

THE HIGH PRIESTESS CARD



A Tarot Mystery

by

Bevan Atkinson

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Electra Enterprises of San Francisco, September 2013
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ISBN 978-0-9969425-2-2

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my writing cheerleaders, especially my cousin Nancey Brackett, who motivates me every day to do the work. My sister Chris Hess is always willing to bring her unerring eye for detail to the details. Marc Sason was “honored” to be namesaked. Judi Cooper Martin was okay with being included as long as I didn’t kill her, and, especially since she invariably encourages me to “keep going!” she remains alive and well in this work. Afrikahn Dayvs is steadfastly the best sort of human being. Lana Flatt is the new friend you hope to make at some point in your life. David K. Nelson kindly provided excellent draft horse information. Thanks also to my beloved Kiki, Julia Rollit Shumway, who knows that her Percival will always adore her, and to Duane Unkefer for his manuscript expertise. Also for his perennially useful advice, even if communicating with him is like exchanging microfilm with a secret agent man. But he sends back the manuscript coated in chocolate, so okay.

For Jean Morrow Bevan

“One can pay back the loan of gold, but one dies forever in
debt to those who are kind.”

Religion's for those who believe in hell and a spiritual belief is for those who've been there.

- M.C. Beaton, Death of an Addict

And then there's America—a country, I understand, remarkably well-supplied with religions.

- Dorothy L. Sayers, Unnatural Death

CHAPTER ONE

Fact: There is no such thing as a bad lemon bar. I have done the research.

I was embarked on such research lately because it had been some weeks since my last (mis)adventure with Thorne. Thorne's now-and-again day job is protecting people who require that sort of thing. I have, on a couple of occasions now, involved myself in the sideline of figuring out why the bodies needed to be guarded.

Thorne Ardall is a very tall person, six-foot-eightish, with suntanned skin, a mop of straight blond hair, and deep-set green eyes that glint with brown and yellow flecks. I believe he can be seen with the naked eye from the International Space Station.

We met when he crashed his car into my house one

foggy night in San Francisco. He had been shot, and we joined forces to catch the murderer of his employer and attempted murderer of himself, after which Thorne moved into a modest but comfortable apartment on the ground floor of my home.

Yes, thank you, I know how absurd that must seem to normal humans. But I live in San Francisco, where normal humans need not seek residency.

He and I are housemates—well, more than that—but with my checkered romantic history I avoid elaborating and possibly jinxing our more-than-housemate status.

All that said, I can tell you there are certainly exceptionally outstanding lemon bars, such as the one I was now savoring, which triggered the requisite full salivary alert.

This particular lemon bar was purveyed by the East-West Café in Daly City, and it was ferrying supreme contentment to my mouth with every forkful. Across the top was a liberal lacing of dark chocolate sauce, an extra touch that is proprietor/chef Rose Sason's personalization, just for lucky me, of an already great dessert.

Rose understands and endorses my point of view about dark chocolate. Bless her.

Born in the Philippines, Rose enjoys amusing the café's patrons with her hand-lettered daily menu. My dessert was listed as Lemmy-Chockety Bah. If you eat at the Café often enough, as I do since I do not cook unless forced to do so by food despots who should

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know better than to require it of me, you acquire a creative culinary vocabulary without—I thank the beneficent gods—acquiring any creative culinary skills.

I was enjoying my chocolate-slathered lemon bar without interference from Thorne, who knows better than to get between me and my dessert, even if at 260 pounds he is twice my size. Motivation trumps muscle-power is my credo when it comes to desserts.

I looked up when I heard the café door open because Thorne shifted his normally boulder-like position. He invariably sits with his back to the wall and an eye on all the exits.

DeLeon Davies, wearing his black working suit, white shirt, black cowboy boots and colorful tie, walked in and was headed over to our table.

DeLeon is the world's coolest human being. He is also my friend, and I am fortunate for that. Among other much more lucrative pursuits, he drives people around in his black Lincoln Town Car, "to stay in touch with my peeps," he says. I have availed myself of both his chauffeur services and encyclopedic knowledge many times during the years I have known him.

Thorne stood to greet DeLeon, and they exchanged a complicated choreography of hand grips and shoulder bumps, minus any words. DeLeon is shorter than Thorne. At maybe six feet or so he is still a substantial presence, but unless one plays tight end for an NFL team, everybody is shorter and less substantial than Thorne.

I stood up to hug and kiss DeLeon because I believe

one should take advantage of every opportunity to hug and kiss handsome men.

DeLeon bore dark half-circles in the normally pecan-colored skin under his eyes. His wiry graying hair was pulled back into a rubber band at his nape. He looked unsettled. This in itself was unsettling. The world's coolest human being does not let anything unsettle him, at least that I'd ever seen.

He pulled a chair over from an adjacent table and we all sat. I was about to ask him how he had tracked us down, but he is DeLeon and he knows exactly where I can be found at mealtime: someplace where someone else, preferably Rose Sason, prepares yummy vittles and then does the dishes afterward.

"Miz Xana, you on your feet again." Even unsettled, DeLeon extended the courtesy of noticing others first.

"Yes," I said.

I had broken my ankle into smithereens not long ago, while helping Thorne figure out who was targeting his most recent personal security client. My nickname is based on Alexandra, which was too much for my baby sister to manage, so she dubbed me "Ex-Anna," and the nickname stuck.

"Long haul," DeLeon shook his head.

"It was."

"You good now?"

"I'm using the cane for the time being." I touched the handle that rested on the table edge. "It was three and a half months before I was allowed to put weight

on all the bionicity, so it's taking me a minute to figure out the whole walking thing from scratch. But I'm doing great. Thanks for asking."

"I was worried."

"You helped me so much, DeLeon. You were an angel, and I won't ever forget it."

He patted my hand where it lay on the cane. Then we were all quiet. DeLeon turned and stared across the room, out the window at the traffic passing by on John Daly Boulevard.

He tapped his fingers on the wood-grain laminate tabletop.

He sighed.

I looked at Thorne. Thorne was watching DeLeon, seeing everything.

Thorne looked at me from under his thatch of hair, his eyes expressive and his face immobile. He was telling me, as he tends to tell me with his prodigious economy of words, that it was my job to conduct the inquiry.

I set my fork down on the plate alongside the remainder of my lemon bar. It took massive self-discipline, but my friend DeLeon was unsettled, so I let go of the utensil that was ferrying lemmy-chockety contentment to me.

"DeLeon?"

He turned back to face me.

"My daughter."

"Which daughter?"

DeLeon had two daughters, the older one a married

attorney and the younger one in high school. His son Terrell helped out with the chauffeuring during the summer, when he wasn't attending industrial engineering classes at Stanford.

"My baby. Netta. They took my Netta."

DeLeon's voice filled up his throat and he choked on it as he spoke. Thorne sat forward and put his dinner-plate-sized hands flat on the table, ready to push himself up and go.

"Do you know who has her?" I said.

"This cult run by some woman up outside Marysville."

"A woman is running a cult?"

"She callin' herself some Egyptian goddess name and sayin' all the people with her are her children. I looked her up. She say she 'Renenet, goddess incarnate of prosperity and abundance.'"

DeLeon can speak English like a Yale Honors Literature professor if he wants to. Right now he didn't want to.

"Netta is how old?" I asked.

"Just sixteen. She 'n her Momma been havin' some trouble 'bout Netta's boyfriend, and a month ago Netta took off in the middle of the night. We thought she went with this boy, but turns out no. So we been goin' crazy 'til today a friend 'a hers brought us a note from Netta sayin' what happened."

DeLeon turned to Thorne. "I couldn't think what to do 'til I thought of you."

DeLeon and Thorne were looking at each other in

that meaningful way that men reserve for themselves—the look men use to say stuff, about the world and their troubles and their battle plans, without saying any actual words.

“How did she wind up in a cult?”

“This boyfriend we didn’t like. She’s sixteen. You know how that can be. He’s twenty-five. I went to the cops, believe it or not, but it turns out there really ain’t much they can do, even she’s underage, if the girl wants to be with the man. This cop told me to make friends with him instead of tryin’ to chase him off, and count on him or Netta gettin’ tired of it.”

“But so far nobody’s gotten tired.”

“Not so far. But she and Maxine had some big fuss a few weeks back. Maxine won’t tell me what it was. Netta took money from Maxine’s wallet and left a note said she was goin’ on the bus to her Aunt Patricia’s down in L.A. Her note to her friend just now says she went to Marysville instead.”

“Is there a reason you don’t just call the cops now that you know where she is? She’s underage. Legally they can’t keep her.”

“That’s gonna take too long. The po-po go and ask questions, knock on the door, let those people know they lookin’ for Netta, give them time to do somethin’. I don’t believe we want to give them time for that.” As DeLeon spoke his voice twisted into desperation.

I took DeLeon’s hand and squeezed it, shaking it a little the way you do to emphasize what you’re saying.

“Okay. Don’t you worry now. Thorne’s going to go

get her for you. Netta's going to come back home safe and sound."

I stood up to hug him goodbye. DeLeon's eyes were red and tears pooled at his lower lids when I hugged him.

"Wait," said Thorne in his deep rumble of a voice. DeLeon and I looked at him. Thorne speaks so seldom that when he does one tends to swivel and stare.

"It's a cult. Not a simple extraction."

"What are you thinking?" I said, sitting back down. DeLeon stayed on his feet.

"Weapons, suicides, dead-bolted entries and exits, underground chambers, dogs, kids." Thorne ticked each item off on his fingers.

"I figured all that," DeLeon said. "It's why I came to you instead of headin' up there on my own. But I have to get Netta out of there. Her note means she's ready to come home. She's countin' on me."

"We'll get her." I put my hand on his forearm. "You came to Thorne because you know he can do this without any harm coming to Netta. To anyone."

"I don't mind if whoever talked her into goin' up there gets harmed right into a hole in the ground."

"Can you arrange for that?" I said to Thorne.

Thorne's mouth turned up slightly at the corners. This is a toothy grin for him, and a definite affirmative.

Thorne stood, dropped money on the table, and strode quickly to the exit. DeLeon turned and followed him.

"Where are we going?" I called out, slinging my

purse over my shoulder, grabbing my cane with one hand and the last two bites of my lemon bar with the other, gimping as quickly as I could after them.

DeLeon heard the bump of my cane on the floor and, ever alert for the most courteous action to take, came back and held out his arm for me.

We heard Thorne shout "*Home!*" just before he slammed the door of his black BMW and started the engine.

The big Beemer's tires chirped as Thorne gunned it through the traffic signal at the corner and was gone. DeLeon and I went slowly down the steps to the café's parking lot. For now I have to go down steps like a toddler, my hand clamped in a death grip on the railing.

"The computers," I said to DeLeon, as he handed me into the Lincoln's back seat. "By the time we get to the house, he'll know what's what and he'll have a plan."

"Whatever that man says to do, that's exactly what I'm gonna do. That man is mighty mighty."

No argument there.

I ate the last two bites of lemon bar as DeLeon pulled out and headed west toward the ocean. The lemon bar was still excellent, but contentment was no longer the primary factor in the experience.

It was a lemon bar. By finishing it I was performing a mere duty. I am confident everyone will understand.

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CHAPTER TWO

The two dogs rushed to greet us as we walked into the house. Hawk, the black Great Dane/Mastiff mix, focused his attention on me. Kinsey, the brown Welsh terrier mix, aimed her plea for attention at DeLeon.

Foiled by our cursory greeting, they retreated to their round floor beds in the entryway alcove.

The two all-black housecats, Katana and Meeka, stayed curled up against each other on the ottoman in the living room. Katana may have raised an eyelid, but it was a mere peek if he did.

Upstairs, DeLeon and I walked into the computer room, where all the screens were lit up and the printers were spewing out paper.

The computer room had been, until Thorne set up

shop by installing wide surfaces crammed with electronics, a seldom-used bedroom on the third floor of my house on 48th Avenue in San Francisco. From the side window we could look out at Sutro Park and the Pacific Ocean through the cypress, eucalyptus and Norfolk Island pine trees.

Maps, photographs, and newspaper articles were sliding out of the printers. Thorne held up a hand, signaling us to give him time.

"Would you like anything?" I asked DeLeon. "Tea? Water? Coffee?"

"How soon we leavin'?" he asked Thorne.

"An hour."

"Then I'm going to go get some provisions together," I said, heading for the kitchen downstairs on the second floor. San Franciscans almost always live one story up from street level in long, narrow houses perched atop a ground-floor garage.

Let me be clear, by the way: "Getting provisions together" does not count as cooking. No burners would be lit in the process.

"I'll make the coffee," offered DeLeon. This was not selfless voluntarism. DeLeon has tasted the coffee I make. I am a tea drinker, and I make splendid tea. Making tea involves boiling water and pouring the boiling water over dry tea leaves.

Boiling and pouring are the sort of cooking at which I can excel.

I assembled turkey sandwiches, some with avocado and lettuce and some with cheese and tomato. I added

bacon to a couple of them because bacon is like dark chocolate: a universal bonus when layered onto just about any other food. I thought about it, and reopened one sandwich, slathered some cranberry sauce on it, and wondered why there is always a can of cranberry sauce available in the pantry.

Go check your pantry. You'll see.

The dogs trotted into the kitchen as soon as they heard the refrigerator door open. They planted themselves directly behind me, prepared to tag-team a high-low tripping effort should I turn around with food in my hand.

The cats ambled in at the sound of the can opener. Katana, the bigger of the two, jumped onto the counter and I promptly pushed him off again, our daily ritual. Meeka rubbed back and forth against Hawk, explaining as clearly as she could, cat-to-dog, that any food that came his way really belonged to her.

I realize my house is occupied by far too many pets for most people's taste. As my friend Yolanda once said about such people, "If they don't like it, there's no law requiring them to come over."

DeLeon poured coffee into a thermos and screwed on the cap. I poured boiling water over Darjeeling tea bags in a pot, waited a couple of minutes, and poured the steeped tea into another thermos. I slid a dozen oatmeal raisin cookies into a bag and zipped it shut.

Standing at the counter, lowering the cooler's lid, I heard the inner voice that calls me "Child" tell me to fetch my tarot cards.

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Uh-oh. But in another way, it was good news.

Mind in a minor muddle, I stood still, considered how much time it would take, and made the decision.

CHAPTER THREE

I am a tarot reader. I don't work out of a storefront with neon signs showing a mystic eye or the outlined palm of a hand, not that I have any particular problem with someone who does. What reading tarot has taught me is to listen to and trust my inner voice.

We all have that voice. Call it your conscience, or Jiminy Cricket, or Jesus, or Jeannette McDonald; I don't care. We all have that voice, and I give heed to mine—the one that calls me “Child” —because I have learned that not doing so causes me problems by which I would just as soon not be troubled.

I said to DeLeon, “I need your help, if you're willing.”

“Sure.”

I asked him to wait for me in the dining room and

went to get my cards out of their rose- and sandalwood box.

DeLeon knows I read cards, but he's never participated in a reading. Not everyone is comfortable around tarot cards, or around people who are reading them. I can't imagine why, except that these little pieces of colored cardboard seem to offend more restrictive and dogmatic religious leaders.

I don't like offending people's sensibilities if I can avoid it, so before I unwrapped the deck from its protective silk scarves I asked DeLeon, "Do you mind these? I'm being asked to read the cards but I can't read for myself very well. I don't remember what I've said afterward, so I need a witness."

"I haven't seen anyone read cards before, but I've heard folks say, 'can I get a witness' plenty of times." DeLeon smiled. "Whatever you need to do, Miz Ex, you go ahead on."

"What I need is for you to do your best to remember what I say, okay? When I read the cards I'm talking from someplace that doesn't consciously string words together, and I can't seem to restrung them myself when I'm done. Afterward I'm going to ask you about what I said."

"Got it. The 'record' button is lit up red." He touched his index finger to his forehead, between his eyebrows.

I unwrapped the cards and spread the scarves out on the table. I shuffled the deck until it warmed up from the heat of my hands. I split the oversized deck

into three piles sitting on the top scarf, and felt like picking up the one on the right, so I did that and stacked it on top of the other two sections, reassembling the deck into a whole again.

“Am I allowed to ask questions?” I could hear tension in DeLeon’s voice.

“You do whatever feels right to you. Ask me questions, comment on what you see on a card, tell me the thoughts that come to your mind as I’m speaking—anything at all.

“The Tarot is a tool for accessing our intuition. Because most deck designs are figurative, reading tarot is a little like interpreting dreams. A reader’s job is to use her intuition to figure out what the pictures mean when they are arrayed in a layout with each other. But every source of information can be useful.”

“Okay then.”

I didn’t bother to go into the many myths about the tarot, or the fact that there are seventy-eight cards in a tarot deck, twenty-two of which are called the Major Arcana.

The Major Arcana represent the big cycles or phases life takes us through. The remaining fifty-six cards are the Minor Arcana, fourteen each in four different suits, and they are the precursors of today’s playing cards. Put simply, the Minor Arcana tend to mean the day-to-day experiences of life.

In modern playing cards, Swords have been renamed Spades, Wands became Clubs, Cups became Hearts, and Pentacles became Diamonds.

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There are many layouts for tarot readings, but this time I opted to put down a row of seven cards, from left to right. I use this layout when I want a snapshot of the situation. I was looking for any clues I could glean about what was happening or about to happen, without taking a lot of time.

In any reading, a higher or lower percentage of Major Arcana is worth noticing, because a high percentage can indicate that what's going on carries with it a sense that things are spiraling out of control.

In the layout I was looking at there was only one Major Arcanum: The High Priestess card. The predominance of Minor Arcana indicated the situation was one I could hope to grapple with without feeling overwhelmed.

I examined all the cards for a moment and then began to talk. I have never been adept at "thinking" a reading.

The first card was the Princess of Cups, reversed, meaning upside down. Next was the Prince of Swords. The third card was the Five of Pentacles. In the center, reversed, was The High Priestess. The fifth spot was the Four of Cups. In the sixth place was the Seven of Cups. The last card was the Eight of Wands.

"DeLeon, this could be about Netta, or about one of us, or me, okay? I'm going to ask for your help in figuring out what everything means. If I say something and you think it's wrong or off somehow, please say what comes to your mind and help me get back on track?"

"I'll do my best, Xana, given that I have no idea how this is supposed to work."

"Don't worry about it or overthink it. Just say what's in your mind."

"I don't seem to have any trouble with that," he laughed. "It's keepin' my opinions to myself that's the problem."

We smiled at each other. I could feel his nerves settling down, and that it was okay to start.

I pointed to the leftmost card: the Princess of Cups.

"She's reversed. When she's right-side up she's ready for a new adventure, something emotionally fulfilling. It could be anything that triggers that child-like feeling of enthusiasm and joy. But here she's upside-down, which often means someone who is immature and emotionally demanding."

I paused before I said what came to me next.

"DeLeon." I looked up at him. "Is there any chance Netta could be pregnant? And you can tell me it's none of my business."

DeLeon stared at me, disbelief on his face. He looked down and pointed at the Princess of Cups.

"You see that?"

"The thought that she was pregnant surfaced in my mind. When this card is right-side-up it can mean pregnancy. I don't know whether Netta is pregnant or not. When I'm reading cards I say what comes into my mind and I don't try to filter it. But you know more than I do about Netta."

He thought for a moment and shook his head.

“Maxine wouldn’t tell me what they fussed about that got them both so mad. If it was about Netta bein’ pregnant that would make sense. Maxine’s been tryin’ to talk sense to Netta about that boyfriend, but Netta never would listen.”

“I don’t know anything for a fact, okay? It was just a thought. There are other meanings I could be ignoring.”

I didn’t tell him that the other meanings tend to include drugs and alcohol.

I heard Thorne’s footsteps upstairs. I knew he was packing up the printouts, tucking a thumb drive into the pocket of his dark gray jeans, checking that everything he’d found was e-mailed to the three of us so we would all have backup access to what he had learned.

“What else are you seein’?”

I pointed to the next card, the Prince of Swords.

“He’s a whirlwind. He uses his intellect and his words to capture the minds of others. He creates momentum because he’s obsessed with an idea. The downside of this card is that his ambition and drive can blind him to the difficulties, the damage, that his headlong pursuit of his goal can trigger.”

“So this is a person?”

“It can be a person, or it can represent the way our psyche operates.” I thought about it.

“My guess is that this is a person. I think maybe Netta met a young man and he talked to her for a while and he just swept her up with him. People like this are

very compelling. They can be glamorous and captivating. At the same time, they can be heedless and cruel. They often use language as a weapon."

"Do you think this is the man she was seein'?"

"It could be. It could be someone more recent, or it can represent a pattern that Netta tends to fall into, of allowing herself to be captivated and carried away by someone who talks a great game."

DeLeon shook his head again. "Yes," he said. "Yes, yes."

"Let's look at the Five of Pentacles. In a couple of the tarot designs the image it shows is of two people, a man using a crutch and a woman with a shawl pulled over her head, walking in the snow outside a church. There's light shining through a stained glass window behind them. The card can refer to someone who insists on isolating herself, refusing the comfort and spiritual solace that are available to us all."

I thought about the card for a moment.

"This card can refer to a willful separation from family, friends, community. It may include a feeling of being unworthy, or of not deserving to be loved. When we were kids it was that whole 'nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I'm gonna go eat worms' thing."

"The week before she ran off Netta was sulkin' 'round the house, stayin' in her room, sleepin' long hours. I was havin' to push her to get up and off to school every day. Anything Maxine or I said, Netta acted like it was a big imposition to even listen."

I nodded in acknowledgement.

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"This next card is the big one," I said. "It's the High Priestess, and she's reversed. It's the only Major Arcana card, meaning 'big mystery,' and she's sitting here dead center. She's tough enough to figure out when she's straight up. Upside-down, wow."

I thought for a moment, allowing my intuition to bring words to the surface of consciousness.

"I think this card has links to the woman up in Marysville as well as into Netta's state of mind."

I paused. Whenever I do a reading for someone, there is meaning in the cards for me as well. Something was telling me to notice this card and figure out what it had to tell me.

"The High Priestess represents the link between our conscious and unconscious. She is our intuition, and when she shows up in a reading she is asking us to listen to our inner selves. But here she's reversed. Any reversed card indicates the potential for what the upright card means, but in this case I think she's here to warn us about a person who is refusing to listen anymore to her inner voice, her angels, if you will. She has shut down her intuition and is running her life based on willfulness and the assertion of false spiritual power."

If this card had something to say to me, I was at a loss to identify what that might be. I made an effort to open myself up to "hearing" what might be unwelcome news about myself.

I stopped and held my breath. I was frightened. I felt a shiver move up my back. My teeth chattered.

I disappeared from my dining room for a second, and saw a tall dark-haired woman with brilliant black eyes standing on a raised platform at one end of a large room. She was holding her hand out ahead of her, palm raised, as if blessing the rows of people seated on the floor below her. But her face was not kindly; her expression was hard and her eyes flashed with anger.

I felt DeLeon's hand squeeze mine.

"Miz Xana? Hey, there, Miz Ex?"

I forced my mind away from the hackle-raising woman in the vision and felt myself returning to the dining room. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, releasing the fear that had overwhelmed me.

"Xana, where did you just go? You turned white as a snowflake. You white enough already, girl. I thought you were 'bout to pass out."

I laughed a jittery giggle, and he looked at me with alarm. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"DeLeon, we have to do something about her."

"Who you mean now?"

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