

MELODIE CAMPBELL



THE
Artful
GODDAUGHTER

*A Gina Gallo
Mystery*

THE
Artful
GODDAUGHTER

MELODIE CAMPBELL



RAVEN BOOKS
an imprint of

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

Copyright © 2014 Melodie Campbell

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system now known or to be invented, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Campbell, Melodie, 1955-, author
The artful goddaughter/ Melodie Campbell.
(Rapid reads)

Issued also in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-4598-0819-5 (pbk.).--ISBN 978-1-4598-0820-1 (pdf).--
ISBN 978-1-4598-0821-8 (epub)

I. Title. II. Series: Rapid reads
PS8605.A54745A77 2014 C813'.6 C2014-901567-4
C2014-901568-2

First published in the United States, 2014
Library of Congress Control Number: 2014935364

Summary: In this work of crime fiction, Gina Gallo, mob goddaughter and unwilling sleuth, tries to return a valuable painting to the art gallery. (RL 3.5)

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover design by Jenn Playford
Cover photography by Shutterstock

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS	ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO Box 5626, Stn. B	PO Box 468
Victoria, BC Canada	Custer, WA USA
V8R 6S4	98240-0468

www.orcabook.com

17 16 15 14 • 4 3 2 1

*For Natalie and Alex,
my smart and witty daughters.*

ONE

When I was a girl, my favorite movie was *The Pink Panther*.

Great-Uncle Franco owned a movie theater in town. He had a knock-off reel. We'd beg him to play that film on the big screen. I probably saw it thirty times. It became an obsession with me.

When other girls dressed up for Halloween as princesses, I was decked out in head-to-toe black. With a mask.

"Girls can't be cat burglars," my cousin Paulo told me.

“Yeah?” I yelled back. “What about Mad Magda?”

Paulo sneered. “She’s not real. She’s just a legend, like Santa Claus. Only boys are burglars.”

This obviously did some serious damage. Because, of course, I had to prove him wrong. Even if it took me twenty years to do it.

My name is Gina Gallo. That’s what it says on my passport—or at least one of them.

I’m a gemologist by trade, not a professional cat burglar. The last thing I want now is a life of crime. But I am known in this burg for some pretty daring escapades. Some were even successful. Others, not so much.

My fiancé, Pete, would say, “You’re still out of jail. That’s successful.”

Frankly, I’d call it a miracle. Especially since I was now contemplating murder.

It had happened again, and I was ready to kill someone.

The Artful Goddaughter

“Lady, this card is no good.”

I was in Four-bucks. The gum-chewing barista held out the credit card. The one with my name on it. My real name.

“What?”

She shrugged. “Machine says it’s been ‘compromised.’” She struggled over that big word.

“You’re kidding me.” I snatched it from her hand. Then I stared at it to make sure I had given her the right one. Bugger. It was. I stormed out of the store without my double cream-no sugar and pound of beans.

Outside in the sunlight, I punched a number on my cell.

“Where are you?” I said to Sammy.

“At the chicken coop.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen,” I said. I clicked the phone off and went to find my car.

Sammy is the underboss and Jewish cousin of my godfather, Uncle Vince. Yes, we can buy both bagels and bologna

wholesale in this family. He's a little guy, short on muscle but long on brains.

I drove along Barton and turned left.

We have a chicken coop on the shores of Lake Ontario. This is one of several properties owned by the family in the industrial city of Hamilton. Our skyline includes steel plants. We consider smog a condiment.

The chicken coop is really a two-bedroom cottage. Some relative long ago kept chickens out back, so the place was assessed as a chicken coop for tax purposes. The chickens are long gone, but they never paid much tax anyway.

We use it for private meetings, if you get my drift. And warehousing. I try not to think about that.

I sped along North Service Road and swung onto a gravel drive. Sunlight glistened off Lake Ontario. Pretty, but it was November, and the water looked cold. I stopped the car and vaulted out.

The Artful Goddaughter

Sammy's black Mercedes was parked farther up the drive. So was an expensive Italian motorcycle I recognized.

I flung open the flimsy wooden door and stormed into the cottage.

"Where's the son of a bitch? I'm gonna kill him!"

The place was dark inside. A single lightbulb hung from a wire in the center of the room. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust.

Sammy was sitting at a small wooden table. Even in the dim light, he looked a lot like Woody Allen.

He looked up. "What son of a bitch, Gina?"

"Mario! He stole my credit card number *again!*"

"Whoops." My dopey cousin Mario was sitting opposite Sammy, in the dark corner. He rocked back on the wooden chair.

I marched over and swatted his dark curly head.

“Ouch!” Mario ducked too late. His hands went up to protect his good-looking face.

“Second time this month! I have to get a new card AGAIN.” I was steaming. “Someday, you are going to die cleaning your rifle, Mario!”

This was a well-known family expression meaning something entirely different. But the result was the same.

Sammy folded his arms across his scrawny chest and tch-tched.

“Mario, you careless nincompoop. You gotta check those numbers against names in the family before you reissue a phony card.”

“Sorry, Uncle Sammy.”

“Don’t cut corners. This whole business depends on doing it right the first time.” He waggled a finger. “Take it up a level. How would we ever get ahead if we just kept stealing from family members?”

“Won’t do it again, Gina,” Mario promised. He sounded morose.

I was still miffed. WHY did I have to be born to this family in this burg? Why couldn’t I be from a little farm town in the American Midwest or something, where people actually did raise chickens?

Credit-card theft was so lowbrow.

“Why are we still doing this anyway? Isn’t this rinky-dink?”

Sammy shrugged. “Hard times, Gina. Gotta train the youngsters on the little shit before we move them on to—”

“Stop right there!” I slapped my hand to my forehead. “Just forget I said that. I don’t want to know.”

Sammy smiled. It was a little creepy. He stuck a hand in his pocket.

“Sorry for the inconvenience, sweetheart. Here’s some recompense for all your trouble. Go buy yourself something nice.”

He handed me a bunch of fives. A whole bunch. Probably a hundred. They came with a nice paper band wrapped around them.

I was immediately suspicious.

“Something tells me these weren’t printed by our government.”

He shrugged.

“Fives? We’re doing fives now?” I blurted.

“We’re not doing anything, doll.” Sammy smiled. “We’re merely in the import business.”

I was confused. What were we importing? I looked down at the bundle in my hand.

“Holy shit. These are made in CHINA?”

“Watch the language! Miriam don’t like it when you talk like that.”

I paced the floor, flinging my arms.

“We’re importing counterfeit Canadian bills from China now? Do we have to give away ALL our manufacturing in this country?”

Sammy looked apologetic. “Blame the politicians, sweetheart.”

“This country is freaking nuts.” I was peeved. I mean, really. We couldn’t even produce our own fake currency now? Did all the paper mills burn down or something?

It was a disgrace.

“They do it a lot cheaper, doll. And they got the technology. Those new plastic twenties are harder to fake. We don’t have the time or the know-how to keep up. So I got this connection in Canton—”

“Kill it. I don’t want to know.”

“—they make them over there and we launder them over here—”

“Of course you do. It’s called *laundering money*.” Jeesh. Like I wouldn’t know that.

“No, I mean we really launder them. Through the washing machine. It makes them look not so new.”

I stared at Sammy. Now I had a vision of Aunt Miriam standing over the Maytag, stuffing five-dollar bills into jean pockets.

“Of course, you have to be careful not to launder them too much, ’cause the ink they use over there isn’t as good as the stuff we get here.”

Mario nodded. “Runs more.”

“This family is freaking nuts,” I muttered. Not to mention unpatriotic. Giving away our counterfeiting business to foreigners. What else will they think of outsourcing?

“It’s really rather clever. You should see what we import them in.”

I slapped both hands over my ears. “LEAVING NOW. Can’t hear you.”

I stomped out of the place. Then I stopped to look at the sparkling lake to calm down.

Sammy’s voice carried from the chicken coop. “Don’t mind her, Mario. She gets emotional these days. It’s the wedding.”

I turned around and stomped back inside.

“The family is *not* paying for my wedding in counterfeit money!”

Sammy twisted around in the wooden chair. “Of course not, doll. Your godfather is classier than that. Nobody pays for weddings with five-dollar bills.”

That made a lot of sense. But his voice was too smooth. I left there feeling vaguely unsettled, and vowed to keep an eye on things.

* * *

When I got home, I threw the packet of bills on the counter. Why had I even taken them? Force of habit, I guessed. A habit I was determined to kick.

I shrugged out of my all-purpose red leather jacket.

The phone was ringing. I picked it up.

“Hey, beautiful. What’s happening?” It was Pete, my fiancé. He’s a sports reporter for our local paper, the *Steeltown Star*. He’s also six foot two and built like a football star. Which he was, until recently.

I felt warm all over. “Same ol’, same ol’,” I said. This was the truth, if you didn’t count the tiny matter of counterfeit bills from China. Pete didn’t need to know about that. He wasn’t part of the family yet. Wouldn’t be until we were married. In fact, he thought I had gone completely straight.

Which was sort of true. I wanted to. I was trying to.

It was harder than you’d think. I decided to ignore the packet of counterfeit fives on the counter.

“Want me to come over for dinner?”

I grinned. “Are you putting yourself on the menu?”

He laughed. God, I loved how he laughed.

“I was thinking the other way around. Shall I bring Chinese takeout?”

I gulped. What was it about that country today?

The Artful Goddaughter

“Sure,” I said. “And don’t forget the fortune cookies.” I needed to hear some good news.