

THE
HUNGER
MONTH

THE
**HUNGER
MONTH**

JESSAMINE KOCH

outskirts
—
press

The Hunger Month
All Rights Reserved.
Copyright © 2020 Jessamine Koch
v4.0

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described herein are imaginary and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher. The author has represented and warranted full ownership and/or legal right to publish all the materials in this book.

This book may not be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in whole or in part by any means, including graphic, electronic, or mechanical without the express written consent of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Outskirts Press, Inc.
<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-9772-0918-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019912230

Cover Photo © 2020 www.gettyimages.com. All rights reserved - used with permission.

Outskirts Press and the “OP” logo are trademarks belonging to Outskirts Press, Inc.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To Marilyn Kaye and Barbara Allison,
who held up the ends.
And especially to Larry,
who held up the middle.*



APRIL 1968



She looked different.

They shook hands as he ushered her into his office. Her hand was cool, and her shake brief but firm. She seemed as solemn and composed as always. Strange, after these shattering weeks. But then, her behavior was very like that of her cool, businesslike parents.

Maybe it was her new clothes that gave him the impression. God, the poor child. She had lost so much more than her wardrobe in the fire.

The girl's eyes were almost level with his, he noticed, as she stepped past him to take a chair. On the day of the funeral, he hadn't stood face-to-face with her. He was five ten, so she must be five eight or nine, he mused.

Funny that her looks now, at nineteen, had altered so little from the eight-year-old he had first met. Still the same little girl.

No, he amended. It's not that she still looks young. It's that she always looked old.

He studied her. She was very pretty despite her pallor, cool blue eyes in a round face. If she ever smiled, she might actually look . . . pixie-ish. She moved, as always, with no wasted motion and sat very still.

At the funeral, he had noticed that she was overdue for a

haircut. The boyish crop cut that she'd worn all her life was slightly shaggy, and she had brushed her bangs out of her eyes often, that strange, sad day. Now, three weeks later, her fine, dark hair seemed fuller, held back with a tortoiseshell band.

She had never experimented with hairstyles or fashions the way his own daughters had. He almost smiled at the idea of this quiet, self-contained girl wearing long, teased hair, or big hoop earrings. Or those white hip-huggers that his youngest, Cindy, loved so much.

"I hope that you have had no trouble with the bank," he said as gently as he could. He took his chair behind his desk and rested his elbow on the arm in an informal posture.

She shook her head once. "Thanks, Mr. Haver. No, they've been very nice. No questions."

He took it to mean that she would not welcome questions about her emotional state.

What she had been through this past month would have changed anyone. To come home from a concert to discover home, family, one's whole life—burnt to cinders. Having to find and furnish an apartment down to the last fork and dish towel, after nineteen years in her parents' home, with the two of them making almost every decision for her . . .

Well, maybe it was therapeutic. Gave her something to focus on.

His acquaintance with her parents had been a notch above merely professional. He'd been the family attorney for fifteen years now. He'd met with Victor and Alice at their home, and attended their two annual parties, for the Fourth of July and Christmas.

But Victor and Alice had never been inclined to chitchat. They had discussed their child only in terms of their wills and insurance, never lacing the conversation with anecdotes about her interests or activities. When Victor's widowed mother died, Haver

had spent some hours with the family discussing the settlement of the estate, but their daughter, then eleven, was allowed to put in her silent appearance only briefly for the social pleasantries.

He'd always had a strange feeling that they kept the girl in the icebox and defrosted her twice a year to pass hors d'oeuvres.

"I'm glad that the bank is cooperating. Maybe we can start thinking about your plans, whenever . . . whenever you're ready."

It was so hard to avoid painful subjects! He resettled in the chair and interlaced his hands on the leather desktop. When he looked back up, she was gazing at him, apparently not upset. *Well*, he thought, *after all, she is here to discuss finances.*

"I'd hoped to have your first check from the life insurance by this meeting, but it certainly will arrive soon."

"First check?"

"In fact, we should . . . If you'd rather have them come at another time of year . . ." He rarely fumbled and tried not to do so now. "It's rather an unfortunate feature of these trusts that the annual payments fall near . . . near the anniversary of a difficult loss for the recipient. But I can arrange to receive them and remit monthly checks to you. Or make an annual payment to you on some other date. Maybe your birthday each year?"

Her brow furrowed slightly.

"Of course, I'm suggesting that for next year's payment. You have a different set of financial circumstances this year."

She glanced sideways, her eyes narrowed, as though she had not expected this information.

Dear Lord. She doesn't know about the trust.

He leaned back, trying to appear unsurprised. "Your father set up the trust for your eighteenth birthday—"

She looked back up at him, her eyes flashing for an instant, then reverted to her composed expression.

But of course, Victor and Alice had not actually discussed the

possibility of their sudden deaths with their daughter. An absurd idea. No child had ever been more sheltered.

"I presumed he was concerned about all the traveling that they did, especially after the Israeli war last year." He paused. The irony of their dying in their own beds instead of in a plane crash in Egypt or Morocco was too grim to think about.

"Well, your father inquired about life insurance trusts. He may have been worried about overwhelming you with responsibility for so much money before you had some time to . . . to get used to managing it. As it is, you'll get a check each year that will allow you complete independence and will let us make a plan for five years from now, when the principle will be remanded to you in full."

It seemed forever before she nodded slowly, and when she did, a glint caught his eye.

Good heavens. She's pierced her ears.

A tiny gold stud rested in the center of each earlobe.

God knows they kept her on a short leash for nineteen years, but to splurge so soon after their deaths seems odd. He reached for a sheaf of papers while he collected his thoughts.

I'm overreacting. Circumstances have forced her into department stores, and she couldn't help but walk by the jewelry counter. They do it right there. She had an impulse. It's a good thing. If she were going to reject their values, she'd have come in wearing heavy makeup and a vinyl miniskirt or something, not this sophisticated new plaid jacket and slacks.

"What about Aunt Pat?" she asked.

"All your mother left her were personal items, a painting, and some knickknacks, and, of course, those were destroyed. She didn't seem to want or need anything else when I talked with her after the funeral. She and your uncle Joseph are quite comfortable. In fact, she mentioned that she had some mementos of your mother for you."

He ended on a slight questioning tone. Patricia McManus had seemed like a very nice lady who wanted more of a relationship with her only niece. She and her sister Alice had apparently had little contact in recent years. Patricia had flown to Boston immediately when she heard about Alice and Victor's deaths and the destruction of the house, and she had paid for the hotel suite for herself and her niece during the following days.

"She talked to me about it." The girl made no further comment but looked away as she spoke. She picked at the upholstery of her chair's arm with her pinkie and seemed lost in thought.

Surely, Patricia had offered to take her back to Minneapolis for some recovery time. But maybe the woman, nice as she was, was still too much of a stranger. The girl probably preferred to be near her friends, even if it meant living in some apartment complex.

"I need to make some decisions, I guess," she said quietly. "But I'm not sure just what my situation is yet."

He paused. "Well, despite your father's . . . business setbacks, he saw to it that your situation is going to be very good. The homeowners' insurance should cover all the . . . all the expenses, and even leave you a few hundred extra. The trust will pay you four thousand a year, and well over \$300,000 at the end of the five-year period. Invested well, it could be substantially more."

She stopped picking at the chair arm and looked up. "So it'll be five years before I can go to college."

College! Haver disguised his surprise to the best of his professional ability. Victor had always intended that his daughter have a college education in accordance with his mother's will. He'd footed the bill for her to attend Northeastern. It was she who had dropped out before the first semester was over.

"My heavens, no, there's no need to wait," Haver offered quickly. "You could go back at any time."

She shook her head. “Uh-uh,” she said firmly. “Most decent schools charge at least \$3,000 a year just for tuition and board. Books, traveling, all kinds of things are extra.”

Yes, she has been a very sheltered child, he thought wryly. Aloud, he said, “There are lots of ways to manage an education. Massachusetts has excellent public universities. Or I’m sure your aunt Patricia would welcome you in Minneapolis if you wanted to go to one of the schools there.”

Her expression showed what she thought of that idea.

“Or you could look into scholarships or go part time. Or look for a work study program.”

Her expression remained closed, but he labored on bravely.

“That income could cover a degree, with some planning.”

“Mr. Haver,” she answered, “I want to be a regular student and live in a dorm. I’m not just after a diploma.” Her voice became patient, as though she were speaking to someone ignorant in the ways of the world. It might have made him bristle, coming from anyone else, but under her circumstances . . .

He listened as she went on, “Dorms shut down during vacations, so I need a home address. I’d have to support two households if you count school as one. That’s about what it amounts to.”

That must have been the problem with Northeastern, he realized. *Of course. Victor and Alice wouldn’t let their daughter leave home.* He leaned back and considered her words. *She wants to be like any other girl. I can hardly blame her.*

“There’s another option,” he said. “You’re a good candidate for a loan. The trust guarantees that you’ll be quite able to pay it back five years from now.”

She seemed to brighten for a moment. Then the unemotional veil fell again.

He scribbled figures on his notepad. “Tuition and board; say

\$4,000 just to accommodate yearly increases. Add books and supplies . . .”

He smiled up at her, and she returned it faintly.

“Monthly allowance,” he went on, adding figures. “Say, fifty dollars during school months? Allowance for four years would . . . come in at 1,800. We could round that up to two thousand.”

He looked back at her, astonished to see that she looked impatient.

“Well,” he concluded, “a loan of twenty thousand would cover all your needs through four years at nearly any school.”

He couldn’t tell if her slight frown was disapproval or merely concentration. “I’ll think about it,” she answered at last.

Just as the thought that she was rather a brat crossed his mind, another replaced it.

What was the phrase she’d used a few minutes ago? “Most decent schools.” Her home schooling had very likely not prepared her well for the SAT. Maybe she was thinking of taking some catch-up study time and then aiming higher.

I suppose this is all rather overwhelming. “That’s a good idea. Too many people jump into financial decisions quickly.” *Many heiresses have less lofty plans for their money,* he reminded himself. He smiled warmly at her.

Her expression softened. He was glad he had praised her instead of lecturing. She seemed so self-assured that he had almost forgotten the insecurities anyone would have after sudden loss; the need for encouragement.

She stood, and he came around the desk to take her hand, saying, “We can meet again when I have more information for you. Please call if you run into any problems. I hope the utilities got hooked up without difficulty?” He had arranged for the security deposits when she found the apartment the day after the funeral.

“Yes, I gave Mrs. Palmer my new phone number.” Ellie Palmer was his executive secretary.

“Good, good.”

She thanked him and left.

“Mr. Haver?” Ellie poked her head around the door. “The Homelife Fidelity report is here. I know it’s about . . .” She looked over her shoulder, at the door through which Haver’s young client had just passed. “I . . . I thought you might prefer to see it without . . .”

“Ellie, you did exactly right,” he assured her, taking the envelope. “It’s a painful subject for the girl, and I’d rather just give her whatever information is necessary.”

“Oh, and I asked her if she needed any help shopping for the apartment,” Ellie added. “She actually seemed to think that was funny!” Ellie looked perplexed. “But really, how could she know what it takes to run a home? She’s never . . . I mean, I was just trying to be helpful.”

Haver smiled at the kindly Ellie. “That was very thoughtful, Ellie. I’m sure that she only thinks she knows what she needs. When she realizes she doesn’t have light bulbs or a hammer, she’ll wish she’d let you.”

“Well, I told her she could call me or come to dinner sometime. She doesn’t have a mother anymore, and . . . well, she’s a sweet kid, really, just . . . shy, I guess. She even asked me how Gwinny was doing! After all she’s been through.” Ellie shook her head.

Ellie’s thirteen-year-old daughter, Gwendolyn, had been diagnosed with leukemia a few months before. The best hospital system one could ask for had her stabilized at the moment, but her odds were not good. Still, Ellie’s house was a pleasant, casual place, full of comfortable furniture, and the good-natured goofing around of her two sons and their friends. It might be a nice

contrast to the pristine, formal home that Alice and Victor had maintained.

“I hope she takes you up on that.” Haver smiled.

Ellie returned to the antechamber. He pulled out the contents of the envelope.

The fire investigator had reported nothing untoward. Haver flipped through the pages. “Probable” dryer lint fire . . . in torn vent hose . . . sparked and smoldered in wall for several hours before burning through to consume the house, which was why both parents were asleep . . . sleeping pills . . . doctor confirmed the prescriptions; both parents were “high-strung,” used the pills for years . . . unusual for daughter to be out that late, but not unheard of . . . She had failed to keep a hair appointment earlier that day . . . had gone to a chamber music concert at Northeastern that night; had greeted and gone out afterwards with some former classmates.

Surely they would close the case and release the money now.

Of course, procedure had to be followed. But, damnation, hadn’t the girl been through enough without an insurance company investigating her every move? She had nothing but her car and the clothes on her back after that night—not even a family photo, much less a family.

He looked out the window. Two stories down, he saw the girl, her hair just abundant enough now to shimmer slightly, as she walked and dug in her purse for her keys. She started her Karmann Ghia and swung out of the space. Something rested in the rear foot well, he saw. A doll.

She’s still a girl, really. Coping with sudden adulthood.

He returned to the business of the day.