

Sugar Magnolia

Jessica Minier

# Ripple

*Melinda*

1.

“This is it,” the taxi driver said, sounding almost like he was asking a question. He took the bills Melinda offered him and didn’t even pretend like he was going to make change, watching silently as she slid out the back door. Then he was gone.

From the sidewalk, the first thing she noticed about the house on Tennessee Avenue was the string of prayer flags hanging from an enormous magnolia in the front, shredded and shivering in the breeze rising up from the bay. Not quite ready to send anyone’s prayers up to heaven, but pretty close. The second thing was the big white bus parked in the driveway. Music spilled out from its open door, tumbling down the unshaded driveway, bright as water in a riverbed.

The third thing Melinda saw was a young man sitting on the front steps in a pair of cut-offs, his hair the color of the sunlit magnolia bark, clutching a pottery mug and smoking a joint. Behind him, the Craftsman’s white paint had thinned wherever the sun hit it, leaving soft gray patches: a piebald house with trim that was still glossy black. A set of battered orange-and-gold striped armchairs was arranged in the dark hollow of the porch. The rusted Dodge parked next to the bus looked barely road-legal.

Nothing about this house or its occupant inspired confidence, but it was too late to back out, she told herself firmly. The P.I. had given Melinda little more than a name and an address, “which I got from his parole officer,” he’d said. Now here she was, in what wasn’t the worst part of Everett, certainly, but also wasn’t the best, wondering what this kid with the magnolia-bark hair had done that he needed to be paroled in the first place. *Besides smoking a joint on his front steps at noon*, she thought.

“Why do they call it Yellow Cab, when the cabs are orange?” the young man asked as she approached. He took a puff of his joint and let the smoke out slowly by opening his mouth.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Are you Dylan Corso?”

“Are you asking me because I’m in violation of something, or because I owe you money?”

“No. Neither.” Melinda smiled at him in what she hoped was a reassuring way.

“Then I’m Dylan Corso this fine morning,” he answered, smiling back. “What can I do for you?”

“I think maybe we might be related,” she told him, nerves resonating as she eased him into what she had come to say. “Was your mother’s maiden name Peggy Stanmore?”

“It was, and she stayed that way, since she and my dad never bothered to get hitched.”

Setting the cup down beside him, Dylan rubbed at his chin. “And that must make you my long-lost older sister, which is fucking nuts. Welcome.”

He extended a hand that was edged with engine grease. She shook it, and he offered her the joint.

“Nancy Reagan would tell me to ‘just say no’,” Melinda noted, even as she took a drag. Her head swam immediately, but she managed not to cough.

“Nancy can go to hell and take Ronnie with her,” Dylan said coolly. He patted the porch where the paint had peeled away, leaving only hints of deep blue in the wood’s grain. “Sit down, Sis. Tell me about yourself.”

“My name’s Melinda Turner.” She sat down on the step beside him. “I mean, that’s what my adoptive parents called me. I don’t know what Peggy called me.”

“I don’t think she called you anything. They took you away the day you were born. She talked a lot about ‘my first girl,’ wondered how you were... Sounds like you know she’s dead.”

“I do,” Melinda confirmed, marveling at the weight of that single flat statement.

“You want some coffee?” Dylan asked.

That was more innocuous than what she’d imagined might be in his mug. “Coffee sounds great,” she said.

He nodded and took another puff of the joint, then offered it to her again. When she shook her head, he pinched it out, setting it carefully on the arm of one of the chairs. “Hang on,” he said and stepped back into the house.

Under the magnolia, a path of flat stones wound like a river, terminating in a little stone temple. Everything was lush and overgrown, well-watered and yet neglected.

Dylan appeared beside her again, as if from nowhere, and Melinda realized she was deeply stoned. Corrie would be freaking out, Melinda considered a little dreamily, lecturing her about responsibility. *But Corrie’s back in Seattle, thirty miles south as the crow flies.* She blinked at the shadows dappling her knees. *And now I’m the one who’s flying.* Dylan handed her another clay cup, the rough red surface partly glazed in a deep green that changed colors in the sunlight. “Thanks,” she said, sipping the coffee, and he nodded. “This is weird,” she added, and he nodded at that, too.

“We’re Peggy’s kids. No way this was going to be normal, trust me.” He leaned back on the steps, elbows on the porch, skinny chest toward the sun. She couldn’t get over the color of his hair. “You look like her, you know,” he said.

“What was she like?” Melinda asked.

“No.” He shook his head firmly. “I’m not in a Peggy sort of mood. I’ll tell you about her later, when I’m not so relaxed.”

“Whatever works for you,” Melinda said. “I’m sort of at your mercy here.”

“No, you’re not. There’s Sera, too. She might talk more about Mom.”

*Mom*, Melinda thought. *Not “my mom.” Not yet “our mom.” Just Mom.*

“But Serafina’s in Connecticut, right?” Melinda asked. Her sister, with a name like a prayer, unlike her own bland moniker.

“Nope,” Dylan replied. “Your information’s outdated. She’s living right here in this very house, drinking all my wine, and driving me fucking nuts.” His eyes were closed, and he seemed to take Melinda’s surprised silence as disapproval. “I mean, she’s not like Peggy. She’s only somewhat irritating.”

Melinda felt giddy, even under the warm blanket of weed. “She’s here?”

He nodded. “She’s at work. Hang around, and you can meet her. Dispel all your mythologies... or confirm them. Whatever.”

Melinda didn’t think she had any mythologies. Until two days ago, neither of her siblings had existed, as though they’d just winked into being when the P.I. handed her their names.

“What does she do?” Melinda asked.

“Some retail shit. Nothing worth doing on a day like today.”

Somewhere in the garden, Melinda could hear water. The music coming from the bus had stopped, but Dylan didn’t seem inclined to get up and deal with it.

“What do you do?” he asked, eyes still closed.

“Nothing worth doing on a day like today,” she told him. “I worked the front desk at a plastic surgeon’s office near Northgate.”

“Worked?” He was sharper than she was, more used to this liquid state.

“Worked, past tense,” Melinda said.

“That’s how it should be,” Dylan agreed. “Worked, past tense.”

“I take it you don’t do anything,” she said, eyeing him. He had an interesting face, different from her own: wide-set eyes and a narrow chin, sharp cheekbones, everything covered in mahogany freckles. *Maybe Serafina will look more like me*, Melinda thought. Maybe they’d have the same coloring, at least. Dylan’s eyes, when he opened them to answer her, were the first she’d ever seen that were truly green: the same color as the moss growing on the temple in the garden. He was twenty-three, according to the index card the P.I. had given her, and Serafina was twenty-four. Melinda felt ancient at twenty-nine-and-ten-months, looking at her half-brother’s youthful face.

“I do stuff,” he protested mildly. “Plumbing, mostly, which fucking sucks. You haven’t lived until you’re down on your back in a wet crawlspace, holding a drill up over your face and trying to muscle it through some petrified piece of framing from 1935. People think what sucks is toilets, but people are so wrong.”

“Why aren’t you down in someone’s crawlspace today?” she asked.

Dylan shrugged. “I work when I need money. Right now, I don’t.”

“Lucky you.” Melinda thought of Corrie, palm always out, like one of those old-fashioned mechanical banks.

“I am lucky,” he agreed. “This house was Peggy’s. No mortgage on The Ghost Palace.”

Melinda turned and peeked in the door, but she could make out little beyond the edge of a rug. “The Ghost Palace?”

“That’s what she called this place. Because it was haunted, and because it was white with black trim. She said it looked like a kid wearing a sheet, like a ghost.”

“Ah,” Melinda said. “Couldn’t she just have painted it another color?”

“*Ghost* wasn’t a derogatory term,” Dylan said. “She liked it that way.”

Melinda considered what that might have meant. She knew nothing about her birth mother, beyond what the P.I. had given her. He'd included just one photo of Peggy, taken for her engagement announcement to Richard Corso, for a wedding Melinda now knew had never happened. Peggy had been twenty-two. Her eyes were sharply slanted like Dylan's, but the rest of her face had looked like Melinda's own: round, with a button nose and a round chin.

"So you made enough money last time you plumbed to tide you over?" Melinda asked.

"Exactly," Dylan said. "Now, I'm getting my bus ready to take it down the coast in a few days, to The Fairgrounds outside L.A. and Lucy."

"What's at the Fairgrounds outside L.A.? And who is Lucy?" she asked.

"On July 12th, the Grateful Dead is what's at the Fairgrounds," he said, "and Lucy is the sort of ex that you can call and say 'I'm coming down for two days to see the Dead,' and she says 'Cool. I'll see you there,' and you know that means she's open to being with you again, because she loved the way you made her feel in bed...and out of it."

"I don't know why, but not one word of that answer surprised me," Melinda laughed, finishing her coffee with a gulp.

Dylan chuckled, sly eyes aimed sideways at hers. "You totally know why. You're just a sarcastic asshole, like me."

"I can be," she agreed, pleased to share a trait with someone that might have originated in nature, not nurture. "Is Serafina also a sarcastic asshole?"

"No." Dylan shook his head. "Sera is something else entirely. You'll see."

"When does she get home?"

"Why?" he asked, stretching and standing up. "Bored already? Do you need that sisterly bond, giggling over makeup and boys and shit like that?"

Melinda watched him walk down the stairs. “That sounds fantastic, honestly, but I’m not bored with you, either.”

He grinned. “She gets home at 3:30. If you like, you can check out my bus, I’ll make us tacos for lunch, and we can wait for Sera. What do you think?”

“Maybe…” she said, and he cocked his head, waiting. “Can you cook?”

“I was a line cook at a fancy restaurant in Seattle for a while,” Dylan said, “back before all my shit went to hell. So yeah, I can cook.”

She looked at his narrow chin, at his slanted, mossy eyes. *Like a skinny Buddha*, she thought. Masculine edges, but with a face almost as pretty as a girl’s. “Sounds great,” she said, and he held out a hand to help her up.

“That was an interesting bet you made, letting that cab go,” he said. “What if you hated me?”

“I don’t know.” Melinda shrugged. “I guess I wasn’t as worried about it as I should’ve been.” That still felt like it might be true, she thought, as they stepped up onto the bus’s stairs. Dylan wasn’t exactly frightening, but he wasn’t necessarily benign, either.

“Maybe you’re psychic,” he suggested, settling into the driver’s seat. “Mom was.”

“What?” Melinda was startled.

“Later. Some night when we’re a little more baked.” She raised her eyebrows at him, but he refused to be baited. “So, what do you think?” he asked.

Melinda peered into the bus. Whatever half-assed hippie bullshit she’d expected, that wasn’t what she saw. The ceiling was lined with blond boards that slotted together, like the vault in an ancient Italian winery. He’d built bookshelves into the side of the stairs, contents held in place with bungee-type straps. Running her finger along the spines, she took note of some of the titles: *Fear and Loathing in Los Vegas*, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, *The Hero’s Journey*, and of course,



*On the Road*. A copy of the King James Bible sat in between *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and the *Popol Vuh*. It was an eclectic collection of philosophies and journeys, counter-culture almost to the point of being a statement in-and-of itself.

“Do they meet with your approval?” Dylan asked, sharp eyes on her progress.

“You can read whatever you like. I’m not judgmental.”

“In that,” he chuckled, “you definitely don’t take after our mother.”

“What about you?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I can be hella judgmental when I need to be, but not about what someone reads. I judge people on other criteria.”

“Kindness?” Melinda suggested, smiling.

He smiled back. “No, but maybe I should add that one.”

Peering over the bookcase, she saw a small table with booth seats. It had fat burgundy cushions, and looked like an excellent place to eat or play a board game. The walls of the bus were paneled in veneered plywood. With the roof vents and all the windows open, it wasn’t unbearably hot, even in the sun.

Behind the driver’s seat he’d added a futon folded up to be a couch, with storage drawers underneath. She walked down the aisle to the tiny kitchen, complete with a turquoise fridge and range that reminded Melinda of the pop-up tent trailer her dad had owned back in the 60s. Clay mugs like those Dylan had used for their coffee were lined up behind more bungees, while other stoneware was hidden behind cupboard doors. Melinda took out a cup, admiring its form.

“Mom made those,” Dylan offered from the front seat. “Dad built her a kiln out back. For a while, her work was our main source of income, until she got too sick.”

“Breast cancer, right?”

Dylan nodded. The P.I. had included a clipping of Peggy's obituary. *She leaves behind her two children, Dylan (16) and Serafina (17).* Peggy would have been just thirty-eight. Melinda had stared at the clipping, sitting in that stuffy office. *She leaves me behind too,* she'd thought.

"I've never managed to break any of the pieces, because they're so thick," Dylan said.

"Ronnie could finally nuke the fucking Russians, and Peggy's crockery would still be here."

Across from the sink was a barrel-shaped woodstove mounted on dark green tiles.

"I assume you can't burn and drive at the same time," Melinda said, and Dylan smirked.

"Only in the woodstove sense of those words."

Beyond the kitchen were four bunks, and a door on each side of the aisle. Melinda opened the doors: the first was a shower, and the other was a room with a toilet and a sink so tiny that she could maybe wash one hand at a time. Finally, blocking the rear exit door, was a double bed.

"The master suite?" she asked, noting the curtain that pulled down for privacy.

"Of course. Captain's prerogative. The whole thing sleeps ten," Dylan said proudly, as Melinda sat on the edge of the bed and looked back up the long aisle.

"It's perfect," she said, because it was. "Where did you learn to build things like this?"

Dylan walked down to sit with her. He scooted up enough to cross his legs. She mirrored his posture, cross-legged on the other side of the bed.

"My dad. He was really good at building things. He was also good at fixing cars, good at plumbing and wiring and carpentry. But he was really, really bad with kids."

"I'm sorry about the parenting part. The rest seems like a good thing."

"It is now," Dylan agreed. "It's what keeps me away from the harder shit, you know?"

“What will you do in an emergency?” Melinda asked, nodding toward the rear door. Dylan reached over and popped the door open. A rush of warm air ruffled the comforter. She reached up and touched the ceiling, felt its grooved surface. “What are you going to call her?”

“Her?” Dylan said, eyebrows up in amusement.

“Yeah. She’s a vehicle. Aren’t vehicles usually female?”

“Usually. Do you think this one is?”

“Not particularly. But it’s not just masculine, either. Sort of like you,” she added.

Dylan shook his head, chuckling. “Man, you *are* Peggy’s daughter. She always said exactly what she was thinking.”

“Are you offended?”

“Fuck no,” he laughed. “Neither fully masculine nor feminine describes me pretty well, but it was a hell of a thing to say to someone you just met.”

“Then what are you going to call her?” she asked again.

Dylan leaned back against a window and regarded Melinda thoughtfully. Melinda felt as though she’d waited her whole life to meet this kid, to love him with all the kindness her own family had shown her and with all the loneliness in the depths of her soul.

“What do you think I should call her?” he asked.

“*Sugar Magnolia*, since you’re off to see the Dead.”

He nodded, assessing her choice. “She can make happy any man alive?”

“Seems like she could, sure,” Melinda agreed. Then she added: “Or any woman.”

Dylan just laughed.