

MELODIE CAMPBELL



A Gina  
Gallo  
Mystery

THE  
GODDAUGHTER  
*Caper*

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GODDAUGHTER  
*Caper*

MELODIE CAMPBELL



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**Summary:** In this work of crime fiction, Gina Gallo, mob goddaughter and unwilling sleuth, gets drawn into a body caper mystery against her better judgment.(RL 2.5)

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# ONE

“Gina, you have to have red flowers. Whoever heard of a Christmas wedding without red flowers?” Nico waved a hand dramatically through the air.

“Sweetie, I’d rather have pink. You can find pink poinsettias, right?”

He sat back, and his brown eyes went wide. “Pink! My favorite! And black. It’s perfect. I can see it now—black tablecloths with ice-sculpture centerpieces. Pink poinsettias on those narrow platforms with streamers coming down from the ceiling...”

He was out for the count. I could sip my coffee in peace now. Not that there wasn't peace in this restaurant. It was Monday night, and the place wasn't full.

Nico is my younger cousin, an interior designer, newly minted. He is tall and thin, with bleached blond hair. Nico is starting up an interior-design business next to my jewelry store in Hess Village. He does event planning on the side and is rather enthusiastic about my upcoming wedding. Some might say over-the-top.

Nico isn't gay—he just likes the color pink. So I knew I could get him off the red Christmas kick with a little subterfuge.

We were seated at La Paloma, my uncle Vito's restaurant in the slick part of Hamilton. Okay, don't laugh. The Hammer has some nice places in amongst the steel mills. This upscale bistro is across the street from a major urban teaching hospital. So it's popular with doctors. Doesn't hurt that

my other uncle, Vince, donated a whole wing to St. Mary's and sits on its board.

Vince is also my godfather. You may have heard of him. He hails from Sicily and has a number of family businesses I try to stay clear of. This is because I am allergic to prison cells. Let me leave it at that.

“What do you think about peacocks?” Nico said.

I nearly fumbled my coffee cup. “*Peacocks?*”

A crash from the kitchen punctuated that word.

Someone screamed.

“Aunt Vera?” Nico was out of his chair, dashing for the kitchen.

I threw down my linen napkin and jogged right behind him.

The kitchen staff stood like stone statues. I had to push my way to the back, where Vito was standing in front of the open door to the alley.

Aunt Vera, Uncle Vito, Nico and I peered down at a body. It didn't move because it had been recently plugged.

"Oh my *god*, Gina, I can't look. There's blood." Nico hid his face dramatically behind his bent elbow.

"Gina, do you know dis guy?" Aunt Vera poked at him with a wooden spoon.

"Who is it?" Nico said, peeking around his arm.

"Oh jeez. It's Wally the Wanker." Yeah, I knew him. Complete loser from high school. Pilfered the student lockers for cash and blackmail material. Even bigger creep in adult life. Not that Wally was ever an adult, except when it came to buying porn. Hence the nickname.

"Who took him out?" Vera said, rifling through the poor guy's pockets for a wallet. She wasn't as squeamish as Nico.

"Gina, you come with me. I need a calming influence."

I followed Uncle Vito's stout body back into the restaurant.

"Everything is *buono, buono*," he assured the diners. "We just dropped a pan back there."

I walked to my seat, smiling all the way. Big fake smile pasted on my face. Several diners beamed back at me, including a few clients. I nodded to Dr. Drake, who was just sitting down, and to his wife, who had been waiting for him. She grinned widely and flashed her right hand. Big hulking sapphire, recently purchased. I nodded in fake appreciation. No, that's not right. I appreciated her business—truly. I just couldn't think beyond the body at the back door.

I reached my chair, sat down and stared into my cold coffee. Who the hell had shot Wally the Wanker? And why leave him on Vito's doorstep?

*Don't get involved*, my fickle conscience warned me. *Your wedding is just six weeks away. Your fiancé, is a great guy who has*



*no idea how involved you still are with “the family.” Keep it cool, Gina Gallo.*

I should have been calling the cops. But the cops don't like me much, especially Rick Spenser, AKA Spense, another high school non-friend. I didn't think he'd appreciate a call from me. He might even get the impression I'd had something to do with the hit. So I decided not to interrupt his Monday-night poker game.

Maybe ten minutes passed before Nico came out from the back room. He sat down at our little table.

“All taken care of,” he whispered. “We can leave now.”

Phew! The relief. I couldn't wait to get out of there, to put some distance between me and the recently departed.

I picked up my purse and jacket. Nico followed me out of the restaurant and over to my car in the back parking lot.

When we were all buckled in, I said, “Whew. What a night. Shall I drop you off at your place?”

“Uh, no, not yet, Gina. We have something else to do first.”

I pulled onto James.

“And you have to promise not to yell.”

I gritted my teeth. “What did you do, Nico?”

“We put the body in your trunk.”

“WHAT?” I slammed on the brakes and pulled over. A guy in a big SUV honked his horn twice. He gave me the finger as he passed.

“It was Aunt Vera’s idea. She made me help. But don’t worry. We’ve already notified Uncle Vince. We’re to take your car to the chop shop. The guys will get it all clean—they promised.”

I slammed my palm on the steering wheel. Then I took three deep breaths.

I didn't need to ask how Nico had got the trunk of the car open without my keys. Mark that down to a misspent youth. Nico had a history of B and Es, with a chaser of car thefts. Luckily, he had never been caught. Yet.

"I wasn't going to get involved. I WASN'T GOING TO GET INVOLVED. And now I have a dead body in the trunk of my car. Nico, I could kill you!"

"Don't be silly. There's no more room in the trunk."

Another car honked at us. I shifted back into Drive.

"I'm supposed to be going straight," I said to Nico. "Pete thinks I'm out of it now!" Pete is a sports reporter and my fiancé. I love him to pieces.

Nico tsk-tsked. "Probably you don't need me for this part. Would you mind letting me off home first? It's on the way."

When we got to his condo, I nearly pushed him out.

## TWO

**I**t was almost nine. I drove to the place I was supposed to go. (Don't ask—I can't tell you.) It was a little place behind a little place in a not-so-well-lit area. The guys at the chop shop stared as I emerged from the car. They had the good sense not to catcall.

Tony (my second cousin Tony—meaning I have more than one) nodded at me.

“Gina. How's things?” He was wiping his greasy hands on an even greasier towel.

“Same ole, same ole,” I said. Except for the dead body in my trunk. “You?”

“Good. The twins are growing. You should come ’round.” Tony looks like a Tony. And his wife, Maria, is equally front-page Italian.

He nodded to the trunk. “The Wanker dude?”

I gestured with both arms. “Not my body. I had nothing to do with it.”

“Strange they dumped it there at the restaurant. But no worries. I’ll get it to the retirement home.”

“The retirement home? Too late for that,” I quipped. “You mean the funeral home.”

Tony stiffened. He tilted his head. “Sure, whatever.”

He looked like he was about to say more, then stopped.

Maybe “retirement home” was new slang for “funeral home”? Like you sort of retired from life there?

“No probs. I’ll call you when the car’s ready,” he said finally.

## The Goddaughter Caper

I wanted to get out of there, but it was really dark. And I had no wheels. And I didn't want to be seen at this place, so that meant no taxi.

I called Pete's cell phone. "Hey, can you come pick me up?"

"Where's your car?" Pete asked.

"What?" Pete's voice always does something to me. I might have been a bit distracted.

"Where is your car?" Pete repeated precisely.

"Oh." I thought fast. "It needed a little work, so I took it in to the mechanic."

"Does this have anything to do with the take-out on James?"

I shrieked a bit. Or, at least, that's what Tony said it sounded like.

"What do you know about a murder on James?" I hissed into the phone.

"I work for a newspaper, remember? I hear everything."

“Well, *un*-hear it. And get the others to un-hear it too.” Jeesh. All I needed was reporters following me around, and cops following them.

I gave Pete the address.

“I’m still at work. Pick you up in twenty.”

Before I could put my cell back in my purse, it started singing “Shut Up and Drive.”

“Wally the Wanker got whacked?” It was Sammy the String Bean, Vince’s underboss.

I hesitated. “Looks like two plugs from a .38. You mean you didn’t do it?” I wasn’t going to say *we*. There is no *we* in my vocabulary when it comes to murder.

“No way, Sugar. This is interesting. Gotta go talk to Vince.” He hung up.

Sure, it was. Interesting, that is.

I was still mulling it over when Pete drove up in his hot little convertible. I hopped in and didn’t look back.

\* \* \*

We had a good night in my condo. Early morning was even better. Pete and I might have come from different ethical backgrounds, but in all else we were delightfully compatible. And I was working on the ethics part.

“So. You got a wedding shower tonight, right?” Pete murmured in my ear. We were playing the part of spoons in a drawer. It was a good resting position, and I needed a rest after all that exercise after sleeping.

I groaned. “Don’t remind me. I’d rather go three rounds with a crazed gorilla.”

Pete liked the boxing metaphor. I knew he would. He is becoming a regular at my cousin Luca’s boxing gym. From family accounts, a hit from Pete is like slamming into a brick wall. He can take it just as good.

None of this surprises me. He is a few inches over six feet and used to be



a professional quarterback. Those broad shoulders and big arms are packed with muscle.

Just looking at him now made me feel weak in the knees. Knowing what that body could do to me was out of bounds.

“So you won’t be needing me tonight,” Pete said. “I’ll be at the gym if you do.” He kissed my shoulder.

I grumbled and rolled out of his arms. “I hate showers. Especially family showers.”

Pete laughed. His dark-blond hair was all tousled. I could see his hazel eyes watching me as I left the bed. He smiled and continued to watch. Pete said I had the body of a mythical goddess. Good thing he liked curves.

“I would much rather be with you tonight. You know that.” I headed to the bathroom.

He grunted with satisfaction. “You should try to enjoy your own wedding shower, babe.”

## The Goddaughter Caper

“Hell’s bells, Pete. Would *you* want to be stuck in a room with all the family aunts?”

My back was to him, but no doubt he shivered. My aunts have a reputation. If you think the men in our family are dangerous...’Nuf said.

I waited until Pete had ambled into the bathroom for a shower. Then I called Paulo, my annoyingly handsome lawyer cousin. He was my go-to guy for gossip. I used a burner phone so the call couldn’t be traced to me.

“What was Wally the Wanker into?” I asked.

“Officially—parking lots. He cruised the lots looking for vehicles that should be removed, if you get my drift. Unofficially—meaning without the family blessing—drugs. But the upmarket kind. Wally was making a little extra on the side, peddling OxyContin to the upper classes.”

I paused for thought. “So he was operating freelance, so to speak?”

“You got it. Vince wasn’t crazy about it but turned a blind eye.”

I promised to take Paulo out to lunch the next week, then sat back on the bed to think.

The recently deceased was not big on my hit parade. Back in high school, Wally’s trade was blackmail. The creep would break into lockers after school and rifle through them to find secrets. I happened to know that Nico had been one of his victims. Luckily, I didn’t know this back then, or Wally’s life might have been even shorter.

But that got me thinking. Perhaps he was still working that particular operation. Only with big-time adult secrets now. Secrets worth killing for.

I couldn’t help but be curious. Who had whacked him, and why?

## The Goddaughter Caper

*Leave it alone, Gina, I told myself. You have enough to worry about. A wedding in six weeks to a fiancé who thinks you've gone straight. And I had gone straight for a whole week.*

It was a start.

I should stay out of this. Banish it from my mind.

I finished dressing and went to find Pete.

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*Library Digest* compared **M E L O D I E CAMPBELL** to Janet Evanovich. But comedy and mystery writing came to Melodie after she was a bank manager, marketing director and college instructor. Melodie has over two hundred publications, including one hundred comedy credits and forty short stories, and has won ten awards for short fiction. In 2014 Melodie won both the Derringer Award and the Arthur Ellis Award for *The Goddaughter's Revenge*. She is the executive director of Crime Writers of Canada and lives outside of Toronto, Ontario.