

# Envy

SANDRA BROWN

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Envy

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"Envy" Prologue  
Key West, Florida, 1988

Saltines and sardines. Staples of his diet. Add a chunk of rat cheese and a Kosher dill spear and you had yourself the four basic food groups. There simply wasn't any finer fare.

That was the unshakable opinion of Hatch Walker, who had a sun-baked, wind-scoured visage that only a mother gargoyle could love. As he munched his supper, eyes that had blinked against the sting of countless squalls squinted narrowly on the horizon.

He was on the lookout for the lightning flashes that would signal an approaching storm. There was still no sign of it here onshore, but it was out there somewhere, gathering energy, sucking moisture up from the sea that it would send back to earth in the form of wind-driven rain.

But later. Above the harbor, a quarter moon hung in a clear sky. Stars defied the neon glare on the ground. But Hatch wasn't fooled. He could feel impending meteorological change in his bones before the barometer dropped. He could smell a storm even before clouds appeared or a sail caught the first

strong gust of wind. His weather forecasts were rarely wrong. There'd be rain before dawn.

His nicotine-stained teeth crunched into his pickle, and he savored the garlicky brine, which he chased with a bite of cheese. It just didn't get any better. He couldn't figure out folks who were willing to pay a week's wages on a meal that wouldn't fill a thimble, when they could eat just as good—and to his mind a hell of a lot better—on a buck and a half. Tops.

Of course, they were paying for more than the groceries. They were financing the parking valets, and the starched white tablecloths, and the waiters with rings in their ears and cobs up their butts, who acted like you were putting them out if you asked them to fetch you an extra helping of bread. They were paying for the fancy French name slapped on a filet of fish that used to be called the catch-of-the-day. He'd seen pretentious outfits like that in ports all over the world. A few had even cropped up here in Key West, and those he scorned most of all.

This being a weeknight, the streets were relatively quiet. Tourist season was on the wane. *Thank the good Lord for small favors*, Hatch thought as he swigged at his can of Pepsi and belched around a harrumph of scorn for tourists in general and those who flocked to Key West in particular.

They descended by the thousands each year, slathered in sunscreen that smelled like monkey barf, toting camera equipment, and dragging along whining kids who'd rather be up in Orlando being dazzled by Disney's man-made marvels than watching one of the most spectacular sunsets on the planet.

Hatch had nothing but contempt for these fools who worked themselves into early coronaries for fifty weeks a year so that for the remaining two they could work doubly hard at having a good time. Even more bewildering to him was that they were willing to pay out their soft, pale asses for the privilege.

Unfortunately, his livelihood depended on them. And for Hatch that represented a moral dilemma. He despised the tourists' invasion, but he couldn't have made a living without it.

Walker's Marine Charters and Rentals got a share of the

money the vacationers spent during their noisy occupation of his town. He equipped them with scuba and snorkeling gear, leased them boats, and took them on deep-sea fishing expeditions so they could return to shore and have their grinning, sunburned mugs photographed with a noble fish, who was probably more affronted by the asinine picture-taking than by being caught.

Business wasn't exactly thriving tonight, but the trade-out was that it was quiet. Peaceful, you might say. And that wasn't a bad thing. Not by a long shot. Not compared to life aboard merchant ships, where quarters were noisy and cramped and privacy was nonexistent. He'd had a bellyful of that, thank you. Give Hatch Walker solitude and quiet anytime.

The water in the marina was as still as a lake. Shore lights were mirrored on the surface with hardly a waver. Occasionally a mast would creak aboard a sailboat or he'd hear a telephone ringing on one of the yachts. Sometimes a note or two of music or several beats of percussion would waft from one of the waterfront nightclubs. Traffic created an incessant swish. Otherwise it was quiet, and, even though it meant a lean week financially speaking, Hatch preferred it this way.

Tonight he might have closed up shop and gone home early, except for that one boat he had out. He'd leased the twenty-five-footer to some kids, if you could rightly call twenty-somethings kids. Compared to him they were. Two men, one woman, which in Hatch's estimation was a volatile combination under any circumstances.

The kids were tan and lean, attractive and self-assured to the point of cockiness. Hatch figured that between the three of them they probably hadn't done an honest day's work in their lives. They were locals, or at least permanent transplants. He'd seen them around.

They were already half lit when they boarded the craft just before sunset, and they'd carried a couple of ice chests on board with them. Heavy as anchors, by the way they were lugging them. Odds were good that those chests contained bottles of booze. They had no fishing gear. They were going off-

shore strictly for a few hours of drinking and debauchery or his name wasn't Hatch Walker. He had debated whether or not to lease a craft to them, but his near-empty till served to persuade him that they were not flat-out drunk.

He'd sternly ordered them not to drink while operating his boat. They flashed him smiles as insincere as a diamond dealer's and assured him that such wasn't their intention. One bowed at the waist and could barely contain his laughter over what he must have considered a lecture from a grizzled old fart. The other saluted him crisply and said, "Aye, aye, sir!"

As Hatch helped the young woman into the boat, he hoped to hell she knew what she was in for. But he figured she did. He'd seen her around, too. Lots of times. With lots of men. An eye patch would have covered more skin than her bikini bottom, and Hatch would have no right to call himself a man if he hadn't noticed that she might just as well not have bothered wearing the top.

And she didn't for long.

Before they were even out of the marina, one of the men snatched off her top and waved it above his head like a victory banner. Her attempts to get it back turned into a game of slap-and-tickle.

Watching this as the boat had chugged out of the marina, Hatch had shaken his head and counted himself lucky that he'd never had a daughter with a virtue to protect.

Finally one last sardine remained in the tin. Hatch pinched it out of the oil, laid it diagonally across a saltine, added the last bite of pickle and sliver of cheese, doused it real good with Tabasco, stacked another cracker on top, and put the whole thing in his mouth, then dusted the crumbs off his beard.

Chewing with contentment, he happened to glance toward the entrance of the harbor. What he saw caused the sandwich to stick in his throat. The corner of a cracker scratched his



esophagus as he forced it down, muttering, "Hell does he think he's doin'?"

No sooner had Hatch spoken his thought aloud than a long blast from the approaching boat's horn nearly knocked him off his stool.

He would have come off it anyway. Because by the time the intact sardine sandwich hit his stomach, Hatch was out the door of the weather-beaten shack that housed his charter service and angrily lumbering down the quay, waving his arms and shouting at the boat's pilot—probably a tourist from one of those square, landlocked states who'd never seen a body of water bigger than a watering trough—that he was coming into the marina way too fast, that he was violating the "no wake" rule, and that his recklessness would cost him a whopping fine if not a couple nights in jail.

Then Hatch recognized the boat as his. His! The damn fool was abusing his boat, the finest and biggest in his fleet!

Hatch fired a volley of expletives, wicked holdovers from his years as a merchant marine. When he got his hands on those kids, they'd regret the day their daddies spawned them. He might be old and ugly and bent, he might have gray whiskers and a slight limp from an unfortunate run-in with a knife-wielding Cuban, but he could hold his own with a couple of pretty beach boys—"And make no mistake about that, you arrogant little fuckers!"

Even after the boat cleared the buoys it didn't slow down. It kept coming. It missed a forty-two-foot sailboat by inches and set it to rocking. A dinghy slammed into the side of a multimillion-dollar yacht, and the folks sipping nightcaps on the yacht's polished deck rushed to the rail and shouted down at the careless mariner.

Hatch shook his fist at the young man at the wheel. The drunken fool was steering straight for the pier, kamikazelike, when he suddenly cut the engine and spun the wheel sharply to port. The outboard sent up a rooster tail of spume.

Hatch had barely a second to leap out of the way before the boat crashed into the quay. The young man clambered down the steps of the cockpit and across the slippery deck, leaped onto the aggregate pier, tripped over a cleat, then crawled a few feet forward on all fours.

Hatch bore down on him, grabbed him by the shoulders, and flipped him over as he would a fish he was about to gut. In fact, if he'd had his filleting knife in hand, he might have slit the guy from gonads to gullet before he could stop himself. Luckily he was armed only with a litany of curses, threats, and accusations.

But they sputtered and died before they were spoken.

Up till then Hatch's focus had been on his boat, on the recklessness and speed with which it had been steered into the marina. He hadn't paid much attention to the young man piloting her.

Now he saw that the boy's face was bloody. His left eye was swollen practically shut. His T-shirt was in shreds, clinging to his lean torso like a wet rag.

"Help me. God, oh, God." He threw Hatch's hand off his shoulder and scrambled to his feet. "They're out there," he said, frantically motioning toward the open sea. "They're in the ocean. I couldn't find them. They . . . they . . ."

Hatch had witnessed a man get shark-bit once. He had managed to pull him from the water before the shark could get more than his left leg. He was alive but in bad shape, in shock, scared shitless, blubbering and making no sense as he bled buckets into the sand.

Hatch recognized the same level of wild panic in this young man's eyes. This was no prank, no showing off, no drunken escapade, as he'd originally thought. The kid—the one who'd smartly saluted him earlier—was in distress to the point of hysteria.

"Calm down, sonny." Hatch took him by the shoulders and shook him slightly. "What happened out yonder? Where are your friends at?"

The young man covered his face with hands that, Hatch no-

ticed, were also bloody and bruised. He sobbed uncontrollably. "In the water."

"Overboard?"

"Yeah. Oh, God. Oh, Jesus."

"That asshole nearly wrecked my yacht! What the fuck was he doing?"

A man wearing flip-flops came slapping up, hands on hips, reeking of a cologne that any self-respecting whore would think was too strong. He was wearing only a Speedo swimsuit beneath an overhanging belly covered with black curly hair. He had a thick gold bracelet on his right wrist and spoke with a nasally northeastern accent—just the kind that never failed to get on Hatch's fighting side.

"The boy's hurt. There's been an accident."

"Accident my ass. He put a big dent in the *Dinky Doo*."

They'd been joined by the man's female companion, who was dressed in a bikini and a pair of high heels. Her tan and tits were store-bought. Under each arm she was holding a toy poodle. The pets had pink ribbons tied to their ears and were yapping in angry synchronization.

"Call 911," Hatch said.

"I want to know what this son of a bitch intends to do—"

"Call 911!"

The interior of Hatch's "office" smelled of sardines, damp hemp, dead fish, and motor oil. It was uncomfortably warm and stuffy inside, as though the shack couldn't provide enough oxygen for three men because it was usually occupied only by one.

The limited floor space was crowded with trunks of fishing and diving gear, coils of rope, maps and charts, maintenance supplies and equipment, a vintage metal file cabinet in which Hatch rarely filed anything, and his desk, which had been salvaged from a shipwreck and bought at auction for thirty dollars.

The kid who'd crashed his boat had heaved twice into his

toilet, but Hatch figured the nausea was more from nerves and fear than from the shot of brandy he'd sneaked him when no one was looking.

Of course, the kid had had a lot to drink prior to the brandy, and that wasn't just an assumption. He'd admitted as much to the Coast Guard officer who was currently questioning him. Key West police had had their turn at interrogating him about crashing the boat into the marina. He was then turned over to the Coast Guard officer, who wanted to know what had happened onboard that had caused his two companions to wind up in the Atlantic.

He'd provided their names and ages, their local addresses. Hatch had checked the information against the rental agreement the two young men had filled out before embarking. He confirmed the data to the officer.

Hatch resented having to share his private space with strangers, but he was glad he hadn't been asked to wait outside while the laws interrogated the kid. The marina was now swarming with onlookers who'd been drawn to the scene of the drama like flies to a pile of manure. And you couldn't swing a dead cat without hitting some breed of uniformed personnel.

Having intimate knowledge of jails in numerous ports on several continents, Hatch had an aversion to uniforms and badges. He would just as soon avoid authority of any kind. If a man couldn't live by his own set of rules, his own sense of right and wrong, what was the good of living? That attitude had landed him in paddy wagons all over the globe, but that was his philosophy and he was sticking to it.

But, in all fairness, Hatch had to hand it to the Coast Guard officials and local policemen who'd questioned the young man and organized a search-and-rescue party: They hadn't been assholes about it.

It was clear that the kid was on the brink of total breakdown. The badges had been savvy enough to realize he might crack if they applied too much additional pressure, and

then where would they be? In order to calm him down and get answers, they'd gone pretty soft on him.

He was still wearing wet swim trunks and sneakers that leaked seawater onto the rough plank flooring whenever he moved his feet. In addition to giving him the brandy, Hatch had thrown a blanket over him, but he'd since discarded it, along with his tattered T-shirt.

Outside, running footsteps and an excited voice brought the kid's head up. He looked hopefully toward the door.

But the footsteps ran past without stopping. The officer, who'd had his back turned while helping himself to Hatch's coffeepot, came around and correctly read the kid's expression. "You'll know something as soon as we do, son."

"They've got to be alive." His voice sounded like someone who'd been outyelling a storm for a long time. Every now and then it would crack over a word. "I think I just couldn't find them in the dark. It was so damned dark out there." His eyes bounced back and forth between Hatch and the officer. "But I didn't hear them. I called and called, but . . . Why weren't they answering me? Or calling out for help? Unless they . . ." He was unable to say out loud what they all feared.

The officer returned to Hatch's stool, which he'd placed near the chair in which the boy sat with his shoulders hunched forward. For several weighty minutes, the officer did nothing but sip his hot coffee. *Schwoop. Schwoop.*

It was irritating as hell, but Hatch remained quiet. This was the law's business now, not his. His boat was insured. There'd be paperwork out the wazoo, and a suspicious, seersucker-suited adjuster to haggle with, but in the long run, he would come out okay. Maybe even a little better off than he'd been.

He was less optimistic about how this kid would fare. No amount of insurance was going to make his life easier after this. As for the two who'd gone into the water, Hatch didn't hold out much hope. The percentages were stacked against them.

He had known a few men who had foundered and lived to tell

about it, but not many. If you went into the water, drowning was probably the most merciful way to die. Exposure took longer. And to predators you were just another source of food.

The Coast Guard officer cradled the chipped coffee mug between his palms and swirled the contents. "How come you didn't use the radio to call for help?"

"I did. I mean, I tried. I couldn't get it to work."

The officer stared into his swirling coffee. "Coupla other boats heard your SOS. Tried to tell you to stay right where you were. You didn't."

"I didn't hear them. I guess . . ." Here he glanced across at Hatch. "I guess I didn't pay much attention when he was showing us how to operate the radio."

"Costly mistake."

"Yes, sir."

"Fair to say you're not a seasoned sailor?"

"Seasoned? No, sir. But this is the first time I've had any trouble."

"Uh-huh. Tell me about the fight."

"Fight?"

This drew a frown from the officer. "Don't bullshit me now, son. Your eye's all but swollen shut. You've got a bloody nose and busted lip. Your knuckles are scraped and bruised. I know what a fistfight looks like, okay? So don't play games with me."

The young man's shoulders began to shake. His eyes streamed, but he didn't even bother trying to stem the tears or to wipe his dripping nose.

"Was it over the girl?" the officer asked in a gentler voice. "Mr. Walker here says she was a looker. A party girl, best he could tell. She belong to one of you?"

"Like a girlfriend, you mean? No, sir. She's just a casual friend."

"You and your buddy fight over her favors?"

"No, sir. Not . . . not exactly. What I mean is, she wasn't the reason it started."

"Then what was?"

The boy sniffed but remained mute.

"Just as well tell me now," the officer said, "because when we find whatever we're going to find out there, we'll keep hounding you until we get the truth of it."

"We were drunk."

"Uh-huh."

"And . . . and . . ." The kid raised his head, looked over at Hatch, then back at the officer, and said earnestly, "He's my best friend."

"All right. So what happened?"

He licked mucus off his upper lip. "He got mad. Mad as hell. I've never seen him like that."

"Like what?"

"Crazy. Violent. Like he snapped or something."

"Snapped."

"Yes, sir."

"What'd you do to piss him off, cause him to snap?"

"Nothing! One minute he's down below with her. I gave them some privacy, you know?"

"For sex? They were having sex?"

"Yeah. I mean, really going at it, having fun. Next minute, he's back up on deck, coming at me."

"For no reason? Just like that?"

The kid's head wobbled up and down. "It was supposed to be a party. A celebration. I don't understand how it went to hell so quick. I swear to God I don't." He lowered his battered face into his hands and began to sob again.

The officer looked over at Hatch as though for consultation. Hatch stared back at him, wanting to ask what he was looking at him for. He wasn't a counselor. He wasn't a parent. He for damn sure wasn't an officer in the Coast Guard or a cop. This was no longer his problem.

When he failed to volunteer anything, the officer asked if he had anything to add to the boy's story.

"No."

"Did you see or hear them fighting?"

"The only thing I saw them doing was enjoying themselves."

The officer turned back to the young man. "Best friends don't fight for no reason. Not even when they've had too much to drink. They might swap some harsh words, maybe throw a punch or two. But once it blows over, it's over, right?"

"I guess," he replied sullenly.

"So I want you to come clean with me now. Okay? You listening? What brought on the fight?"

The kid struggled to swallow. "He just attacked me."

"How come?"

"All I did was defend myself. I swear," he blubbered. "I didn't want to fight him. It was a party."

"Why'd he attack you?"

He shook his head.

"Now, that's not true, is it, son? You know why he attacked you. So tell me. What caused your best friend to get mad enough to start beating up on you?"

Silence stretched out for about twenty seconds, then the kid mumbled a single word.

Hatch wasn't sure he'd heard correctly, mainly because the first clap of thunder from the predicted storm rattled the small square window in his shack just as the boy spoke, and also because what he thought he heard the boy say was a strange answer to the question.

The officer must have thought so, too. He shook his head with misapprehension and leaned forward to hear better.

"Come again? Speak up, son."

The young man raised his head and took a swipe at his nose with the back of his hand. He cleared his throat. He blinked the officer into focus with his one functioning eye.

"Envy," he said gruffly. "That's what this is all about. Envy."

P.M.E.

St. Anne Island, Georgia  
February 2002



But there's got to be." Maris Matherly-Reed impatiently tapped her pencil against the notepad upon which she had doodled a series of triangles and a chain of loops. Below those she'd rough-sketched an idea for a book jacket.

"P.M.E., correct?"

"Correct."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, there's no such listing. I double-checked."

The idea for the book jacket—an autobiographical account of the author's murky relationship with her stepsibling—had come to Maris while she was waiting for the directory assistance operator to locate the telephone number. A call that should have taken no more than a few seconds had stretched into several minutes.

"You don't have a listing for P.M.E. in this area code?"

"In any area code," the operator replied. "I've accessed the entire U.S."

"Maybe it's a business listing, not a residential."

"I checked both."

"Could it be an unlisted number?"

"It would appear with that designation. I don't have anything under those initials, period. If you had a last name—"