



## Unraveled (Elemental Assassin Book 15)

By Jennifer Estep

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After the shocking revelations of the previous book, *Bitter Bite*, the world of Ashland's become even more sinister, and Gin Blanco (aka Ashland's most fearsome assassin, the Spider) no longer knows who—or what—she can count on. Only one thing is for certain: danger and new enemies await Gin in *Unraveled*, Book 15 in the *New York Times* bestselling Elemental Assassin urban fantasy series that *RT Book Reviews* calls “unbeatable entertainment!”

*What could go wrong when you're trying to unravel a decades-old conspiracy?*

As the current queen of the Ashland underworld, you would think that I, Gin Blanco, would know all about some secret society controlling things from behind the scenes. I might be the Spider, the city's most fearsome assassin, but all my Ice and Stone elemental magic hasn't done me a lick of good in learning more about “the Circle”. Despite my continued investigations, the trail's gone as cold as the coming winter.

So when Finnegan Lane, my foster brother, gets word of a surprising inheritance, we figure why not skip town for someplace less dangerous for a few days? That place: Bullet Pointe, a fancy hotel resort complex plus Old West theme park that Finn now owns lock, stock, and barrel. At first, all the struttin' cowboys and sassy saloon girls are just hokey fun. But add in some shady coincidences and Circle assassins lurking all around, and vacationing becomes wilder—and deadlier—than any of us expected.

Good thing this assassin brought plenty of knives to the gunfight ...

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## Editorial Review

### 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](http://JenniferEstep.com) and [@Jennifer\\_Estep](https://twitter.com/Jennifer_Estep).

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Unraveled



It was the perfect night to kill someone.

Thick, heavy clouds obscured the moon and stars, deepening the shadows of the cold December evening, and an icy drizzle spattered down from the sky, slowly covering everything in a slick, glossy, treacherous sheen. Icicles had already formed on many of the trees that lined the street, looking like gnarled, glittering fingers that were crawling all over the bare, skeletal branches. No animals moved or stirred, not so much as an owl sailing into one of the treetops searching for shelter.

Down the block, red, green, and white holiday lights flashed on the doors and windows of one of the sprawling mansions set back from the street, and the faint trill of Christmas carols filled the air. A steady stream of people hurried from the mistletoe-festooned front door, down the snowmen-lined driveway, and out to their cars, scrambling into the vehicles and cranking the engines. Someone's dinner party was rapidly winding down, although it was only nine o'clock. Everyone wanted to get home and be all safe, warm, and snug in their own beds, dreaming of sugarplums, before the weather got any worse. In ten minutes, they'd all be gone, and the street would be quiet and deserted again.

Yes, it was the perfect night to kill someone.

Too bad my mission was recon only.

I slouched down in my seat, staying as much out of view of the passing headlights as possible. But none of the drivers gave my battered old white van a second look, and I doubted that any of them even bothered to glance at the blue lettering on the side that read Cloudburst Falls Catering. Caterers, florists, musicians. Such service vehicles were all too common in Northtown, the part of Ashland where the rich, social, and magical elite lived. If not for the lousy weather, this entire street probably would have been lit up with holiday cheer as people hosted various parties, each one trying to outdo their neighbors with garish light displays.

Once the last of the cars cruised by and the final pair of headlights faded away, I straightened up in my seat, picked up my binoculars from my lap, and peered through them at another nearby mansion.

A stone wall cordoned this mansion off from the street, featuring a wide iron gate that was closed and locked. Unlike its neighbor, no holiday lights decorated this house, and only a single room on the front was illuminated—an office with glass doors that led out to a stone patio. Thin white curtains covered the doors, and every few seconds, the murky shape of a man would appear, moving back and forth, as though he were continuously pacing from one side of his office to the other.

I just bet he was pacing. From all the reports I'd heard, he'd been holed up in his mansion for months now, preparing for his murder trial, which was set to begin after the first of the year. That would be enough to drive anyone stir-crazy.

Beside me, a soft creak rang out, followed by a long, loud sigh. Two sounds that I'd heard over and over in the last hour I'd been parked here.

The man in the mansion wasn't the only one going nuts.

"Tell me again. How did I get stuck hanging out with you tonight?" a low voice muttered.

I lowered my binoculars and looked over at Phillip Kincaid, who had his arms crossed over his muscled chest and a mulish expression on his handsome face. A long black trench coat covered his body, while a black toboggan was pulled down low on his forehead, hiding his golden hair from sight, except for the low ponytail that stuck out the back. I was dressed in all black as well, from my boots to my jeans to my turtleneck, silverstone vest, and fleece jacket. A black toboggan also topped my head, although I'd stuffed all my dark brown hair up underneath the knit hat.

"What's wrong, Philly?" I said. "Don't like being my babysitter tonight?"

He shrugged, not even bothering to deny it. "You're Gin Blanco, the famed assassin turned underworld queen. You don't need babysitting." He shifted in his seat, making it creak again, and shook his head. "But Owen insisted on it. . . . The things I do for that man."

Phillip was right. As the Spider, I could handle myself in just about any situation. I certainly didn't need him here, but Owen Grayson, Phillip's best friend and my significant other, had wanted it this way. But I hadn't protested too much when Phillip had shown up at the Pork Pit and told me that he wanted to tag along tonight.

With the mysterious members of the Circle out there, a little backup might come in handy. Even if said backup was whinier than one would hope.

"Why couldn't Lane sit out here with you?" Phillip asked. "Or Jo-Jo or even Sophia for that matter? Why did I get elected to freeze my balls off tonight?"

Finnegan Lane, my foster brother, was often my partner in crime in all things Spider-related, while Jo-Jo and Sophia Deveraux respectively healed me and cleaned up the blood and bodies I left in my wake.

"Because Finn is still dealing with the mess that Deirdre Shaw left behind at First Trust bank, and Jo-Jo and Sophia had tickets to The Nutcracker," I said, ticking our friends off on my fingers. "And of course, you know that Owen promised Eva that he'd help out with that holiday toy drive she's leading over at the community college."

“I would have been happy to help Eva with her toy drive,” Phillip grumbled. “Thrilled. Ecstatic even.”

Despite their roughly ten-year age difference, Phillip was crazy about Eva Grayson, Owen’s younger sister, although he was waiting for her to finish college and grow up a bit before pursuing a real relationship with her.

“Anything would have been better—warmer—than this.” He popped up the collar of his trench coat so that it would cover more of his neck, then slouched down even farther in his seat.

“Aw, poor baby. Stuck out here in the cold and dark with me tonight.” I clucked my tongue in mock sympathy. “And to think that I was just about to offer you some hot chocolate.”

His blue eyes narrowed with interest. “You have hot chocolate? Homemade hot chocolate?”

I reached down and pulled a large metal thermos out of the black duffel bag sitting between our seats on the van floor. “Of course I do. You can’t have a stakeout on a cold winter’s night without it.”

I grabbed two plastic cups out of the bag and handed them over to Phillip, who held them steady while I poured. The rich, heady aroma of the decadent drink filled the van, cutting through the icy chill that had crept inside the vehicle. I breathed in the fumes as I capped the thermos and put it away. Phillip passed over my cup, and I drew in a couple more deep, steamy breaths before taking a sip. The dark brew coated my tongue with its bittersweet flavor, softened by the vanilla extract and raspberry puree that I’d added to the mixture.

Phillip cradled his cup like a bum huddled over a trash-can fire. He took a long slurp and sighed again, this time with happiness. “Now that’s more like it.”

We both settled back in our seats, watching the mansion and sipping our hot chocolate.

The folks who’d been hosting the dinner party must have decided to go to bed, since the recorded carols abruptly cut off, and the holiday lights winked out one door, window, and plastic snowman at a time, further blackening the landscape. The icy drizzle picked up as well, turning into more of a steady rain, each drop tinkling against the van windshield. It truly was a night fit for neither man nor beast, but these were my favorite kinds of environments as an assassin. The cold, the rain, and the darkness always made it that much easier to get close to your target and then get away after you’d put him down. If I’d wanted someone dead, I would have waited for a night just like this one to strike.

And I was willing to bet that someone might have the same idea about the man in the mansion.

Phillip tipped his cup at the shadow still pacing back and forth behind the patio doors. “You really think that he knows something about the Circle?”

I shrugged. “He’s the best lead I have right now—and the only person still alive who might know anything about them.”

Two weeks ago, I’d been kidnapped and held hostage by Hugh Tucker, a vampire who claimed that he was part of a secret group that supposedly pulled the strings on the underworld and everything else in Ashland. That had certainly come as news to me, since I was supposedly the head of the underworld these days. But Tucker had claimed that the Circle was an organization of criminals so high-and-mighty that no one could

touch them, especially not a lowly assassin like me. The vamp had also said that the Circle monitored everything from behind the scenes—and that they could kill me and my friends anytime they wanted to.

But the most shocking thing he'd revealed was that my mother, Eira Snow, had supposedly been one of them.

My mother had been murdered when I was thirteen, a deep loss that I still felt to this day. But I'd viewed her like any other kid. She was my mom—nothing more, nothing less. I'd never really thought about who she was, much less what kind of person. The good things she did, the bad ones, how she felt about all of them. I didn't know any of that. But Tucker had turned my world upside down with his accusations, and I wanted to know if they were true: I had to know if my mother had been the good person I'd always assumed she was, or just as rotten, heartless, and depraved as the rest of this shadowy Circle.

"You know, we could just go knock on his door and ask him about all this," Phillip said.

I snorted. "He wouldn't tell me anything. Nothing I could trust anyway. He hates me too much for that."

Phillip shifted in his seat again. "Well, at least we could get this over with and go home. That would certainly keep my balls from turning into ice cubes—"

A pair of headlights popped up in the van's rearview mirror. I gestured at Phillip, and we both slouched back down in our seats.

A black SUV cruised down the street, passing our van. The vehicle stopped at the end of the block and made a right, disappearing from sight. Phillip started to sit back up, but I held out my hand, stopping him.

"Wait," I said. "Let's see if they come back."

He rolled his eyes, but he stayed still. "Why would they come back? It's probably just somebody who lives in the neighborhood—"

Headlights popped up in the van's rearview mirror again, and that same SUV cruised by our position. This time the vehicle turned left at the end of the block.

"Maybe they're lost," he said. "All these cookie-cutter Northtown streets and mansions look alike, especially in the dark."

I shook my head. "They're not lost. They're seeing how quiet and deserted the area is for whatever they have in mind. They'll be back. You'll see."

We sat in the van, watching our mirrors. Sure enough, a minute later, that same SUV cruised by us again. Only this time, the vehicle didn't have its headlights on, or even its parking lights. It whipped a U-turn in the middle of the street, pulled over to the curb, and stopped—right in front of the mansion we were watching.

"Hello," I murmured. "What do we have here?"

The doors opened, and two people got out of the front of the SUV, both wearing long black trench coats akin to Phillip's. They were giants, each one roughly seven feet tall with thick shoulders and broad chests; most likely they were the muscle and bodyguards for whoever was in the back of the vehicle.

Sure enough, one of the giants opened a rear door, and a shorter, thinner figure emerged, also sporting a black trench coat, along with a black fedora and a matching scarf wrapped around their neck. I peered through my binoculars, but the person's back was to me, so I couldn't see their face, although from the size and gait, I did get the impression that it was a woman.

"Some late-night visitors here for a hush-hush meeting with our old friend?" Phillip mused.

"Maybe."

One of the giants squatted down. At first, I wondered what he was doing, but then the woman in the fedora and scarf ran over to the giant, who hoisted her high up into the air. Ms. Fedora grabbed hold of the top of the iron gate and swung her legs up and over it with all the grace of an Olympic gymnast. Landing deftly on her feet in the driveway on the other side, she straightened up and started striding toward the mansion with deadly purpose.

I cursed, realizing that I was about to lose my one and only lead on the Circle. I'd considered the possibility that someone might come here to silence him, but part of me hadn't thought that it would actually happen since everything else I'd tried to track down the members of the Circle had been a dead end.

"Not a meeting," I growled. "They're here to kill him."

Since Fedora was already past the gate, I didn't have time to ease out of the van, sneak through the shadows, and stab the giants in the back the way I normally would have. So I dropped my binoculars, kicked my door open, barreled out of the vehicle, and ran down the street toward the SUV.

"Gin! Wait!" Phillip shouted, scrambling to get out and follow me.

But I needed to get to the man in the mansion before Fedora did, so I tuned him out. The giants whirled around at the sound of Phillip's voice and spotted me racing toward them. They cursed, pulled guns from inside their trench coats, and snapped up the weapons.

Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

I zigzagged, and the first round of bullets went wide. But when the giants paused to take more careful aim, I reached for my Stone magic and hardened my skin into an impenetrable shell.

Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

The second round of bullets also went wide. The giants had come prepared, and the silencers on the ends of their weapons muffled the sounds of the shots. No lights snapped on inside the neighboring mansions. They wanted to keep this quiet? Well, so did I.

Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

Two of the shots went wide again, but the third punched into my right shoulder, spinning me around. Still, thanks to my magic, it didn't blast through me the way it otherwise would have. I skidded on the ice coating the street, but I managed to regain my balance and charge forward again.

Instead of heading toward the giants, I ran straight at the SUV. When I was in range, I leaped up onto the

bumper, then the hood, then scrambled up onto the roof. Before the giants realized what I was doing, I raced forward and leaped off the vehicle's roof, pushing off hard and trying to get as high in the air as possible. Lucky for me, they'd parked close to the curb and the narrow sidewalk. A second later, my hands hit the top of the wall that fronted the mansion, and I dug my boots into the slick stones so that I could pull myself up onto the ledge. Fedora wasn't the only one who could do gymnastics.

I rolled off the top of the wall and dropped ten feet down to the other side, landing in a crouch. I palmed one of the silverstone knives tucked up my sleeves, surged to my feet, and darted forward across the lawn. The ice-crusting grass crunched like brittle bones under my boots.

The light spilling out from the office perfectly illuminated Fedora, who was fifty feet ahead of me and moving fast, her breath streaming out behind her in a trail of frosty vapor. She must have heard the disturbance out on the street because she picked up her pace, pulled a gun out of her trench coat, and shot through the lock on the patio doors with one smooth motion. A second later, she was inside the mansion.

"Hey!" a man's voice shouted from inside the office. "Who are you? What do you think you're doing?"

I didn't hear her reply, if there even was one.

Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

More and more shots sounded on the street behind me, but the giants weren't aiming at me anymore. Phillip must have gotten into the fight. He could take care of himself, so I focused all my energy on sprinting across the lawn, trying to get to the mansion, even though it was already too late.

Pfft! Pfft! Pfft!

Sure enough, gunfire flashed inside the office, as bright as the holiday lights had been earlier. Someone had just been shot.

A second later, Fedora stepped through the doors and out onto the stone patio. I squinted, but the office lights were behind her, and all I could see in the darkness was the pale glitter of her eyes above the black scarf wrapped around her face. She gave me a mocking salute with her gun before ducking back inside the mansion. Now that her mission was accomplished, no doubt she'd leave through one of the back doors and disappear into the woods. All without my even getting a good look at her face.

I cursed. Even though I wanted to rush inside the mansion, I forced myself to slow down and approach the patio doors with caution, just in case she might be lying in wait to try to kill me too. I also grabbed hold of even more of my Stone power, hardening my skin as much as possible, on the off chance that she decided to blast me with bullets and elemental magic. As a final precaution, I reached out with my power, listening to all the emotional vibrations that had sunk into the stone walls of the mansion.

Harsh, shocked mutters echoed back to me, from the shots the woman had just fired. Alongside that was a high, whiny chorus of worry, fear, and paranoia. But there were no sly whispers or dark murmurs of evil intent that would have signaled that she was hiding in the office, ready to put a bullet in my head the second I stepped inside. Whoever the woman was, she was long gone.



Still, I was careful as I eased into the office, my knife still in my hand, my other hand up and lightly glowing with my Ice magic, ready to blast whoever might attack me.

But only one person was in the office: the man I'd been watching.

Jonah McAllister, my old nemesis, lay sprawled across the floor.

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