

## **Spider's Bargain**

**By Jennifer Estep**

The cop was going to die tonight.

He just didn't know it yet.

For Detective Cliff Ingles, this was just another Saturday night in the southern metropolis of Ashland, and he was spending it the way he did all his other Saturday nights—slugging down drinks and ogling the sultry vampire hookers at Northern Aggression, the most popular nightclub in the city.

Just before midnight, and people packed into the nightclub. Men in designer suits, women in skirts that barely covered their asses, all looking for their particular brand of poison. Blood, booze, drugs, sex, smokes. Northern Aggression offered all that and more, as long as you had the cash or plastic to pay for your particular vice.

Still, despite the veritable unwashed masses that surrounded me, I had to admit that the nightclub had a decadent style about it. Crushed red velvet drapes covered the walls, while the floor was made of soft, springy bamboo. But the most striking thing in the club was the bar that ran down one wall—an elaborate sheet made entirely of ice. Runes had been carved into the slick surface of the ice. Suns and stars, mostly, symbolizing life and joy. I supposed the symbols were rather appropriate, given all the people getting hot 'n' heavy in the booths in the back of the club.

Either way, I'd spent the last hour sitting at the Ice bar—along with Cliff Ingles.

The detective threw back his third whiskey of the evening, then leaned forward and murmured something in the ear of the vampire waitress who'd brought over his drink. The two of them were near the center of the enormous Ice bar, about fifty feet away from my position around the curve and up against the far wall.

Ingles never had a clue that I was watching him. No real reason why he would. If the detective had bothered to look in my direction, all he would have seen was another woman drinking her way through a night out on the town.

Even if the detective had noticed me, even if he'd come over and tried to pick me up, I would have told him exactly who I was. Gin Blanco. A part-time cook and waitress at the Pork Pit barbecue joint in downtown Ashland. A Stone and Ice elemental.

And the assassin known as the Spider.

The woman who was going to make sure Detective Cliff Ingles quit breathing before the night was through.

But there was no danger of Ingles noticing me. I wasn't his type. The bastard preferred to force himself on young, helpless girls.

And with the five silverstone knives hidden on my person, I was anything but helpless.

I took another sip of my gin and tonic and studied my target, comparing the man in front of me to the photo that had been in the file of information that my handler, Fletcher Lane, had given me when he'd told me about the hit.

Detective Cliff Ingles stood six feet tall, which meant he was a good foot shorter than the giant bouncers who patrolled the nightclub and kept everyone in line. Still, at more than two hundred fifty pounds, Ingles wasn't a small guy, although his once trim, hard muscle was slowly giving way to flabby fat underneath his expensive navy suit.

With his thick, honey-blonde hair, wide smile, and square chin, Ingles wasn't an unattractive man. But his brown eyes got a little narrower and a little meaner with every drink that he had. Now, he reminded me of a copperhead, all coiled up and ready to lash out and sink his poisonous fangs into whoever crossed his path tonight.

Ingles wore his gold detective's badge openly on the leather belt around his thick waist, along with his gun, almost like being a member of the Ashland police force was something to be proud of.

I snorted into my drink. Everyone knew that the majority of the Ashland cops were dirtier than the gangbanger graffiti that covered some of the city's buildings. Ingles was no exception. Fletcher had dug up all sorts of nasty bits of business that the detective was involved in. Extortion, gambling, forcing vampire hookers to give him freebies in the back of his city-issued sedan. Ingles was a real classy guy all the way around.

But he wasn't going to die for those particular sins. No, Cliff Ingles was getting my particular brand of attention because he'd raped a thirteen-year-old girl, beaten her after the fact, and left her for dead. Ashland was a violent city, full of bad people doing a lot of bad things. But Ingles was the lowest sort of scum for what he'd done to that girl.

And I was here tonight to make sure that he never had the chance to do it again.

Pro fucking bono.

Normally, I didn't work for nothing. Mine was a highly specialized skill set, and I liked getting paid for it. I earned it, if only for all the blood I had to wash out of my clothes and hair after the fact.

And as the Spider, I got paid a lot to kill people. I'd been in the assassin business since I was thirteen. Now, creeping up on thirty, I had more money tucked away than I could spend in

two lifetimes. Which was one of the reasons my handler, Fletcher, kept nagging me to retire. The old man wanted me to live long enough to actually spend and enjoy my ill-gotten gains.

So far, I'd only listened to Fletcher with half an ear. Killing people was all that I knew how to do. What the fuck would I do if I retired? Take up knitting? Adopt stray puppies? Get knocked up by some guy, move to the suburbs, become a soccer mom, and try to put my bloody past behind me?

None of those things particularly appealed to me. Well, maybe the puppies. I'd always been a dog person.

But the simple fact was that I liked my job. Sure, it was dark, dangerous work. But the blood and the screams didn't bother me, and I'd long ago given up trying to save my own immortal soul from the fiery hell I knew I was destined for. Besides, every once in a while, I got to take care of somebody like Cliff Ingles. Got to make the city of Ashland just a little bit safer in my own twisted way.

It was the little things in life that made me happy.

A bit of cool magic surged through the air, interrupting my musings. I glanced over at the guy tending bar. His eyes glowed a blue-white in the semi-darkness of the nightclub, as he embraced his power once more. The Ice elemental responsible for keeping the bar in one piece for the night was feeding a bit of his magic into the cold, massive structure.

My own sluggish Ice magic responded to the familiar influx of power trickling into the bar. I was an elemental too, with the rare ability to use two of the four elements—Stone and Ice in my case, although my Ice magic was far weaker than my Stone power. Usually, though, I didn't think too much about my magic when I was out on a job. As the Spider, I didn't use my elemental powers to kill.

That's what my knives were for.

Still, I uncurled my palm from around my drink and stared down at the scar embedded in my flesh. A small circle surrounded by eight thin rays. A spider rune. The symbol for patience. My namesake, in more ways than one. A matching scar decorated my other palm.

The spider rune had once been a medallion that I'd worn around my neck as a child, until a Fire elemental had superheated the metal and burned the symbol into my palms, marking me forever the night she'd murdered my family—

“Disgusting pig!”

The vampire waitress that Cliff Ingles had been propositioning spat out the words, then drew back her hand and slapped him across the face—hard. Despite the music that filled the club, I still heard the stinging crack of her blow at my end of the bar.

Wow. Whatever he'd said to her must have been pretty bad for her to react that way. Because the vampire was also a hooker, just like all the other folks on the wait staff. There weren't many things you couldn't do at Northern Aggression, which made me wonder exactly what sick thing Ingles had just suggested.

“Bitch!” The detective snarled, his hand drifting down to the gun on his belt, like he wanted to pull it out and cold-cock her with it.

The vampire's dark eyes widened, and she backed up a couple of steps.

But before Ingles could pull his gun and retaliate, one of the giant bouncers cut through the crowd, taking up a defensive position in front of the waitress, shielding her from Ingles with his seven-foot frame. The giant's shaved head glinted like onyx under the club's black lights.

“Is there a problem here?” the giant rumbled, his deep baritone voice cutting through the pulsing beat of the music.

I'd seen this particular giant around the club a time or two when I'd been in here before. Hard to miss seven feet of solid muscle. Xavier was his name.

Ingles stared at the giant in front of him. His eyes cut to the waitress before flicking back to Xavier. The waitress's handprint marked Ingles' cheek like a scarlet letter, not even starting to fade. But the detective made a visible effort to get himself under control. He might be a member of the Ashland po-po, but Ingles knew he'd get his ass kicked if he kept pushing things. Even cops couldn't get away with assaulting women—at least not in public.

“No problem,” Ingles spat out. “The bitch isn't worth it. I was just leaving.”

Xavier nodded. “You do that.”

Ingles' eyes narrowed to slits in his face, but he reached into his pocket, drew out a couple of bills, and tossed them on the Ice bar. Then, the detective turned and started shoving his way through the crowd, heading for the door.

But instead of immediately following him, my gray eyes skimmed over the scene, flicking from the people three deep around the Ice bar to those grooving out on the dance floor to some old song by The Pretenders. Looking for trouble, searching for anything out of place, anyone who was taking a particular interest in my target or me. I'd been an assassin for almost twenty years now, and I hadn't survived this long by being sloppy.

But once he made sure Ingles was really leaving, Xavier turned back to the waitress, and the two of them started talking. To them, the detective was just another creepy customer they'd had to kick to the curb. It happened, even here at Northern Aggression, where very little was off limits. But no one else showed any interest in Detective Cliff Ingles or more importantly in me.

Which meant it was finally time to make my move.

I swallowed the rest of my gin, enjoying the sensation of the cold liquor sliding down my

throat before starting its slow, sweet burn in my stomach. Then, I paid my own tab, walked away from the Ice bar, and sauntered out of the club, moving ever closer toward my prey.

The Spider was ready to spin her web for the evening.

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It was late July, and the night air was thick with humidity the way it always was this time of year. Ashland was located in the mountainous corner where Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina met in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains. So muggy summer nights were part of the region's many charms. Even here in the city, more than a few fireflies winked on and off in the darkness, their quick little flashes matching the smoldering red glows from the cigarettes of those smoking outside.

Even though it was after midnight now, a line of people still stood outside the nightclub waiting to get in past the giant guarding the velvet rope in front of the entrance. Above his head, a neon sign shaped like a heart with an arrow through it flashed red, then yellow, then orange. The rune for Northern Aggression, the symbol the nightclub's owner, Roslyn Phillips, used to promote and identify her business.

I walked away from the club's entrance, scanning the rows of parked cars, looking for Detective Cliff Ingles. Ten...twenty...it didn't even take me thirty seconds to spot him.

Because Ingles hadn't gotten far. The detective had moved off into the parking lot and was now stalking back and forth underneath the gently swaying tendrils of a weeping willow. An anonymous black car sat next to the large tree. The detective's city-issued sedan. The license plate and description had been in the file of information that Fletcher Lane had given me. The old man was nothing if not thorough.

I looked at everything, from the people still standing in line to Ingles to the few folks

staggering out to their cars in the side lots that flanked the nightclub. Nobody gave me a second glance, and nobody was sober or close enough to the detective to notice anything—especially not him dying.

Perfect.

I smoothed down my black leather miniskirt and put a little swing in my hips as I approached the detective. If I'd just come to the club to enjoy myself, I would have worn my usual outfit of jeans, boots, and a long-sleeved T-shirt. But tonight, since I was going out on the town as the Spider, I'd dressed up a bit, just in case I had to use my feminine wiles to lure Cliff Ingles to my side long enough to stab the bastard to death.

Which is why in addition to the leather miniskirt, I was also sporting a long-sleeved, red silk skirt and a pair of black, stiletto-heeled boots that came all the way up to my thighs. I'd even teased out my bleached blonde hair to TBH—Tennessee Big Hair—proportions. In short, I looked like a girl out to have an evening to remember.

Cliff Ingles certainly wouldn't forget meeting me.

I didn't bother to walk quietly, and the sharp crack of my heels on the pavement soon caught Ingles' attention. The detective glared in my direction, but the hot anger shimmering in his brown eyes soon turned to something darker and uglier as he took in my outfit.

I tossed my hair back over my shoulder to take one more quick glance around, but nobody was staring in our direction. Excellent.

I finally stopped when I was within arm's reach of Ingles. I put one hand on my hip and struck a pose, letting him get a good, long look at me and all I had to offer.

"Hey, there, sugar," I cooed in my best slow, sweet, husky, southern drawl. "Got a light?"

Ingles' brown eyes flicked down my body and back up again, mentally checking off parts

of my anatomy one by one. Boobs. Thighs. And the sweet spot in between them. He must have liked what he saw, because a cold, hard smile lifted his lips.

“For you, darling? Of course,” Ingles murmured.

The detective started patting the pockets of his suit, looking for his cigarette lighter. While he was distracted, I discreetly slid my right arm behind my back and palmed a silverstone knife—one of five that I had on me tonight. A second knife was tucked up my other sleeve, while one rested in the small of my back. Two more were hidden in the tops of my fuck-me boots. My usual five-point arsenal. Never left home without 'em.

While Ingles searched for his lighter, my gray eyes scanned the area around us one more time. But the closest person was at least a hundred feet away, and the music drifting out from the club would cover any sound the detective might make.

My hand tightened around the hilt of my knife. The weapon felt cold, hard, solid against my skin. The weight of it comforted me the way that it always did.

Ingles finally found his lighter, flicked it on, and held it up to me. The flame wavered in the darkness between us, a tiny beacon of sputtering light.

Ingles frowned when I didn't immediately produce a cigarette, lean forward, and let him get a better look at my boobs.

“Hey,” he snapped. “Don't you have a smoke on you? Because I'm not giving you one of mine. Damn things are too expensive for that, these days.”

He paused, his eyes narrowing and his smile getting that much colder. “Unless you want to trade me something for it, darling.”

Fuck him for a cigarette? I'd rather stab myself. Yeah, Cliff Ingles was a real class act.

But I gave him my most winsome smile, keeping up the charade just a few seconds

longer. “No,” I replied. “I don’t have a smoke on me. I’ve got something better. This.”

I brought my hand around from behind my back and showed him the silverstone knife. The magical metal glinted dully in the semi-darkness.

Ingles’ brown eyes widened in surprise, but before he could open his mouth to scream, my arm punched forward, and I buried my silverstone knife in his heart.

All the way up to the hilt.

Ingles drew in another breath, but before he could scream it out, I clamped my free hand over his mouth, my fingers digging into his skin.

But the detective didn’t give up. Since he couldn’t scream for help, Ingles lashed out at me with his fists, raining hard blows down on my chest and arms. The solid impacts made me grunt. But I’d been an assassin a long time, and I’d taken my share of punches from giants, dwarves, and vampires over the years—all of whom were a lot stronger than the human detective in front of me. Ingles’ blows hurt, but not enough to make me let go or drop my knife.

Still, we seesawed back and forth there in the darkness underneath the weeping willow for the better part of a minute before Ingles’ body began to shut down from the massive trauma it had just received. When I felt the fight in him start to ebb, I pushed him deeper into the shadows, until his back was against the rough bark of the tree.

By this point, tears of pain or fear or whatever dripped down Ingles’ fat face and splattered onto my red silk shirt—along with his blood.

“You know,” I said, twisting the knife in a little deeper. “It’s bad enough that you make the vampire hookers give you freebies while you’re on duty, supposedly protecting and serving the good people of Ashland. But to rape and beat that little girl like you did? That was just sick. Evil. And now, it’s going to be the death of you, Cliff.”

Usually, I wasn't this chatty when I was killing someone. But the soft murmur of my words helped to cover up the detective's muffled gasps and the scrape of his limbs flailing against the tree. Still, if anyone had been curious enough to look our way, he would have thought that the detective and I were having a grand old time screwing against the tree.

But only one of us was getting fucked over tonight, and it wasn't me.

I yanked the knife out of Ingles' chest, and more of his blood splashed onto my clothes. The warm, sticky fluid coated my hand, but I barely noticed it. I'd wash it off later, the way I always did.

By this point, the fight and life was all but gone from Ingles. I let go of him, and the detective slid to the soft ground beneath the tree. His breaths came in shallow, raspy gulps now, and I knew that he'd be dead in another minute. Two, tops.

Still, I crouched down next to him, bloody knife in hand, just in case he made a last-ditch effort to do something stupid—like try to go for his gun and shoot me.

"Who...the hell...are you?" the detective wheezed out the words.

"Some folks call me the Spider," I said in a soft voice. "Perhaps you've heard of me."

Ingles' mouth twisted. "Fucking...assassin...bitch."

"Yeah," I drawled. "That's me to a T."

Those were the last words the detective ever said. Forty-five seconds later, he rasped out his last breath and was still. Ingles' head lolled to the side, and his brown eyes stared at nothing.

But my job wasn't through just yet. Because when the girl's mother had reached out to Fletcher Lane through various anonymous channels, when she'd decided to ask the Spider for help, the mother had made a specific request about what she wanted done to Ingles' body after the fact. Couldn't blame her for it. Hell, maybe it would make the next twisted bastard think

twice about things.

Rather than fumble with the detective's belt buckle, I used my knife to cut through the leather, then his pants and boxers. The fabric ripped with a whisper. And then, I used my blood-blackened blade to slice off the thing that Ingles had held most dear.

When that was done, I wiped my knife off in the grass around the body and tucked it back up my sleeve. Then, I slowly stood up and looked around, my eyes once again peering into the darkness.

But no one had noticed me killing the detective or cutting into him after the fact. The scene looked the same as before. People still waited in line to get into the nightclub, still smoked, and still stumbled drunkenly out to their cars.

At this point, I should have been moving through the parking lot and getting the fuck out of Dodge before someone tripped over the detective's body and raised the inevitable alarm. But instead, I found myself staring down at Cliff Ingles.

The detective's eyes were now just as empty and soulless as those of the girl that he'd raped. Fletcher Lane had shown me a photo of the girl when he'd asked me to kill Ingles. The girl had had a look in her eyes that I recognized—a shattered, broken expression of lost innocence.

Of everything lost.

I'd had the same look for months after my family had been murdered. Even now, all these years later, sometimes I still caught a glimpse of it whenever I stared into the mirror just a little too long.

Maybe it was because I'd been thirteen—the same age as the girl Ingles had raped—the night my family had been murdered. Maybe it was because in Ashland, there were some people

who just deserved killing. Maybe it was because Fletcher Lane hadn't sent me out on a job in more than a month and I was bored.

But I'd looked at the girl's photo, and I'd told Fletcher that I'd do the job for free.

Detective Cliff Ingles had broken the girl with his horrid actions, and I'd made him pay for it tonight. Maybe knowing that he was dead would bring the little girl some peace in the end.

Maybe not.

Either way, I'd held up my end of the deadly bargain. The Spider had done her work for the evening. I'd helped in the only violent, bloody way that I knew how.

And now, it was time to go home and wash the blood out of my clothes once again.

So I stepped over Ingles' body and headed toward the back end of the parking lot away from the lights and noise around the front of the nightclub.

As I walked underneath the weeping willow tree, a mountain breeze rustled the tree's branches, and the soft, trailing tendrils kissed my face the gentle way a mother might show affection for her child. For some reason, I stopped and waited until the breeze and the tendrils died down before moving on.

The late summer fireflies lit the way as I stepped into the waiting darkness.