

# THE MAGICIAN 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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Electra Enterprises of San Francisco

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ISBN 978-0-9969425-1-5

## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to my writing cheerleaders, especially my cousin Nancey Brackett, and former English teacher Dr. Karl Harshbarger, who both helped me get going again when I was stuck.

Thanks also to my lovely friend Barb Thompson, to the marvelously detail-oriented Chris and Dianne, and to Duane Unkefer for his manuscript expertise and always useful advice, plus whenever I call he always asks me what I'm wearing. And of course a shout-out to Mr. Hitchcock.

For James Atkinson and Barbara Louise

“... The Tarot . . . may have been originally intended, by an unknown Maker, to be used . . . as an intellectual and intuitive system, for making systems, for destroying them, and for creating.”

— Bill Butler, *Dictionary of the Tarot*

“Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie  
Which we ascribe to heaven.”

— William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*





I was taking one last sip of my now cold peppermint tea. It was Monday morning, between the breakfast rush and the lunch hour crush, and there were mostly empty tables at Enrico's on Broadway. The woman whose tarot cards I had read was gone, happier now, feeling free to make a decision that had stymied her.

"Do you read for strangers?" he asked me, a young man of medium height, with longish straight dark brown hair, bright black eyes, olive complexion. He was slender, nervous. He was wearing a black T-shirt and dark gray stovepipe jeans. Androgynous, but San Francisco calls itself "everybody's favorite city," and that goes triple if you're androgynous.

He had been sitting at the table next to mine but had risen when the woman did and was facing me now. He spoke in a light tenor and gripped the back of an empty chair at the side of my table, shoulders shrugged upward as he leaned toward me, his gaze intent.

"Sometimes," I said.

"How much do you charge?"

"I don't. It's nice if you can do something in kind for me, if you think the reading has been helpful."

"Really? You don't charge anything? Why not?"

"I don't make my living this way. I read for people who ask me to. It's a gift, to be able to read the cards, and I pass it along. I do believe it keeps things in balance if the people I read for respond with something of value, but I leave it up to them. Sometimes all they can manage is to thank me, and that's fine."

"Could you read my cards now? Do you have time?"

I watched him, and waited for my intuition to kick in. I didn't get the feeling he was trying to pick me up. *He's all right*, my inner voice told me, *and there will be contradictions.*

"Please sit down," I said, gesturing at the chair he was white-knuckling, "wherever you like."

"I'll get my coffee," he said, swiveling and

picking up his cappuccino from the next table. The normally nonstop traffic up and down Broadway was intermittent. Right now there were mostly cars instead of rumbling trucks.

Since the irreparably damaged double-decker Embarcadero Freeway, including the Broadway off-ramp, was torn down after the 1989 earthquake, traffic is much quieter around Enrico's. The café empties out in the late morning and I don't feel like I am taking up a table a paying patron would occupy. I never read cards at Mama's for instance, which is always packed, with a line outside waiting patiently for the exceptional omelettes.

As it has been for many years, Broadway is a mix of strip clubs and restaurants on the edge of North Beach, the former headquarters of all things beatnik. Enrico's is just around the corner from City Lights Bookstore, run by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, where I shop when I feel the urge to buy subversive, or just plain unusual, literature.

Some years ago the Condor, once the home of Carol Doda and the original topless review, had taken down the huge sign of the nude woman with her blinking red-light nipples. At the time it was scheduled to be replaced by a sign showing just the name of the club, some people fought to keep the nude lady; they said she was a landmark and should be preserved.

I love my nutty city.

There was a big man sitting across the café by himself. Not at all fat, just very large. He looked over at me briefly and when our eyes met I felt color rising into my cheeks. He looked away, a smile turning up the corners of his mouth.

The slender man sat down across from me and immediately picked up his cup, holding it with both hands, his fingers long and smooth. I had the impression that with those hands he could do something complicated, and he would do it adroitly.

He took a sip of his coffee.

"I was watching you read that woman's cards," he said, looking at me. His dark eyes glittered with intelligence, and he tilted his head with curiosity.

"I could tell you helped her."

"How could you tell?"

"The way she stood up. Like she had a purpose. And she looked light-hearted when she walked away."

I nodded my head.

"That's what a reading is supposed to do for you. Make you feel unstuck, and recognized, and free from whatever has you stalled. Have you had your cards read before?"

"No,"

"May I ask, why now?"

"Because I don't know what to do," he said, and lifted his hands to cover his face. He shook

his head like a dog shaking off raindrops.

Sliding his fingertips down to rest on his cheekbones, he looked at me and said, "I can't figure out what's happening. And I can't figure out how to...", he paused and thought, "...how to maneuver."

One hand wriggled like an eel, back and forth toward me across the table.

I looked at him, then away toward the late morning sky beyond the patio. I paid attention to how I felt about him and what he was saying. I felt safe. I wanted to do what I could to help him.

Unlike most people, who have been taught to mistrust and avoid using their intuition, I rely on mine utterly. People tell me I am too trusting. What they are really saying is that they do not know how to trust properly, using the innate skills they are born with to assess whether strangers intend evil or good.

"I'm Alexandra Bard," I said, turning back to him and holding out my hand. "People call me Xana."

He shook hands with me, firmly but without smashing my fingers against my rings. His skin was very smooth. I didn't feel any spark of warning from the handshake.

"I'm Asa Ballantine."

"You and I are going to work together on this, okay? A card reading is not a test, and I'm not going to talk about long voyages or dark strangers

or coming into a lost inheritance. The tarot is a tool to get at information you and I might not otherwise notice or remark on.

"I'm going to tell you what I think," I went on, "and then based on your reactions and comments we'll try to unearth information that will shine enough light on your circumstances that you feel free to decide, or move, or act, or maybe do nothing. If I'm doing this properly what you will mostly feel is recognized. How does that sound to you?"

"Great. Wonderful. Thank you."

"Take the cards," I said, handing them to him. "Work with them until you think they're ready."

"Can I look at them?"

"Sure. Whatever you feel like doing."

"How will I know when they're ready?"

"You'll just know. Take all the time you want."

I sat and cleared my mind while he shuffled. Inwardly I said the prayer I always say when I read the cards for someone: *Please let Your light shine through me clearly, undimmed, unaltered.*

"They're big," he said.

"This particular deck is."

"Are there smaller ones?"

"Sure. And many different designs. There's a version of the tarot in just about every culture around the world."

I knew to keep my tarot explanation general

and to a minimum; most people are preoccupied with their problems and uninterested in Court de Ghibellin and the Temple of Karnak, or the confab of Magi in Fez during the sixth century, or Louis XIII and the tarot's emergence in the fourteenth century as the Marseille deck, brought by Gypsies who entered France from the Mediterranean. People are not generally fascinated about the fact that Gypsies are so called because they were thought to have come from Egypt.

There's lore, tons of lore. Nobody cares. People who ask me to read their cards don't want to learn the history of the occult sciences, the links between Jung's theory of archetypes and the images on the tarot cards, nor do they want to discover the secret to world peace. They want answers to personal questions about love, or jobs, or money, or health, or family.

But I haven't yet read cards for a Miss America contestant, so world peace may still come up as a question someday.

Asa spread out the cards face up on the silk scarves that I use as protectors and tablecloths. Looking at the designs, he picked up the Nine of Swords.

"This one is sad," he said.

"It can be, yes."

In the best known tarot deck, called the Rider-Waite pack, the Nine of Swords card shows a robed figure sitting up in bed, hands covering the

face as if the person were weeping. I use a different deck, in which the Nine of Swords shows multiple hands emerging from clouds, with the hands holding nine swords. That Asa could read sadness into such a non-figurative image was telling, to me anyway.

I waited to see what else he would say about the card, but he was quiet. He replaced it and shuffled the cards capably with his long, elegant fingers. Most people fumble around a little—not he. He held the pack for a moment, bending his head and concentrating, and then held it out across the table to me.

“Done,” he said. I didn’t take the cards from him.

“Split them into three piles, please.”

He stared at the cards as he separated them and set three piles down on the silk. He looked up at me.

I studied the piles for a moment, waiting to see which one wanted to be picked up. My hand went to the pile to my left. I stacked the other two and set them aside.

I began laying out the Celtic Cross, a ten-card layout that curls outward from a center card and is intended to provide a general overview of any Querent’s situation, a Querent being the person for whom you are reading.

The center card was The Magician. Crossing it was The Emperor. The Background card was the

Nine of Swords, the card Asa had called "sad." Just Passing was The High Priestess. The Crowning card was Death, followed by the Ten of Swords in the Soon-To-Come spot. The Tower Card turned up in the Fear position of the layout. Others' Influence was The Hermit, reversed, meaning upside-down. Querent's Hope was the Seven of Pentacles. Outcome was the Five of Wands.

I had never seen a layout like it and I pray I never will again.

"Holy God in heaven above me," I said.

I steadied myself, took a deep breath, let it out, and looked up at him.

"You're at war," I said, back in control and using my soft, tarot reader voice. It's the voice late-night FM radio deejays use, and I fall into it when I'm doing a reading. Asa looked frightened, and then he nodded slowly.

"God help your enemies," I said, calm now but appalled as well, holding his gaze. "God is already helping you, and you need all the help you can get."