



# The Dark

# Warehouse

**DEON ASHLEIGH**

Kelly was a catch, and she knew it. Classically curvy. Smart and sassy. Thick brunette curls for days. But still, she hadn't been caught.

She'd even done some fishing herself—that is, making the first move, asking the tough questions (so, do you or do you not live with your dad?), and risking rejection—but the right one hadn't crossed her path.

A woman of the 21st century, Kelly didn't need a man, but what was so wrong with wanting one? Nothing. So, she stood at the farthest end of the dark warehouse, bundled in her winter coat, left-swiping on a few pictures from her dating app.

The men were smart, hot, and single, but none appealed to her. She put her phone away, then groaned at the open door. Unlike the others that locked from the inside, this one always gave her trouble. She closed it and keyed in the code. It popped back open.

*Come on. Come on. Stupid door.*

She yanked the door shut again, ready to go home, and then paused, a noise behind her catching her attention. Almost like a phone ringing, but not quite. She listened. Silence. There it was again.

Strange.

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A chilling gust of wind blew in, and Kelly found herself gliding through the warehouse, unable to feel her feet. Twenty-foot shelves stacked with boxes of all sizes towered over her. The noise ricocheted through the large space, so she walked down an aisle, changing direction when the sound moved.

Sometimes, it sounded galaxies away. Other times, it echoed through her body as if it had always been there. Bringing her nearer. Vacillating between tinkling bells and bombs exploding. Kelly was hooked.

The haze strengthened until she turned a corner in the back of Bay 25 and looked down. One hundred tiny boxes wrapped in plastic. Stacked on a pallet. Nothing special in her long career as a senior warehouse manager, except one of them was ringing.

This close to the sound, much of the calm disappeared, replaced with a million red ants nipping under her skin—a painful panic to touch the box took her over.

Kelly ripped at the plastic and pulled out boxes, throwing them on the floor. They were light and had an oily, orange film on them.

What the—.

The nearer she got, the stronger the ringing became. Bottomless booms and searing sirens pulsating like a heartbeat. Inside her now. Everything ached.

Until she saw a faint blue glow from the last box on the pallet.

*Ba-dum. Ba-dum.* The light thumped fast in time with her heart, making swirls in the cardboard. She bent down and reached for it, fingers greedy like metal to a magnet. An inch away, the box floated—and the spell broke.

Kelly's body drained of the calm, the jitters, and returned to the lonely shell she could hardly feel anymore. She jumped back and fell into the pile of boxes, then patted her body as control and clarity flowed back in. "What the heck just happened? How did—?"

Kelly hoisted herself out of the stack, stood, and craned her neck to see if strings were attached to the box. None, and why would they be? She

wiped some of the oil off her elbow. Seeing, but not understanding. Nothing could explain it, and Kelly wasn't a fool.

It was time to go. The aliens could keep this trick.

Everybody knew magicians were liars. They waved floral scarves, disappeared in front of you—and never came back to say goodbye—or tell you they loved you and were forced to go.

She moved further away, about to run, when the box dripped oil and spun, splashing her with warm, spicy-smelling grease.

“Oh, my go—”

The box stopped spinning and moved near her face. “Voice confirmed. Kell-lee Jasmine Michaels, touch The Box to accept.” The voice had an accent unlike any she'd heard. Sing-song with whistles, slurps, and hard tones like choking.

“What are you? Accept what?” she yelled. Her fear reverberated through the large space.

“Touch The Box to accept.”

“No.” She jumped an inch to the side, then the other side. The box followed just as fast.

“I don't have a choice, do I?” Kelly yanked at a few curls. It hurt bad, but feeling pain didn't mean she was awake. She must've dozed off. This was a weird dream. And if it wasn't, she couldn't live with some slimy box following her around, asking her to touch it, so maybe...

In her dreams, she was a curious hypocrite. In her dreams, she was reckless. In her dreams, she could touch some random talking box rather than go home to her big, empty house and even bigger Netflix queue. Kelly sifted through the possible consequences—endless—but two thoughts

kept coming back to her: Where did this box come from? Would she ever have another chance to find out?

She ran a finger through the oil on another box. It was silky, clung to her skin, and smelled like spicy flowers. Nothing like the warehouse. Dusty, predictable, comfortable. Safe. She ruled it well, but a little adventure never hurt anyone. Did it? Kelly touched the box and fell through the floor.

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*“What does love mean to you?” the scientist asked her assistant as she stared at the results on the screen. The test was taking a long time to finish, and she was impatient to see the outcome. Sitting to her right, the male lifted his clipboard so she could not see. She hovered over him, trying to peek, but he dodged her.*

*For nearly a minute, he drew. Finally, he showed her his drawing. Circles upon circles of many sizes overlapped each other and interlocked at one middle dot.*

*“Love means this.” He placed a finger on the middle dot. She turned to the infuriatingly blank screen, smiling.*

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Kelly was soaked. More of the orange oil was in her hair, dripping down her face and seeping into her clothes. A thicker consistency than before. She wiped it from her eyes. An unfamiliar, massive, bright room reeked of it.

Behind her, someone cleared their throat. Spoke in a whisper, “Excuse me, but your buttocks are in my soup bowl.”

She turned around, into the face of a man a few years older than her 48 years. Her breath hiccupped as she scanned his face. His complexion was the color of hers after she'd tanned a few hours, and his beard was thick, long down to his chest. A rhinestone glittered from his chin. His skin was smooth but for light wrinkles, lips perfectly sized, and—

His eyes. She stared. They were bright blue with silver pupils. The blue drifted like clouds, and his gaze was soft, kind, and confused. He was the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

God, her fantasies had stepped it up twenty notches. So vivid.

“Guards!” a harsh, shrill voice said behind her. “Detain this contaminated thing; it has tried to decimate Grand Lord Adryn!”

“Assassin.” The word rippled through the room. Guards, slim and about eight feet tall, stepped forward and yanked her off the table, holding her a few inches off the ground.

Strong, rigid like statues.

“No, I'm not contaminated. I took a shower this morning. I take two showers every day. Hot ones. I'm not an assassin.” She struggled against them, pain thrumming through her armpits. “I don't even know how I got here. Th-there was a box. It glowed. The box brought me here.” She babbled until Adrian stood up, a long table full of people stretching out in front of him.

“Impossible.” He was taller than he looked sitting. Wide-shouldered. About seven feet. Wow. Still, this had turned into a nightmare quick, and she was ready to wake up. She'd never had a dream that scared her this much—or felt so real.

The room stilled, save one person's nearly endless slurping and the man's big, weirdly shaped bowl rocking back and forth in front of her.

Kelly stared at it, terror jumbling her thoughts. She had never begged a bowl to do anything, but now she was pleading with this one to not fall on the floor. If it did, she was sure they'd kill her.

It moved closer to the edge...



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