

# THE HIGH PRIESTESS 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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A Tarot Mystery

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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*







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-eight-ish, suntanned, with a mop of straight blond hair, and deep-set green eyes that glint with brown and yellow flecks. In terms of sheer mass, he is pretty much the human equivalent of the Great Wall of China.

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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

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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 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.

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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 gray-ing 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 lemmychockey 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.

As Othello said, "Farewell the tranquil mind!"

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

"This cult run by some crazy woman."

"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 one tends to swivel and stare.

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

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

"Weapons, suicides, dead-bolted entries and exits, underground chambers, dogs, kids."

"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.

"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 sacred duty. I am confident everyone will understand.