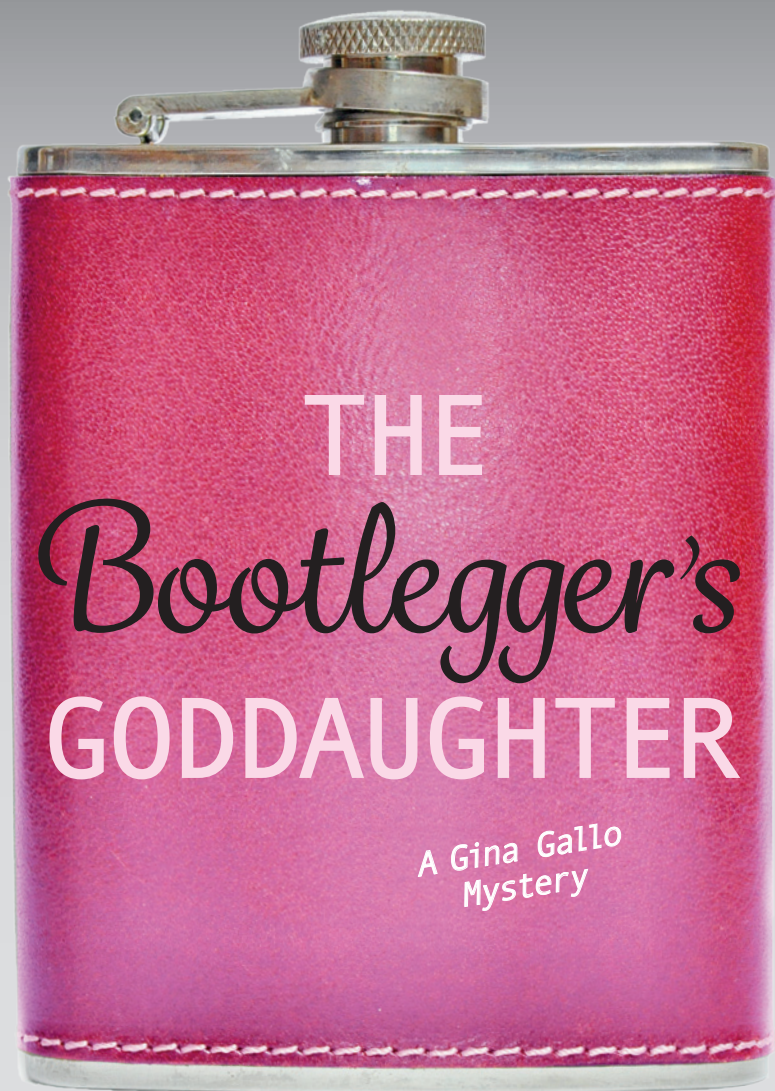


MELODIE CAMPBELL



THE
Bootlegger's
GODDAUGHTER

A Gina Gallo
Mystery

THE
Bootlegger's
GODDAUGHTER

MELODIE CAMPBELL



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Summary: In this work of crime fiction, Gina works to uncover a bootlegging operation that threatens to jeopardize her wedding. (RL 3.0)

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ONE

My cell phone rang, and it was Nico.
“Where are you?” he said. His tenor voice was a tad strident.

“At the corner of King and James. Hold on a sec while I put something down.”

I was carrying too much, as usual. My arms ached from the weight. I placed the reusable shopping bag I’d been carrying on the sidewalk. Then I tucked my small handbag into the top of it. I leaned back against a storefront window with the phone to my ear, drinking in the winter sun that shone down on my face.

It was a beautiful December day in Hamilton, also known as The Hammer. You could hardly smell the smog from the steel plants in the distance. The temperature was just above freezing, with no snow in the forecast. Santa might have a bit of trouble with that, but I was happy. My wedding was in three days. I didn't need crappy weather or anything else to mess with it.

"What's up?" I asked my favorite cousin. Nico is a few years younger than me. He owns the interior-design store next door to my jewelry shop.

"Have you heard about the storm?" he said.

"What storm?" I looked up into the sky. It was bright blue, and the sun was big and shiny.

"Not here," said Nico. "Starting late tomorrow, hitting the eastern seaboard."

I hadn't noticed the skinny young guy until he was right at my side. "Lady, you got a light?" he said.

My attention slipped from the phone call to his unshaven face. He was wearing dirty jeans and a ragged black band T-shirt. He seemed vaguely familiar. "Sorry, I don't—hey!"

Quick as a weasel, the creep grabbed my shopping bag. He turned and ran.

"Stop!" I yelled. I took off after him, phone still in my hand.

"Gina, what's happening?" Nico's voice sounded far, far away.

The kid ran fast, whipping around the other walkers on James Street. I followed as quickly as I could in dress boots, which wasn't fast enough. *Why the hell did I wear heels today?*

Down James we both ran, weaving between startled pedestrians. I saw him

tangle with a homeless man, spinning him around. I dodged an old lady with a trundle cart and smacked into a younger one pushing an umbrella stroller.

“Sorry,” I said, untangling myself from her arm. “Sorry.”

The race continued. I ran past the homeless man, clipping him with my elbow. “Sorry,” I sang out.

The light turned red in front of us, but my quarry ignored it. He sprinted through the intersection without slowing down. I cursed, slowed and looked left and right for cars before picking up the chase.

My wraparound coat was wide open now, flowing like a cape behind me. I felt it catch on something, then release. “Oops, sorry,” I mumbled to a lamppost.

My target swung around a corner and onto a side street. I peeled around the corner after him. He dashed across the street and looked back.

"Hey!" I yelled again, from my side of the road.

I could almost see him smile. I leapt out into the street, determined not to lose him.

Honk!

"Sorry," I mumbled to the car that had missed me by inches.

"Watch where you're going, moron!" yelled the driver of the car.

I patted the lid of the trunk with my left hand as I ran by.

In retrospect, it probably sounded like a smack.

By this time, the skinny kid was way ahead of me. I vaulted up onto the sidewalk, caught my heel on the curb and lost my balance. *Damn!* By the time I got upright, he was crossing John Street. No way could I catch up.

I doubled over, hands on knees for balance, gasping for air.

He stopped for a moment to look back.
Then he raised his arm and waved.

“That’s not fair!” I yelled after the fleeing figure. “I’m supposed to be the thief around here, dammit.”

TWO

I was a tad miffed when Nico picked me up in his little red Beetle half an hour later.

“What did he steal?” said Nico.

“Everything,” I said, sliding into the passenger seat. “My wallet, credit cards, Christmas presents. Even my car keys. *Shit.*” I slammed the door shut. “Thank God I had my cell phone in my hand.”

This really sucked. I’d wasted a whole day of shopping. I’d also lost a pile of money and the gifts. And now I would have to spend a whole lot of time canceling

cards and getting new ID. Right before my wedding *and* Christmas.

Not to mention replacing those car keys. “I have another set of keys at the store. Let’s go there first, and I’ll come back for my car later.”

Nico nodded. He seemed preoccupied. He drove the Beetle down to Cannon, made a left and headed for our shops in Hess Village.

His silence concerned me. “What’s up, Nico?”

“Your mom is in New York right now, right?”

“Yup. She’s doing a little Christmas shopping before flying here for the wedding.” Mom and Phil live in Florida. They stopped off in New York to visit his family before coming up here to be with mine.

His thin face contorted into a worried frown. “I was talking to Luca. Did you hear

me before? There's a big storm expected along the eastern seaboard. It may affect all flights."

I groaned. My mother was flying in on Thursday. "Do they know when it's going to hit?"

"It's just off the Carolina coastline right now. Thing is, it looks like it will be an ice storm."

This sounded ominous. But rather fitting news on what was turning out to be a totally crap day.

* * *

We stopped for espresso and cannoli on the way to Hess Village. After that Nico dropped me off at my store, Ricci Jewelers. Tiff, working alone there this week, was wiping down counters with glass cleaner. I waved a hand as I walked by her toward the back office.

“What are you doing here?” she said, lifting her head.

“Nothing. Just getting my other set of keys from the desk.” I stood in front of my office. *Crap. My locked office.*

“Tiff, can you open the door? I haven’t got my keys.”

“Sure,” she said. I watched her cross the room. Tiff is Nico’s younger sister, but they don’t look much alike. At least, not since Nico starting bleaching his hair blond. Tiff is big into piercings, whereas Nico avoids any kind of pain. Tiff tends to wear black a lot. Nico likes wild colors. They both use the same black eyeliner though.

Once in the office, I went immediately to the desk. And stopped. And sighed.

“Can you unlock the desk too, please?”

She smiled and moved forward.

The other keys were exactly where they should be. I snatched them and shut the desk drawer.

Tiff was still standing there. Something in her manner put me on alert.

“What’s the matter?”

She shifted uneasily. “Your aunt Vera called. She said Zia Sophia saw a crow.”

I groaned. “Not one of her crazy omens.” Zia Sophia is famous in the family. Correction. She is infamous.

Tiff shrugged. “Just passing it on. She said to tell you.”

“You know she’s a nutcase, Tiff.”

“She thinks it has something to do with the wedding.”

“Oh for—” I used my arms for emphasis. “I’m not having my wedding tainted by crackpot omens from an elderly great-aunt who clearly has reality issues. She doesn’t even live here, for crissake.”

Zia Sophia has never made it to the “new world.” Her duty is to terrorize the Sicilian end of the family. She takes that role very seriously.

The first thing you notice about Zia Sophia? Black. Dressed in black from head to toe. She is the only one in the family who still sports the old-widow look. I've only met her once, when we visited Sicily over a decade ago. Even then, her face had the look of a wizened apple. I was never a fan of omens, so I kept my distance from her. Tiff was too young to remember much about her. But Nico was terrified of her.

"You think the distance makes a difference?" Tiff looked relieved.

"For crissake, Tiff! She saw a bird in Palermo. How the heck could it bother us here?"

Honestly. It was silly, but superstitions go back a long way, and they don't have to make a lot of sense. Crows mean bad luck in our culture. Some even think a crow is a sign that someone is going to die. We have a more liberal interpretation in the family.

For us, it usually means that something bad is going to happen.

Which is sort of redundant, because let's face it. You don't need an omen to predict that. Something bad happens to Nico and me on a weekly basis. Not to mention I'd just been robbed.

But I didn't need another thing to worry about. I waved to Tiff as I left the store.

I didn't have to walk far. The Painted Parrot was right next door. You have to know something about Nico to appreciate the name of his interior-design store. He inherited a parrot from our late great-uncle Seb a few weeks ago. The store is named after the parrot. Pauly isn't a very nice parrot, although he is colorful. He also uses very colorful language. Pauly is currently doing the country-music circuit with my best friend. Lainy McSwain and the Lonesome Doves now have a demented parrot in their act. Audiences seem to

love it. But The Painted Parrot lives on in Steeltown.

The other thing about Nico is he tends to be a tad eccentric. I already mentioned the eyeliner. And the bleached-blond hair. Today he was wearing burgundy jeans with a slim black turtleneck. Not your standard blue-collar outfit in The Hammer.

As soon as he saw me, his eyes went wide. “Zia Sophia saw a crow.”

I sighed. “Know it. Tiff told me.”

“Do you think—”

“No, I don’t think, Nico. And neither should you. Omens are ridiculous. We have other things to worry about.” Real things. Like my car, and stolen purse and presents.

My phone started to sing the theme from *The Godfather* movie. That was my uncle Sammy’s signature ringtone.

“Gina, I have something for you. You want to come down to the chicken coop right away.”

The Bootlegger's Goddaughter

“Um...I don't actually have my car with me at the moment.”

“Why don't you—oh, never mind. Get Nico to bring you. I want to talk to him too.”

Uh-oh. I clicked off.

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MELODIE CAMPBELL got her start writing stand-up comedy. Her fiction has been described by editors and reviewers as “wacky” and “laugh-out-loud funny.” Winner of ten awards, including the 2014 Derringer and the 2014 Arthur Ellis for *The Goddaughter’s Revenge*, Melodie has over two hundred publishing credits, including forty short stories and eleven novels. She is the former executive director of Crime Writers of Canada. She lives outside Toronto, Ontario. For more information, visit www.melodiecampbell.com.