

# INHUMAN ACTS By Brooke I French

## EXAMPLE

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A week at sea produced a lot of laundry. It fluttered above Jessa Duquesne as she lay on the foredeck of her parents' sailboat, soaking up the morning sun. The air smelled of salt, waves splashed against the hull, and seabirds cried out in the distance. It was everything she loved about a life lived outdoors.

Jessa lifted her head, searching the water for Mark. The ocean glittered, and the Náпали coast rose in the distance. Razor-sharp crags, each peak edged with green. Beautiful but empty. Just like the sea. No Mark.

She twisted to check their port side and spotted him beneath the surface. His body slid through a seemingly endless expanse of water, all sun-kissed skin and muscle.

*Yum.*

She'd never planned to marry, never had any interest in men that a one night stand couldn't fix. At least, not until she'd met Mark. He surfaced for a breath then slipped back under the waves. Something moved behind him, further out. A dark shape, getting closer. Thick body, elongated dorsal fin, maybe eight feet long.

Jessa rolled onto her stomach and undid the shoulder ties of her bikini.

The sandbar shark was probably a female, given the size, and harmless as sharks went. Odd it was out this far from shore, though. Poor thing would probably be lunch for a bigger predator. A great white or a tiger shark. And it shouldn't have been so close to the surface. Sandbar sharks usually hugged the bottom.

She should go get her camera. Maybe make a note of when she'd spotted it so she could have the data point. She could look up any other odd behavioral patterns when—

*Stop it, Jessa.*

There would be plenty of opportunities to study marine life when she got back to her office at the university. What she needed to do now was focus on all the wedding planning still left undone.

She'd been putting off the worst of it — seating charts and table linens and all the other things she didn't actually care about — hoping she could pawn them off on her sister. Or, at least, that she and Letty could handle them together this week, powered by a steady rotation of caffeine and wine.

Jessa sighed and shifted on her towel. It couldn't be helped. Letty wasn't the type to say no when work called, and it wasn't like Jessa was sorry to be here. A little get-away with Mark was the perfect use for the week she'd already taken off work. But still...

Seating charts and table linens.

*Yuck.*

The minutiae danced through her mind, conspiring with the warm press of the sun to lull her into a near-doze...

Ice-cold water dripped onto the small of Jessa's back, and she jumped with a yelp. "What the—?"

Mark stood over her, a grin on his face, dark hair dripping onto the deck. And her.

"Asshole." She laughed, using the edge of her towel to wipe the water away while she admired the broad stretch of his chest, the V of his abdomen where it disappeared into the top of his swim trunks. "How was your swim?"

"Lonely." He pulled a T-shirt from the rigging, where she'd hung it to dry. "Want to go below for a bit?"

She shook her head with a smile. "We're out of condoms." They'd used the last one the night before, and the memory brought heat to her cheeks. Even in the cramped confines of the cabin, he was a remarkable lover.

Mark shrugged. "The wedding's in a month. You wouldn't even be showing by then."

His dark eyes sparked with mischief.

"You're so bad." Jessa retied the straps of her suit. "I'll meet you down there. I need to hop in and cool off first."

Mark helped her to her feet and pulled her close. "Don't be long." He pressed a kiss to her lips that tasted like salt water. "We've got to return the boat to your dad by four."

She stepped back, winked at him, and dove off the side.

"Show-off!" he called down after her.

Jessa slipped into the water with barely a splash, like the lifelong swimmer she was. The water brushed a cool relief against her hot skin. Moored as far from land as they were, there was nothing to swim to. She settled for circuits around the boat. After a dozen, she turned onto her back and floated, giving her shoulders a break. The sky was a bright almost unnatural blue. It made a wide crescent against the darker indigo of the sea where the two met at the horizon.

Something brushed her foot.

Jessa stilled her legs, paddling with her arms to keep herself afloat as she searched for the culprit. A light-blue mass swirled below her.

*Oh shit.*

Ghostly strands reached up, inches from her skin.

*Jellies.*

And not just any jellyfish — box jellyfish. Large, square bodies with tentacles trailing below. Lots of them. Some as long as ten feet. Each tentacle had as many as five thousand stinging cells. Each one capable of causing excruciating pain and even death.

*Don't panic.*

She had to stay calm, keep her wits. Which would be easier if she didn't know their venom was deadlier than a cobra's. Her mouth went dry. She turned in a slow circle, her breath tightening with each new jelly she spotted. They pulsed through the water underneath her. A writhing, growing mass.

She shifted the direction of her strokes, pulling herself away from them. How many were there? And why were they out now? Box jellyfish were always in the ocean, but Hawaii's jellyfish tended to come and go with the cycle of the moon. And they weren't due for weeks, especially not here. She and Mark had dropped anchor off Kauai, nowhere near the beaches of Oahu where box jellyfish were usually spotted.

"Mark?" She called out, but there was no sign of him.

*Must be below deck.*

She judged the distance to the boat. Maybe fifty yards. It would be easier and faster if she could kick. But she didn't want to accidentally make contact with the jellyfish. Even one sting could send her into cardiac arrest. Her mouth was so dry, she could hardly swallow. The world shrunk to nothing more than the distance between her and the boat. She treaded water using only her arms, her muscles protesting, tired from the laps she'd done.

*Just get to the ladder.*

*If you get stung, you'll find the vinegar and douse yourself.*

Jessa kept swimming, trying not to move her legs, gliding over the still-growing mass of jellies. Her heart pounded and she struggled to keep herself from hyperventilating. Forty yards, thirty, twenty-five. This was taking forever.

A lightning bolt of pain shot up from her ankle, a radiating burning sting. "Shit."

*F\*ck this.*

She kicked off, powering toward the boat. Her ankle burning, her jaw clenched tight against the pain.

Another strike, this one on the other leg and higher near her thigh. Like a thousand wasps stinging at once. Sweat broke out on her forehead, and she gasped at the sudden shock of pain, then another struck. And another. Her body seized, her arms freezing in place as the jellyfish wrapped themselves around her. Delicate strands weaving bands of fire across her body. Her heart thundered. The sear of agony blotting out the rest of the world, until it was the one true certain thing left.

*Not the only thing.*

"Mark!" Jessa forced out the word as her head slipped under the water, a sharp pain slicing her chest. She willed herself to push toward the surface, not to breathe in the saltwater around her. Except it wasn't water. The jellyfish were everywhere.

A few feet below the surface, she opened her mouth and screamed.