

THE EMPRESS CARD



A Tarot Mystery by

Bevan Atkinson

The Tarot Mysteries by Bevan Atkinson

The Empress Card

The High Priestess Card

The Magician Card

The Fool Card

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Electra Enterprises of San Francisco

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ISBN 978-0-9969425-3-9

Acknowledgements

Thanks always to Nancey Brackett, Tracy Blackwood, and Judi Cooper Martin, who keep me going. Thanks also to Maury Carron for bringing former police captain Walt Kostas to my aid, and to Walt for his invaluable perspective and insight into the difficult and necessary work that good police officers do to catch bad guys and help victims of crimes. I am always grateful for my sister Chris Hess's ace proofreading skills and Duane Unkefer's manuscript editing, and any remaining typos or other errors are due to my unmonitored efforts to edit the writing post-Chris/Duane.

For

Barb Thompson and Julia Rollit Shumway
Heaven must have needed more Gentle Readers

In a lifetime there is only love

Reaching for a lonely one...

– Kenny Loggins, “Meet Me Half Way”

Reproducing is, like, weird.

– Jeannie Frazier

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Xana

"Why the suitcase?"

"New client," Thorne answered, demonstrating his prodigious talent for terseness.

"Oh? Who is he?"

"She."

"Really? How did she find you?"

"DeLeon drives her. Somebody took a shot at her."

Thus I learned of Mona Raglan. Over the next few weeks I would come to learn much more about her, her kinky boots manufacturing enter-

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prise, and her assorted family members. I would not enjoy the education.

Thorne lives in the tidy apartment we built for him at the back of the ground-floor garage in my San Francisco house on 48th Avenue. I live on the upper two floors, with a view beyond the backyard fence across Sutro Park to the Pacific. We extend unlimited and clothing-optional visitation privileges to each other.

DeLeon Davies drives mostly rich people around, not for a living so much as to “stay in touch with my peeps,” as he puts it. He has invested enough in his peeps’ enterprises along the way that he and his family live in a large house in Piedmont, with a view over the swimming pool and down the Oakland hills to San Francisco Bay.

Because DeLeon’s clientele tended to be wealthy and paranoid about that characteristic, he was a reliable source of referrals for Thorne. When Thorne has a new personal security client—meaning someone who requires what the rest of us would call a bodyguard—he has been known to disappear into the client’s world for the duration. I miss the pajama-free visitations something ferocious when those disappearances occur.

The absence of a two-hundred-sixty-pound, six-foot-eight-or-so human between the sheets might seem like something to revel in rather than fret about, but I could feel fretfulness nibbling

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around the edges of my emotions.

"How long is the gig?" I asked him, attempting to quash the fretfulness from my tone.

"Indefinite."

He stopped his packing and looked at me. We exchanged looks for a while. They said pretty much all that needed to be said, which was just as well because Thorne is, as previously mentioned, not vastly verbal.

Since Thorne has unique employment terms, it takes a special sort of situation for someone to agree to those terms indefinitely.

I know Thorne has to work, but not because he needs the money particularly; he keeps a safe, a money bin, somewhere. He keeps it stuffed with gold coins and wafers and mini-ingots. He stores his golden treasure trove in a money bin because he's entirely off the grid, a nowhere man, and direct-depositing paychecks into banks simply will not serve.

He does not have ID, a passport, a phone number that's listed anywhere, or a credit card, nor does he ever receive any mail whatsoever. Imagine a world with no credit card come-ons or six-month discount offers from Comcast or AT&T. As far as his estranged family, the IRS, and the United States Postal Service are concerned, my super-sized sweetheart simply does not exist.

Thorne likes the personal security work and is

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good at it. It had been a while between clients and I knew he had been chafing at the lack of challenge. Not, of course, because he had said anything about it. Thorne does not grouse about his lot in life. He is not a chatty fellow, nor is he ever a grouser.

From time to time I have assisted him, a little more than willingly, in his endeavors, mostly because someone has either been at risk of death or was actually dead, and in spite of the dangers involved I always wanted in. This time, however, no matter how long I stared meaningfully at his deep-set dark green eyes, he gave no sign that I was invited to participate.

So I left Thorne to finish his packing and settled down to adjust myself to his impending absence. I trudged upstairs to my part of the house, plunked myself down onto a barstool at the kitchen island, and tapped my favorite pen against an empty tablet of notepaper on the countertop. What ought to go on the to-do list?

I stared out the window to the intersection of 48th Avenue and Anza, and the parked cars in front of the tightly packed houses that stretched along the slight uphill slope toward downtown San Francisco.

I wrote down the word "Groceries" and underlined it. People always need groceries. I was certainly going to need groceries. I got up and

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opened the refrigerator to assess the grocery situation.

Since I don't cook—nor would anyone with the sense God gave carpet pad want me to—there was nothing much in there that required anyone to light a burner. Nevertheless, the shelves were chock-full of stuff to assemble into sandwiches and salads or shove into the toaster oven or nuker.

Thorne had anticipated his departure and gone to the store for me, the way he invariably does.

Okay. Hmmph. For the time being then, no groceries. I crossed the word off my list. I wrote "Pet food" below the crossed-off word.

I opened the door to the service porch, which is the stair-top area off the kitchen in San Francisco houses. Non-San Franciscans might call it a mud room, but since it hardly ever rains here the word "mud" has become irrelevant in our world unless we're in Calistoga at the hot springs submerged in hot, wet dirt to "remove toxins."

Service porches lead down to the back garden, if the house is lucky enough to have a back garden. Because houses in San Francisco tend to be short on storage space, most of us turn the service porch into a pantry-slash-closet-slash-laundry room. On the high shelves I could see that Thorne had stocked up on kibble, canned food, and treats

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for the two dogs and two cats who live with me.

Yes, I realize that four pets is too many pets. Let's move on.

So there I was, stumped for something to write on the to-do list. In fact, I was stumped for anything useful to do at all.

The fact is, I don't have to work for a living. It's a long boring story that involves an employment lawsuit settled immensely in my favor. My friends like to imagine that I must be either bored stiff or else asking Jeeves to peel me another grape, but I don't typically have any trouble figuring out how to spend my time. Not at all. I live in San Francisco, you see. I'm not going to explain that; just come for a visit like everyone else does and you'll get without any explanation what I mean about the City with a capital C, which is what we, in our urban vanity, call San Francisco.

Also, I have learned to like my own company, and over the last few months I have learned to like Thorne's as well.

To keep something on the calendar in the way of a regular commitment, and also to feel like a decent human being, one day a week I volunteer by sponsoring a third-grade class. I help out with school supplies and classroom support and sometimes music lessons or lunch money or clothes—whatever seems necessary at the time.

But it was June. School was out.

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The larger issue then, was what I would do on my own, now that I had grown accustomed to having Thorne around. I used to live alone and be fine with it; after a pathetic history of disastrous relationships I'd thrown in the towel and learned to be content as a solitaire. That is, until Thorne showed up.

What Thorne does best is look out for people, keeping them out of harm's way. He had looked out for me by buying plenty of people and pet food, to avert any harm that might have arisen from a trip to the store.

So I sat down, crossed off "Pet food," and tapped the pencil some more.

Having Thorne in my life was wonderful, but now all of a sudden I had to focus on what to do with my time when he wasn't around. Was I the same person I had been before we became the two of us? If not, then what was I now? And if I didn't know who I was now, then how could I figure it out?

I decided to go the *What Color is Your Parachute?* route. What did I do best, and how should I go about doing more of it, with or without Thorne around?

I should start another list. Yes.

The pencil tapping lured both dogs into the kitchen. Perhaps I was inadvertently tapping out the secret canine code for "Biscuits!"

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Hawk, the black Great Dane/Mastiff mix, stalked to the service porch, the door to which I had carelessly left ajar. He stood up on his long hind legs and used his mouth to unhook his collar and leash from the coat hook where they were hanging at eye level, if the eye level is an NBA center's.

He then dragged them into the kitchen, the choke collar clanking gently as if Marley's ghost's phantom dog wanted a walk. Hawk looked up at me expectantly, his stub of a tail wagging. Kinsey, the much smaller brown terrier mix, sat on the floor, her tail swishing back and forth across the tile.

"Oh, all right," I said, and got up to fetch Kinsey's leash. The dogs began jumping around, bumping into each other and moaning excitedly in soprano and baritone glissandos. Their toenails ticked on the tile floor.

I realized, sitting and tapping my pencil, that I was feeling lost in a way I hadn't since Thorne literally crashed into my house one dark foggy night, shot and bleeding.

"Dark, foggy night" is a redundant statement in San Francisco. The fog goes out in the morning and comes in in the evening, acting as our city's meteorological respiratory system, cleaning the air and requiring us to own windproof outerwear in all seasons of the year.

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I was fixating on the fact that in the past Thorne has needed my help. I like very much for people to need my help. When the dogs and I got home from the walk I'd start a new list with ideas for providing help to anyone who could be induced to stand still for it.

Right now my dogs needed my help, which would have to do.

I clipped on their leashes and let them run down the steps to the front door. Thorne loomed in the entryway to his ground-floor apartment.

"Be safe," I said, hugging him and tilting my face up so I could look into his hooded eyes and be taken seriously. He put his big arms around me and pulled me close. I smelled starched cotton and shaving cream and the vetiver soap he uses.

"I'll stay in touch," he said, and kissed me.

Thorne does not bestow a full sentence, subject and verb plus prepositional phrase, on just any old body. Neither does he go around nonchalantly dispensing kisses and all-powerful, all-encompassing embraces. When he dispenses them in my direction I have the sense to feel fortunate, turned on, and grateful.

"Do you have a few minutes before you have to leave?" I said.

He shut the door on the dogs and carried me into his bedroom, kissing me for the entire distance.

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Later, when I was walking the dogs along the pedestrian/bike path at Ocean Beach, with no one around me, I let the tears well up.

Damn.

Before the bullet-riddled Thorne showed up on my doorstep I had sworn off men after years of investing in tear-clogged, wounded-bird recovery missions. Now that I had reversed my decision and made a soul-restoring selection, I was once again going to be forced to expand the Kleenex budget.