welt on her cheek, where her face had smacked into the floor. The girl had a level head on her shoulders and a firm grip on her emotions. But that didn't mean she wouldn't crash later. I held the plate out to her. You too. Eva took a cookie, broke it in two, and stuffed half of it into her mouth. Not shy, either. I also plucked one of the chocolate treats off the stack. Not because I had shaky nerves, but because they were damn fine cookies. I'd made them myself, and I was just as good a

cook as I had been an assassin. I looked at the two unconscious men on the floor. Lance lay spread-eagled next to one of the booths where Sophia had dropped him. Blood continued to drip from the cuts on Jakes throat and temple, staining the floor a rusty brown. I grabbed another cookie off the plate and watched him bleed. 2010 Jennifer Estep Revue de presse "Estep has truly hit the jackpot with this outstanding series!" - Romantic Times, 4 1/2 stars "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 on SPIDER'S BITE "High-octane-fueled action, labyrinthine conspiracies, and characters who will steal your heart." - Adrian Phoenix on

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