

WHAT WE LOCK AWAY

“What’s in the box?” Em asked.

“No idea,” Jay replied.

The box, for its part, said nothing.

They stood uneasily in the gloomy bedroom. The small box was stubbornly locked and mounted to the wall, a rusty metal tumor attached to the otherwise drab house. Em had immediately tried to open it, then tried to pry it off the wall, and then asked if she could try random combinations on its 4-digit code. Jay had told her no. He hadn’t even wanted to come here in the first place, and he certainly didn’t need more to worry about.

“Who do you think put it there?” she tried.

“No idea.”

“Is there anything inside? I bet there’s something inside. Why would it be locked if there wasn’t something inside?” Em’s blue eyes sparkled. To her it was a puzzle, a mystery to be solved. It was hope.

To Jay, the box was a minor annoyance. All he wanted was to go home and for things to be normal again. As if Father had never gotten that phone call.

“Mother would want to open it,” Em said, and Jay’s stomach clenched. He bit his lip hard. They stood silently again.

“Why don’t you go explore your room?” Jay managed.

“Already did,” she replied absently. “Nothing interesting.”

Her gaze was still set squarely on the box, which seemed to stare out into the dusty bedroom. It was stoic and poker-faced, as if the two kids weren’t even there.

“Do you think it’s broken?”

“Broken? It’s just a stupid box. You can’t ‘fix’ it.” Jay sighed and flopped onto the bed.

His whole body felt tense. He stared defiantly at the ceiling, but he couldn’t stop replaying the day’s events in his mind: Father’s grave expression as he took the phone call. It’ll be a “fun weekend” at Aunt Holly’s house. Mother and I just need to “sort things out” with the doctor.

Em finally glanced over at him. Her wide eyes gleamed in the dim room, and for a moment, Jay thought he saw her lower lip quivering.

“I— I bet there’s something good inside,” she announced quickly. “I’m going downstairs to plan how to open it.” With that, she marched out of the room.

He sighed and resumed his staring contest with the ceiling. It was cracked and dry. The room wasn’t much better: ancient curtains over a small window, an oversized chest of drawers, a rug melting into the floor...

And that damned box on the wall, awkwardly jutting out from the peeling wallpaper. Jay felt his jaw clench just thinking about it. He gave the box a wary look, scoffed, and resolved not to worry about it any more than he already had.

The box, for its part, stared back as calmly as ever. But Jay had a feeling it was secretly gloating.

The boy turned over, feeling the weight of the day pressing down on him. The silent car ride, hugs goodbye, not wanting to let go, Mother will be fine, Mother will be fine. Jay didn't want to think about how she was sick. He didn't want to think about anything.

Before he knew it his eyes fluttered closed, and the room dissolved around him.

Jay's blissful reprieve from the world was shattered by screams.

He was out of bed in an instant, fumbling with the lamp, but there was only darkness, darkness pouring out of the box on the wall, its metal face torn open, and — his breath caught in his throat.

Em. She was barely visible in the corner, eyes frantic beneath twisting tendrils of shadow holding her down.

Jay wanted to scream but all that came out was a guttural cry. On pure adrenaline, he willed his legs to move. The room stretched and warped around him like a house of mirrors. His outstretched hand found hers for an instant, their eyes meeting, siblings grasping for one another in the dark.

Then the box vomited forth more darkness. Except it wasn't the box anymore but the house itself. A terrible vertigo made its home in Jay's stomach as he found himself facing the monstrous front door to their prison. Its rotten plank walls warped outwards, awnings looming like the face of some great beast. Darkness spewed from its maw, roiling over the dead lawn and the winding driveway that Father had taken them up that morning after the phone call that ruined everything.

With a sickening feeling, Jay realized he had lost his grip on Em's hand. She was screaming somewhere deeper in the shadows.

“Give her back!” he yelled against the suffocating darkness.

But the darkness only intensified, pressing harder and harder against him until he could barely breathe, until his ribs were about to crack, until—

Jay gasped awake. His heart was pounding. He lay on the bed, clothes drenched in sweat. His chest felt tight where the darkness had been pressing. Except it hadn’t been, because he was still in the dim room, and it had all been a dream, hadn’t it? The cracked ceiling grinned down at him. He sat up shakily.

“I opened it.”

“Em!” Jay leapt off the bed and stumbled over to her.

“You’re here, you’re okay?” he asked, kneeling down and grabbing her shoulders.

“Yeah.” She must’ve known he was dreaming, and probably thought he was crazy, but she didn’t mention it. Jay found a secure grip on Em’s hand as they glanced up warily at the box.

Its front panel had swung open, revealing a stark interior.

“It’s a telephone,” Em said quietly.

The phone let out a shrill ring.

Jay’s heart skipped a beat.

He reached into the box with trembling fingers to retrieve the phone.

“Hello, Father.”