

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Widow Ginger

Pip Granger

About the Book

It is 1954, the year Roger Bannister ran the four-minute mile, and Rosie and her beloved Auntie Maggie are opening up their cafe in Old Compton Street for Uncle Bert's breakfast special when the Widow Ginger comes to call.

The Widow Ginger, an ex-GI with ice-cold eyes, has unfinished business with Uncle Bert - business that includes being cheated on his share of a 'liberated' lorry-load of guns and explosives during the War - and he intends to make sure he gets paid in full.

And this isn't all: the lovely Luigi appears to be suffering from a severe case of unrequited lust; Bert and the local Mafioso Maltese Joe have had an acrimonious falling-out; and, most worrying of all, Rosie's best friend Jenny has begun to keel over in the school playground.

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PIP GRANGER



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In loving memory of my father, 'Cliff'
and our beloved Sally

Also by Pip Granger

NOT ALL TARTS ARE APPLE

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1

It wasn't my fault, honest; none of it. According to my uncle Bert, keeping your gob shut is the very best thing, but failing that, sticking to your story is the next best. Of course, that's the advice he doled out to the punters who found themselves in trouble with the coppers or the military police. Me, I was supposed to own up, tell the truth and take the consequences like his 'brave little soldier'. Which I mostly did. But what are you supposed to do when you're not sure what the truth is? Or when you do know, but telling it could get someone you love into lots and lots of trouble?

And there's another thing: why is there one set of rules for grown-ups and a completely different set for the nippers? I really would like to know because it never felt fair to me and still doesn't. But all Auntie Maggie and Uncle Bert would say when I asked them is that life isn't fair. Now what kind of answer is that? Still, I'd better start right at the beginning and not get stuck in to what is and isn't fair. I could go on for ever about that.

It started one Saturday morning in March, 1954, with a thundering on the cafe door. It must have been really early, because even Auntie Maggie and Uncle Bert weren't up yet and the work in our cafe starts about six. Usually, banging on the door at strange times of day or night meant that my mum had been on a bender with one of her blokes and was in need of more money to carry on, or was in trouble, or simply felt like visiting and was too Brahms and Liszt to

realize that sparrowfart was not the time to do it. But my mum was safely tucked up in a clinic again, where they lock 'em in, so I knew it couldn't have been her - unless she'd escaped.

The thought that she might have legged it was what got me across my bedroom with my lug to the door in the first place. I was there almost before I heard Uncle Bert's muttered curses as he creaked down the stairs. I heard him say, 'Bleeding 'ell, Sugar Plum, what time do you call this?' and then, 'Hang on a tick while I get this door open.' By this time, my auntie Maggie had heaved herself out of bed and was trundling down the stairs herself. That meant it would soon be safe to take up my usual listening post just behind the door that shut the cafe off from our private bit. It was a good spot because I could usually get out of the way and back to my room in very swift order and I could see and hear almost everything from there.

Anyway, it was Sugar Plum all right. He must have come straight from work because he was twinkling like a Christmas tree as the lights across the road reflected off the three million sequins on his floor-length dress. I knew it was three million because he'd told me that he and Alma Cogan's mum had spent weeks sewing them on. He was holding his silver high heels in his hand and I could see that his stockings were in tatters and his feet were grubby from the wet pavements. He obviously hadn't even had time to remove his make-up and false eyelashes, but he had got rid of the lovely blonde wig that made him look a bit like Marilyn Monroe. His long, dangly diamond earrings looked funny with his short back and sides. He parked his glinting buttocks on the edge of one of the tables and fought to get enough breath to speak.

'It's Bandy, Bert. She says to come to the club straight away. The Widow Ginger's just blown in and is being what you might call quietly menacing.'

Now, I don't think I had ever seen my uncle Bert stuck for words or even surprised before. Let's face it, if you were born and bred in the very heart of Soho, it's difficult to think of anything that would come as a shock, but the words 'Widow Ginger' obviously did, because he and Auntie Maggie couldn't have looked more stunned if Sugar Plum had sprouted wings and started whizzing around the cafe, dive-bombing them as he went.

Uncle Bert finally found his voice. 'I thought we were shot of him when he was incarcerated by the Yanks. What's brought him back?'

'I dunno, Bert. He says they slung him out of the military when he'd done his bird. Must've been something a bit weighty if even that bunch wouldn't keep him. I mean he *wanted* to stay and, normally, having a heartbeat is the only requirement. He's not saying a lot, just sitting there looking around like he's totting up what fixtures and fittings might fetch down the auctions. It's best you get round there and see what's what. Bandy says I can stay here and help Maggie get started, if you want. Truth to tell, I don't like the way that bleeder looks at me, so I'd rather stay if it's all right with you.' He waved a bag about in the air. 'I've brought me mufti, so's not to excite the punters. Can I nip upstairs and wash and change?'

That was my cue to get back to my room, so I went. The next time I saw Sugar he was eating a bit of toast in our kitchen and was dressed in sensible shoes, neatly pressed trousers, immaculate white shirt and a perfectly knotted, striped tie. You'd never guess that the vision in sequins and this soberly dressed man were the same person, and in a way I suppose they weren't. Sugar explained to me once that he felt like two people living in the one skin, and that's why he liked to wear dresses sometimes.

It was lucky that he lived and worked with Bandy at the club, because neither she nor the punters cared what he

wore. I didn't like to tell him that I did care, but I always thought he looked better when he sparkled. I didn't want to hurt his feelings because I had decided to marry Sugar when I grew up, so he could make me some lovely dresses.

2

I suppose I'd better explain a bit about our set-up. I had lived with my auntie Maggie and uncle Bert in a cafe in Old Compton Street since I was a dot small enough to fit comfortably into a sideboard drawer. They're not my real aunt and uncle, but that's what I got used to calling them over the years. One story says that my real mum chose them to look after me because she realized that she couldn't do it herself. Another story says she nipped into the cafe one day to borrow a few quid and somehow managed to leave without me. I expect it was a bit of both, as my auntie Maggie always said. Either way, it was all official by then; I was properly adopted with the papers and everything. Which was good, because I loved my auntie Maggie and uncle Bert and I wouldn't have swapped living at the cafe for anything. I was coming up for nine when this Widow Ginger person crashed into our lives.

Bandy Bunyan's drinking club was just round the corner, down an alley that you wouldn't notice unless you were looking for it. According to my auntie Maggie - and she should have known because she knew everything and everybody in our patch of Soho, and every other patch come to that - Bandy and Sugar had been a team for years.

The pair of them had shared the flat above the club ever since it opened up for business right after the war. Sugar served the drinks and Bandy pulled in the punters by sitting in her favourite spot, drinking Gordon's gin, smoking Passing Clouds and insulting her paying customers in a rich, dark brown voice and ripe language.

She always dressed in flowing silk pyjama-type garments, designed and made by Sugar, in an assortment of glowing colours. They hung in just the right way to soften Bandy's bony edges.

How Sugar got the silk from the Chinese in Gerrard Street nobody knew, because hardly anyone could get even a nod and a wink off them in the normal way. The Chinese preferred to stick to themselves mostly, except for Mrs Wong who helped out at the cafe. Even she hardly ever said anything to anyone, and she rarely smiled either, although I swear she twinkled at me sometimes.

Nobody knew where Bandy came from, because she wouldn't tell anyone and I mean *anyone*, not even Sugar. She had just turned up one day, the way people do in Soho, and never left. Well, almost never; she did move a couple of miles away in the war to do her bit, whatever that was. You could never be sure with Bandy, or so Auntie Maggie said.

Mind you, being secretive about your life past or present was not at all unusual around our way. Miss Welbeloved (who wasn't) used to tell the kids in her class at school that Soho had been a bolt-hole for the wanted and unwanted of Europe for centuries. Miss Welbeloved, strict, plain and ancient, belonged with the unwanted ones, at least as far as our school was concerned. She had been there *for ever*, terrorizing several generations of local kids, and was still treated with respect by the most hardened of bruisers.

Still, Bandy was a woman of mystery. For instance, I never understood why she was called Bandy, because her legs were as straight as mine, but that's what she answered to. What's more, she didn't pay any protection money to anyone. Uncle Bert said it was because she was well able to look after herself and that it took a brave man or woman to take her on. Everyone knew that she could flay you alive with her tongue and anything else she happened to have about her person. Many's the drunk who found himself

lying on the pavement in the early hours with only the haziest of notions as to how he had managed to escape with everything intact. But Auntie Maggie said it was because Bandy did someone an enormous favour once, and she'd never needed any protection since.

Uncle Bert said he thought it was one of the great mysteries of life why anyone would actually *choose* to drink at Bandy's place when she insulted them the way she did, but they seemed to love her being rude to them. People actually begged to be allowed to join her club and carried on begging year after year. Members said it was the way she spoke to them that was so wonderful, but I couldn't really understand that any more than Uncle Bert could. If we treated our punters like that the cafe would be empty toot sweet. He put it down to the fact that Bandy's lot imbibed plenty of strong drink, which addled their brains, whereas ours only got tea, which didn't. Still, as he also said, Bandy and Sugar made a bloody good living out of her foul mouth, so they were obviously doing something right.

Sugar was another mystery person. He said he came from Ireland originally, but his accent was pure London, so he must have been young when he crossed the Irish Sea. He found Soho when he was still at school and ran away from his family to 'come home' as he put it. What I think he meant is that his original home, wherever that was, couldn't or wouldn't get used to his dresses, whereas some of the clubs and theatres of Soho would and did. Nobody ever bothered to search for him. Or if they did, they didn't think to look in the obvious place. Sugar felt it was probably a relief for them to get shot of him but I couldn't see why; Sugar was just lovely and made gorgeous frocks and silk pyjamas.

Anyway, Sugar was in Auntie Maggie's spot behind the counter that morning, and Auntie Maggie was in Uncle Bert's kitchen doing the cooking. According to Uncle Bert,

Saturday mornings were always busy in the cafe because on Friday nights the punters came to Soho to spend their wages in the local pubs and clubs, and come the morning they needed a nice cup of tea and a fry-up to help them line up behind their eyes. That's if they had got any money left after the dedicated local professionals had done their very best to relieve them of it.

Still, our customers were a varied lot. The Saturday morning mob were mostly strangers, although some turned up *every* Saturday, regular as clockwork. Then there were our proper regulars who came in every day, at least once, even when we weren't open. Luigi Campanini was one of these.

I was hovering near the corner table, the one reserved for us and anyone else who could be called 'family', when Luigi showed up. Family to us meant anyone we liked enough to include, and Luigi was very definitely one of those. He belonged next door but one in the delicatessen run by Mamma and Papa Campanini and their huge tribe of sons, daughters, grandchildren and in-laws.

Luigi was Mamma's baby, and he came in early most mornings, not having been to bed the night before. Mamma would turn the lock on him in an effort to get him to mend his wicked ways, but it didn't work. He just found somewhere else to sleep and went to Confession on Saturdays. That way, he said, he started his weekend on the tiles with a clean slate. Personally, I couldn't see what slates and tiles had to do with anything except building houses and as far as I knew, Luigi had never built anything, except mashed potato mountains on his dinner plate. Auntie Maggie said he was young and sowing his wild oats but I was pretty sure oats had nothing to do with it either and that he was just hanging about with his mates in the spielers, or canoodling with one of his many girlfriends. He did a lot of that on account of being gorgeous. He had

flashing brown eyes, sparkling white teeth and a glossy black barnet all set off by a lovely olive skin free of even a single pimple. Anyway, Luigi was the first of our regulars in that morning.

‘Morning, Shoog. How’s the angle of your dangle?’

‘Perfect, thanks, Luigi. What’s your pleasure, young sir?’

‘I don’t think I’ll say in front of young Shorty here’ – that was me – ‘but a cuppa will do nicely for now, ta. What are you doing here all dolled up in a tie and everything? Bandy slung you out, has she?’

Sugar looked carefully around, checking out the punters to see who was earwiggling – besides me, that is; everybody knew my lugs were always flapping up a storm. He inclined his head, inviting Luigi to lean in a little closer, and mouthed in his ear, ‘It’s the Widow Ginger. He’s back, and round at the club. Bandy sent for Bert to help her decide what to do. You never know, we may get shot of him before anything really nasty happens. But I doubt it somehow. Something tells me that the brown stuff’s about to hit the proverbial. The Widow’s bad enough on his own, but mix him with Maltese Joe and you’ve got all the makings of World War III. I reckon that round about now would be a bloody good time to take a holiday, but of course we can’t leave the club—’

‘Hang about, Shoog. Who is this Widow Ginger? A bloke, is it?’

‘Sorry, Luigi. I s’pose you’re a bit young to remember him. His name’s Stanley something or other – he has one of those foreign-type surnames full of js and zs that I can’t get me mouth round. He was in business with Bandy, Maltese Joe and Bert during the war. Army surplus you might call it, only it wasn’t quite surplus when they got their mitts on it, if you catch my drift. He’s a Yank, came over with their military. According to Bandy, he can be a merciless sod,

which is why everyone's underwear's in a bit of a tangle now he's resurfaced. Mind you, I don't s'pose I know the half of it. Bandy's not exactly forthcoming when it comes to the gory details, as you well know.'

Sugar paused for breath and I noticed the cup rattled loudly against its saucer as he handed Luigi his tea across the counter. Sugar was seriously worried, I could tell, and he deliberately changed the subject. 'Now, did I hear you'd got yourself a job, or was I dreaming? Sit down, why don't you, and I'll join you while it's quiet.'

I sort of slid into a seat at the table with Sugar and Luigi, which is how I came to hear that Luigi was finally working after a time of what Uncle Bert called 'creative lolling'. Normally, a Campanini would wind up working in the deli, but Luigi had never been keen and there was no shortage of labour among their mob. He took a gulp of his tea, leaned back in his seat and smacked his lips appreciatively. 'Your tea's almost as good as Maggie's, Shoog, and that's saying something. As it happens, I am a working man nowadays, yes. I'm running for Tic-Tac and doing very nicely so far, thanks very much. As my old papa always says, "Thees ees when you see the Italian at his best, when he is rrronning!"' Luigi's impression of Papa included full eye rolling and arm waving, as well as his thick accent. 'And of course, he ain't wrong, 'specially if the running is away from the men in blue and towards a thumping good wodge of dosh. With my mates and contacts, I'm not short of punters, and Tic-Tac's passed on his regulars an' all. He's given me a cut of the takings, so it's turned out sweet.'

'That would explain why you've not been to our place in a while. I s'pose you're hanging about at Running Jack's.'

Running Jack's was a drinking club handily situated near the post office, which had a row of telephone boxes right outside. The runners, armed with a ton and a half of

pennies, would be in and out of those boxes 'like farts in a colander', as Madame Zelda kept saying, despite Auntie Maggie's pleas that she shouldn't say it in front of me. The runners telephoned the bets through to their bookies before the race and then would call up again to get the results. Of course, in those days there was no such thing as a betting shop; people had to go to the track to put a bet on a horse. As only the rich and idle could make a regular habit of going to the races, the rest had to rely on bookies' runners to place their bets for them and sometimes to dole out their winnings when they got lucky.

To be a successful runner, you needed four things: a good memory, good legs, good contacts on the street and in the cop shop and plenty of pockets for stuffing betting slips, coins and crumpled notes into. Luckily, our Luigi was well qualified on all counts.

The large figure of Auntie Maggie came out of the kitchen at that point and stopped just long enough behind the counter to pour another cuppa before joining us at the corner table. The cafe wouldn't get really lively again until dinner time. The chicken and ham pies were made and only needed cooking, and the beef and carrot casserole was already in the oven waiting for the rush. She lowered herself carefully on to a seat, on account of not being built for flinging herself about in an unladylike fashion.

Auntie Maggie's lap was as soft and comforting as a large armchair, and despite being far too old I climbed into it. To be honest, talk of this Widow Ginger bloke had put the wind up me, especially after what had happened to me the year before. I really needed Auntie Maggie's reassuring cuddle. Her plump arms wrapped themselves around me and I snuggled for all I was worth into her mighty bosom. She smelt of soap, Yardley's face powder and just a dab of 4711 cologne behind each ear and down her cleavage, so that when she got warm the scent sort of wafted upwards

and she got a whiff. She said it made a nice change from the smell of fry-up. She took a sip of tea, being careful not to tip it on my head, which was in the way.

'You look half dead, Sugar. Even the bags under your eyes have got luggage. Surely there's only so much daylight you can stand? Hadn't you better get your head down for a bit before you turn into something?' Auntie Maggie had given Sugar the once-over as she came across to our table.

'She's right, Shoog. You look as if the cat's had you on the landing two or three times in the night,' Luigi observed.

'That's just how it feels, Luigi, only we haven't got a mog. No, it's wondering what that Stanley's up to and how Bandy and Bert are faring, that's what's doing me in. I'm better off keeping busy.'

I didn't dare move. I didn't dare *breathe* in case I was sent away, just as things looked as if they might get interesting. Whenever the grown-up talk looked like turning really juicy, my beloved auntie Maggie would shoot the talker her 'stop right there' look, which made them act like goldfish at feeding time, mouths wide open but not a word coming out, until she'd dealt with me. She'd send me to do something like muck out my bedroom or fiddle with the jigsaw puzzle that lurked beneath the plush tablecloth in the front room. It was kept there for those moments when I was whining that I was bored and by some miracle my bedroom had passed muster. 'How about that jigsaw?' she'd say, and I'd know I was about to miss all the really tasty bits of gossip yet again. But not this time. I was like a statue willing the talk to continue, and it did.

Sugar's voice grew quieter as he spoke and I had to strain to hear him, what with one ear being stuffed with bosom, but it was worth it in a very scary kind of way. I learned that the Widow Ginger had been quiet, but really

threatening as he told Bandy and Sugar that he was back to wind up some unfinished business. 'He's the coldest bugger I've ever met. Brass monkeys had better keep a good grip on their best bits when he's around, I'm telling you. He thinks Joe, Bandy and Bert cheated him in the war. It had something to do with "getting him out of the way of the gravy train just before it got into the station".' He didn't like the sound of it, he continued. It wasn't so much what the Widow said that put a ferret up his jacksie, apparently, as the way he said it.

My bum was numb, my lugs were flapped almost to tatters and my goosepimples had goosepimples by the time Sugar had finished giving us his impressions of the Widow Ginger. It reminded me of the Ghastly Godfrey, my mum's stepfather and a really nasty piece of work. He was the one who had been behind me being snatched out of the school playground, belted in the mush and shoved into a cupboard the previous summer. I closed my eyes and there, like it was yesterday, were Godfrey's dead-looking yellow eyes glaring at me across the snowy white tablecloth at the Marble Arch Lyon's Corner House. I shuddered and opened my eyes quick to get rid of the awful picture. Sugar was talking again.

'He may be a runt next to me, but then most blokes are. But he gives off this feeling that although he's in control and all quiet-like, if he threw a wobbly then he would be a right beserker. A stop-at-nothing sort that'd be very happy to inflict all kinds of damage on a body.' Sugar gave a sickly grin before carrying on. 'He's enough to give Bandy a sudden attack of charm, and you know what that means. She either wants to bed him or she's afraid of him, and knowing Band as I do I'd say she was afraid. I always know that when she stops insulting 'em something's up, and if she pours on the old oil she thinks the situation is serious.'

Everyone sat around with worried looks on their faces until Auntie Maggie remembered me when I sort of squeaked in fright. She gave me a tight squeeze and came over all hearty. 'What? Nothing better to do than earwig, young miss? All right then, how about giving your auntie Maggie a hand in the kitchen while I'm doing the veg? You can make pastry flowers for the pies, if you like. I've got some pastry left over in the larder.' She tipped me gently off her lap and heaved herself to her feet.

I thought that being in the warm, fragrant kitchen with Auntie Maggie until my uncle Bert got home was the very best place on earth to be. I liked being with one or other or both of them when there was trouble; it made me feel safer. By now, I knew that the Widow Ginger was a threat to us, but what made it really frightening was that I didn't know what kind.

3

I was waiting on tables when Madame Zelda breezed in with a very tall, red-headed woman none of us had ever seen before. Although I say 'waiting on tables', I was only allowed to carry the non-sloppy food and the cold drinks, in case of spillage. Sugar was still behind the counter, Auntie Maggie was in the kitchen and Luigi had been in and out all morning. Mrs Wong was in as usual. She was always there in the middle of the day when things got busy. Auntie Maggie and Uncle Bert did a fine line in home-cooked dinners, which meant we were always heaving with punters then. We offered a soup, a couple of main dishes and ice cream or a pie or tart with custard for afters, to keep it simple. A lot of the preparation was done the night before or early in the morning, before I turned the 'Closed' sign round to 'Open' and unbolted and unlocked the cafe door.

Things that cooked slowly in the oven or on the hotplate in a saucepan were preferred, because they took the rush and bustle out of it. Winter was the best time for that, because then there were lots of stews and casseroles and soups that tasted all the better for hanging about on a low heat. Auntie Maggie was a dab hand at suet puddings, sweet or savoury, and was famed round and about for her spotted dick, Christmas pud and my own favourite, lemon syrup pudding. Her steak and kidney puddings were the best in the world, everybody said so. The way that the time-honoured routine of the cafe and the seasons, the menu and the shopping rolled on was comforting, like my liberty bodice in winter.

That day, the menu was Scotch broth, chicken and ham pie or beef and carrot casserole, and apple pie and custard. The kitchen was still running along its usual well-oiled lines, despite Sugar's early morning bombshell. As Auntie Maggie said, if Hitler couldn't close our cafe with his rotten war, she was blowed if she'd let that damned Yank do it.

Chicken and ham pies meant making pastry, and Auntie Maggie had whipped up loads the night before, and made the apple pies for pudding while she was at it. Chicken carcasses turned into stock and various soups, starting with cock-a-leekie or maybe cream of chicken. Ham bones also turned into stock and the next day's soup would almost certainly be split pea and ham. The bones would be simmering gently on the back burner with odds and ends of vegetables, peppercorns and bay leaves floating about in the pan.

The stockpots were bubbling away and Auntie Maggie was keeping me busy with laying the tables for the dinner trade. Routine, she said, was a good way to keep troublesome thoughts away. She was right, too. First, I went round all the empty tables wiping up spilt tea, sugar, bits of egg and dustings of fag ash. Then I went round with a bucket and emptied all the ashtrays into it - yuk! The ashtrays got a lick and a promise with a damp cloth and any empty salt and pepper shakers were filled while I was at it. Then I laid each place carefully with a knife, fork and two spoons, a round one for soup and an egg-shaped one for afters. Auntie Maggie reckoned that supplying the hardware to scoff with encouraged people to go the whole hog at dinner time, and try for three courses. Being chief-in-charge of table laying meant I learned left from right in double-quick time, and, as Auntie Maggie said, that was a bonus.

Sugar rationing was finally over, which meant the precious stuff was no longer doled out grain by grain by