



Nena Tramountani (Author)

## **Cards of Love 1 – Die Magic des Todes**

### ***Cards of Love 1 – The Magic of Death***

Young Adult Fiction | Recommended age: 14+ | ISBN: 978-3-96976-017-8 | Pages: 384

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***“If this life has taught me anything, it’s that there’s no such thing as chance.”***

What is truth? What is love? Who are we really - and can we ever really know anyone else?

These and other huge questions are asked - and not necessarily answered - by Nena Tramountani in the first volume of her intriguing and complex *Cards of Love* series.

- Part whodunnit/murder mystery, part love story, and part supernatural fantasy
- This unsettling novel plays with the readers in the same way in which the Major Arcana Tarot figures play with Giuletta

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## Synopsis

The main strand of the novel is narrated from the perspective of eighteen-year-old Giuletta. She was told that her mother died when she was a baby, but she has always had a close and loving relationship with her father, Lorenzo. As an investigative journalist, Lorenzo has always travelled widely, leaving Giuletta in the care of Speranza and Noemi, two female neighbours whom Giuletta regards as quasi family. Giuletta's relationship with her father has always been so close, in fact, that she has never felt the need to get close to anyone else. The only thing they have ever disagreed about is Tarot cards. Giuletta has long used the cards, though has largely done so in secret because she knows her father's feelings about the practice.

The novel opens with Giuletta at a crossroads in her life. She has just finished school, but has no idea what she wants to do next. Her father is away, so she, Speranza and Noemi decide to hold a Tarot session.

Giuletta, already discontented with her lot, is not cheered by the cards she chooses: they appear to signify sickness, unhappiness, decisions - and (Card Number 13 of the Major Arcana) death. These same cards are equally capable of benign interpretation. However, a knock on the door suggests that a malign interpretation might be more fitting. For her father has, so the Police tell her, been killed in a road accident in Venice.

Giuletta's world falls apart. How can she possibly carry on without her beloved father? Yet she is unable to cry, either, despite the outpourings of sympathy that come her way. All that remains of her father is a note telling her to promise him that she would stay away from Venice and from Tarot. And who is the woman in the shabby old ballgown who appears to be watching the wake held for Giuletta's father at their home?

Things take an even stranger turn when Giuletta receives a sudden invitation from her Uncle Vincenzo to stay at the family hotel - the Grand Hotel - in Venice. Giuletta wasn't aware she even had an Uncle Vincenzo, never mind a family hotel. Despite the concerns of Speranza and Noemi, she accepts, purely because she feels compelled to find out what actually happened to her father. She doesn't believe it was a simple road accident, and investigating the true cause of his death gives her something on which to focus (and also spares her from the pain of grief).

Giuletta is immediately overwhelmed and fascinated by the hotel and by Uncle Vincenzo, who wines and dines her but from whom she elicits no information. She says she would like to work in the hotel while she's staying there; this is partly as a form of distraction, and partly as a

'cover' for her investigations. Her uncle agrees - but on the understanding that she is not to venture near the First Floor, which is inhabited by a group of very demanding actors whose needs are best left to the more experienced staff.

It quickly becomes clear to Giulietta that there are strange things going on in the hotel. She befriends a chamber-maid, Greta, whom she finds sobbing in a broom cupboard, having been raped by a guest. The next time she sees Greta, though, the latter appears to have no memory of the rape. Giulietta is then on the verge of finding out something important about her father from Davide, who works in the kitchens - but he is then found dead. Who killed him? The only person Giulietta saw at that time was the same woman in the shabby ball gown whom she saw at her father's wake: Cosima.

Giulietta has, meanwhile, met and been entranced by one of the hotel guests, a beautiful boy of her age named Malvolio. He takes her out on a gondola and charms her; they gradually become close. But what causes him to collapse in extreme pain? She takes him into her confidence and says that she is desperate to find out what happened to her father. He in turn takes her into his confidence and tells her that the First Floor guests are no actors - but the 21 Major Arcana Tarot cards, come to life. Her father, as a direct descendant of one of the three men who created the first set of cards, had magical powers (unlike Uncle Vincenzo, who was adopted) - which means that she in turn has magical powers and is in danger as a result. The cards have been set free relatively rarely since the 15th century, though one of the men to do so was her grandfather Edoardo. He was in turn murdered by one of the cards. Malvolio is himself related to one of the founders - but only also via adoption, so doesn't have the same magical powers. He explains to her that Cosima, the woman in the tatty ballgown, is the 21st Major Arcana Tarot card, representing The World.

Giulietta is horrified. Things start to come to a head at the Masked Ball, which she attends with Malvolio. After various twists and turns, Giulietta finds herself on the point of being raped by Azazel - Card 15, the Devil, come to life. She is saved just in time, and finally ends up having a night of passion with Malvolio (who has never slept with anyone before). Following this, and following an overheard conversation between Cosima and Uncle Vincenzo, Giulietta comes to realise that her mother never died: her mother was in fact Cosima. Cosima's supernatural power is the ability to replicate her own physical form - so the woman Giulietta saw at the wake was Cosima's shadow.

The other strand of the novel is told in the first person, and is that of Malvolio. The true meaning of his chapters only becomes clear on a second reading (and would then in fact easily bear a third reading due to the complexity of the narrative). Far from being a 'normal' boy, Malvolio is Card Number 13: Death. What he wants more than anything is to die - but Tarot cards can't die. Together with the other cards of the Major Arcana, he constructs a plot to deceive Giulietta and to secure their future. However, even he can't help feeling guilty when confronted with such clear evidence that she has no idea that she has magical powers as a result of her parentage. He also has an overwhelming desire to be loved, possibly as a result of a long-buried memory of his 'human' family.

Malvolio is a complex character, one of whose particular supernatural powers is that he has the misfortune to enter the head of a dying person. What becomes clear much later in the novel is that as a result of this, he knows who killed Giulietta's father (namely Uncle Vincenzo), and also knows who killed the kitchen-boy Davide. His peculiar bouts of 'illness' are in fact him experiencing someone else's death. When he looks at a human, he can see the date of their future death written above their heads as a number. The Tarot figures, by contrast, have no death date above their heads as they can't be killed.

Malvolio, however, makes two huge mistakes. One is that he fails to pay attention the first time he sees Giulietta. He hardly dares look at her as he doesn't want to see the date of her death above her head - but when he does look, there is nothing there. He passes this off as simply unusual. He does the same when he later notices that Cosima does have a date above her head - which the Tarot figures shouldn't have. Again, he dismisses the thought.

These two errors, however, are brought home to him in the closing pages of the novel, when he overcomes his own selfishness to save Giulietta from Cosima, using the original set of Tarot cards from the fifteenth century. Cosima has at this point attempted to slit Giulietta's throat, and Malvolio has stabbed her. He knows that this will merely render her unconscious for enough precious minutes: she's a Tarot figure, so she can't die. He and Giulietta can use these minutes to stain the original pack of cards with the blood from Giulietta's neck wound.

Things, however, are again not as they seem. And this is Malvolio's third mistake. Having apparently been in control of the situation, he realises - yet again - that there's no such thing as chance. He spent his whole 'life' trying to find a way to die, until he met Giulietta. Now he has found what might be a reason to want to live, he is going to be locked back into the Tarot set once more.

*I glanced round. Cosima was still motionless behind us. The knife was deep inside her chest. Exactly where I left it.*

*No.*

*No.*

*No.*

*Then I saw the blood. The blood she should never have been shedding. Tarot figures didn't shed blood, for God's sake. And then I saw the numbers above her, which were slowly fading.*

*A death-date which I had ignored, because I'd had better things to do.*

*It was today's date.*

*The gruesome truth hit me.*

*I was Death. I was the only card with the power to take my own life. But since I'd been alive, I had never tried to take anyone else's life. I'd never have thought it possible...*

*She was staring at me, her eyes wide open. I looked her quickly up and down.*

*No date. She had never had a date. And now there were two of her.*

*"What the ..."*

*I had killed The World. And The World had sought a replacement.*

*The only living descendant, who had just smeared her blood on all twenty-one cards, including The World. The only human who could ever free us again.*

*Oh my God, what had I done?*

*"Giulietta," I said hoarsely.*

*Just a name.*

*Just a girl.*

*Just a reason to want to live.*

*I'd fought against it. I had had my way. And I had just stopped her from having her way ever again.*