

A
BETTER
NIGHT
MARE

MEGAN FREEMAN

Chicken
House

2 PALMER STREET, FROME,
SOMERSET BA11 1DS

First published in the UK in 2025
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Text © Megan Freeman 2025
Cover art © Mishko 2025

The moral rights of the author and illustrator have been asserted.

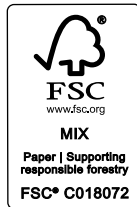
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, used to train any artificial intelligence technologies, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the express written permission of the publisher. Subject to EU law the publisher expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is purely coincidental.

For safety or quality concerns:
UK: www.chickenhousebooks.com/productinformation
EU: www.scholastic.ie/productinformation

Cover design by Maeve Norton and Ali Al Amine
Interior design by Ali Al Amine
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed in Great Britain by Clays, Elcograf S.p.A



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-915947-25-3
eISBN 978-1-917171-00-7



I

I don't speak to the other girls. I don't look at them. The morning music is still being pumped through one of the speakers that line the halls and fills up what would otherwise be silence – violins and cellos and other instruments I can't name weaving together.

I follow my roommates out of our dorm and into the narrow hallway.

Single file, we trudge towards the communal bathroom and join the line of girls already waiting outside the door. Each of us carries an identical lumpy toiletry bag in one hand and a towel in the other. The same old, brown towel I was given seven years ago when I arrived here.

I think I recognize the composer from music therapy. Bach, perhaps? I'm not completely sure, but like all the music they pump into this place, it is slow and mellow. Soft music. Soothing music. Music that's supposed to keep us calm and stop us from doing bad things.

Not that this works. Bad things happen here all the time.

The concrete floor is cold under my winter regulation

socks and I am glad when it's finally my turn in the bathroom. I step through the door and blink in the sudden glare. Everything is white tiles and painted concrete. Harsh lights tint the room blue. There are stalls of toilets with no doors, a communal shower area, and a row of sinks with little mirrors hammered into the wall above.

I take my place in front of an empty sink, looking in the mirror as I fix my hair. Twenty brushes – ten times on each side just like Matron taught me to – before tying it up in a ponytail.

As a senior, I'm expected to get myself ready for the day without supervision. But Matron has trained us all well. How to wash correctly. How to brush correctly. How to tie up our hair. No looking in the mirror unnecessarily. No talking. No procrastinating. Why? *Because those are the rules*, as Matron would say.

I brush my teeth and think of nothing.

I leave the sink and another girl quietly steps forward to take my place. She starts to wash her face as I exit the room.

Back in my dorm, I deposit my toiletry bag on my bedside table and hang my towel from my rail. I am last back and the others are already continuing with their morning routines. They fold and tuck and brush, heads down and necks bent.

I turn and make my bed. Sheets first. Each corner tucked and folded. A coarse woollen blanket draped evenly over the sides.

Next, I lay out my uniform: a white shirt and a grey skirt

with pleats that falls to exactly two centimetres below the knee, tights that itch and stiff black shoes. Lastly, a blazer to wear over the top. Our school crest is embroidered on one side – a bird flying above a tree. Beneath the bird, elaborate script spells out the name of our school: WILDSMOOR FACILITY.

Three smaller words are also sewn into the crest: CARE. EDUCATION. CORRECTION.

My mind drifts as I dress myself and finish my morning chores before leaving my dorm room.

I'm outside Matron's office. I blink, registering my surroundings, surprised to find myself already here.

But time is like that at Wildsmoor Facility, bitten off in great big chunks. Whole minutes, hours, days, gone in a blink. One day it's January and the next it's June. One day I am a little kid with chubby cheeks and the next I am practically an adult, almost sixteen.

Should this make me feel something? Should it make me sad, or scared? Maybe I should care, but I don't.

Students are queuing up in front of the little hatch set into the wall. I join the line, uniform in its neatness. Hands are behind backs. Girls' hair is shoulder length, tied into ponytails with a navy band. Boys' hair is short. Shirts are tucked in. No exceptions.

I fix my eyes on the hatch up ahead. I can't see who is on medication duty this morning, but I can see a pair of hands dishing out pills of all different colours and little cups of water. Mr Peters, one of our teachers, stands on duty next

to the hatch. He watches as we file past, his eyes cold and remote. Every now and again he rebukes somebody for sloppy dressing: a missed button or a loose thread or a toothpaste stain.

I step forward in time with everyone else, one place closer. By now my hands are ever so slightly shaking and my mouth salivating. Little slivers of pain shoot through my head. Doctor Sylvie says these are all symptoms of my illness coming back as the medication leaves my body. I will the kids in front of me to move quicker. I need my pills, and soon.

Finally, it's my turn.

'Emily Emerson?' A girl I know as Meera peers through the hatch at me. Meera is almost eighteen now, the oldest girl here, but still she hasn't been cured of the same cognitive disease that affects all of us.

Grimm–Cross Syndrome. Or just 'the Grimm'.

We're not allowed to leave the facility until we're cured of the Grimm, but everyone has to leave at eighteen anyway. I don't know what happens to the kids who turn eighteen without being cured. I look at Meera's empty face and somewhere deep down inside feel a little prod of emotion. I don't want to end up like her. Still sick. Still here.

'Yes,' I say, stepping forward. I feel Mr Peters's sharp eyes on me. Meera turns around, rummages in a few trays, and then turns back. I hold out my hand automatically and she drops the little pills into my palm. A little white round one and a big red capsule. I take my cardboard cup of water in

the other hand.

'Next,' says Mr Peters.

'No, thanks,' says a voice behind me, ever so quietly.

Mr Peters's head snaps around. 'Excuse me?'

I turn to look too. A boy, younger than me by several years at least, with cropped sandy hair and wide eyes fixed on Mr Peters. He's shaking his head and his hands are gripped in front of him, twisting into knots.

'No,' he repeats, louder this time, moving his hands behind his body. 'I don't need to take any more medicine. I'm better now.'

Better. Better. Better – the word echoes in my head.

He turns and tries to run, pushing his way through the line. There is a series of screams. A domino effect of bodies.

A girl stumbles and lurches into me. I fall to the floor.

My cheek is pressed to the tiles. I squeeze my eyes shut and open them again, not sure what I'm seeing. The boy is running still, but his feet have somehow left the floor. He's rising into the air, as if gravity has forgotten him. He's floating. Actually floating. Like a helium balloon released from a child's fingertips.

Around me the other kids stare.

He scrabbles with his arms as he collides into the wall above the door. I can hear his fingernails scrape the concrete. He cries out, a long keening wail that sounds more like an animal than a human. An alarm begins to clang. Doors burst open and blue-uniformed guardians rush into the room.

They grab his ankles and pull him back to the floor. One of them holds a Taser to his neck and pulls the trigger. A buzzing, crackling noise. The boy screams and arches his back. The muscles in his arms tense, pushing against and resisting the three guardians who are on him at once. A moment later he falls limp after another guardian pulls out a syringe full of clear liquid, jabbing the needle into his arm and pressing down the plunger.

The guardians lift his body between them and carry him away. His head lolls obscenely to one side and his feet drag along the floor that he was floating above only a moment ago.

I see another boy then, closer to my age, maybe a bit older. He has a head of tight-shorn curls, almost white in colour. Eyes that find mine and red lips that twist so quickly and suddenly into a smile that I'm sure I've imagined it. He crouches, his hand reaching out and scooping something off the floor in front of me.

A second later and the image of this stooped, grinning figure is gone, replaced by Mr Peters's looming face.

The alarm stops. Silence holds the air in a tight embrace for a moment before music begins to play. Mozart this time. A piano piece that rises and falls softly in the space around us. The floor is cool under my hot, thumping head. I guess it must've been mopped recently, as disinfectant stings the back of my throat.

'Miss Emerson, get off the floor immediately.' Mr Peters's

thick eyebrows knit together in the middle of his forehead. His too-pale lips press together and make a thin line.

I push myself back to my feet.

'And clean up this mess,' he snaps. He gestures to the floor in front of the hatch where my cup lies crumpled in a puddle of water.

'Yes, Mr Peters,' I reply. I pick up the cup and put it in the bin. I stare down at the floor, my eyes sweeping left and right, searching along the scuffed skirting board and between other children's feet.

'Well,' Mr Peters claps, a noise like a whip cracking, and I jump. 'What are you waiting for?'

'Sorry,' I say. Under Mr Peters's gaze, I turn and walk away. There is a cupboard nearby that I know from cleaning duty has a mop and a bucket in it. I push my way through the double doors and they swing shut behind me.

I stop. I turn around and look through the window set into the door. The glass is smeared with cloth marks and it's hard to see anything clearly. Besides, I looked, and they're not there. They're gone.

My pills are gone.

For a moment I consider going back in to try to find them again, but then I see Mr Peters yelling at someone for an untied shoelace and change my mind. He might accuse me of clumsiness or carelessness. Or worse, lying. I've seen kids sent to isolation for less.

I walk to the cupboard. I open the door. I get out the mop.

*

I did a bad thing. That's how I ended up here.

That's how all kids like me end up at Wildsmoor Facility, by doing bad things. We stuff it down and try to hide and swallow the burning inside, but eventually it comes out.

I broke my sister's arm, that was my bad thing.

It was the year I turned eight and Amelia, my sister, turned nine. We were different in many ways. She was taller, I was shorter. She had short hair and I wore mine long. She liked soccer and running whereas I liked reading and imagination games.

But we were also similar. The same almond-shaped eyes. The same laugh. And the same fiery temper.

We argued about anything and everything, our anger flaring fast and exchanging hot and heated words. We always made up, our tempers usually burning out as quickly as they came, but for some reason this night and this argument were different. We argued without end and without resolution. Dad was furious. He yelled at us and then sent us both to bed early without anything to eat.

I fell asleep consumed by rage.

That night I dreamt of a monster that walked out of my head and came to life. It grew bigger and bigger until it filled my whole bedroom, bulging into the corners and snarling and snapping with its many jaws. Its skin was pustuled and in some parts furred and in others scaled. It glowed with its own light, as if it had eaten the moon and it was now trying to

claw its way back out of the monster's skin.

The monster broke out of my room with enough force that my door exploded into splinters. It stood there, casting a faint blue light across the landing, its body so large that it spilt over the banister and oozed down the stairs. A door swung open and my mother came running out of her bedroom.

'Derek,' screamed my mother. 'It's happening again!'

This wasn't the first time my dreams had walked. I had been hiding my strange dreams for months now, concealing my ability to set my unconscious thoughts free into the world. My parents had caught me before. Once running around the house as my dream self, chasing a puppy. And then another time when they woke up to the house covered in iridescent flowers, thick like a forest and sowed with nothing more than my unconscious thoughts.

I thought these things might make my parents smile, but instead my mother cried and my father shouted. I learnt that what I could do was bad. So I stuffed it down and pretended that it wasn't there. But underneath I could feel it swelling inside me, wanting to burst out, and I knew it was only a matter of time.

When my dream monster's eyes found my sister, it lunged. Its many jaws snapped and globular drool oozed from its mouth. It pushed up on its hind legs and opened its chest and roared. I don't think it was ever going to hurt her, just scare her, but my sister didn't know that.

She screamed and ducked and ran. And in her panic, she fell down the stairs.

It was only then that I woke up and the monster disappeared, but it was too late. My parents had seen the monster I had made. They'd seen its drooling face and sharp teeth. They'd heard its snarls.

But worst of all, they now knew what was really hidden within me: disease and darkness. Nightmares so real that they walked the earth with flesh and bone and blood.

After that, they couldn't pretend any longer. The next night, back home from A&E with my sister's arm bound up tight in a pink cast, I heard them arguing in whispers. My dad's low voice rumbled through the walls and my mum's whispers crept under the crack at the bottom of my door. I knew what they were arguing about, of course. Me.

I had it. I had the Grimm. And none of us could pretend any longer that it wasn't the case.

Hours later my dad came for me. When he shook me awake, I was dozing fitfully, too distressed to sleep properly. His face was tight and unsmiling and his eyes wouldn't meet mine.

'What's happening, Dad?' I asked. 'Is it Amelia? Is she OK?' Dad shook his head. 'She's fine.'

I sat up and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. 'What is it, then?'

'You're going on a trip,' he said.

I frowned, confused. A trip? In the middle of the night?

'But I don't want to go on a trip.'

'You have to. You can't stay here any longer. You're— it's dangerous.'

A cold, metallic taste appeared in my mouth. Dread. It began to drip down my throat, pooling like poison in my stomach. 'I can't stay here?' I echoed. 'What are you talking about? Where am I going?'

My dad rubbed his hand over his forehead and through his hair. 'You have the Grimm, Emily. We've been denying it to ourselves for too long.'

Realization hit me like a punch to the stomach and I suddenly knew without him saying where I was going: a facility.

I had heard about facilities at school from the other kids. That's what they did with kids who had the Grimm. They sent them far, far away and they never came back.

I wasn't the first one at my school, and the names of the kids who had been taken before were still whispered in the playground, rumours that passed down from the oldest to the youngest.

Ashanti, who could make the ground shake under her feet. William, who could break bones just with his thoughts. And the year before, a girl in my sister's class had been taken. Nobody knew what she'd done but it must've been bad, and after that her whole family moved away and nobody saw them ever again.

'Please,' I begged my dad. 'Please. It won't happen again. I

can make it stop. I know I can.'

But his mouth grew thinner and he pulled me from my duvet by my arm. I struggled in his grip as he dragged me out on to the landing.

My mum was standing there, watching. Her lip trembled and her eyes were glassy with unspilt tears.

'Mum!' I screamed, reaching for her. 'Help me!'

She opened and closed her mouth like a fish. 'You'll be OK, Emily,' she said eventually. 'You just need to go and get better and then you can come home again.'

But I knew this was just a lie, and when I realized that my mother wasn't going to help me, I went into a frenzy. I bit and scratched and screamed. I was incoherent and unthinking. Wild.

My sister, Amelia, emerged from her bedroom. She was wide-eyed and had bed hair, peeking out from her bedroom door. 'What's happening?' she cried, running forward and trying to pull me free with her one good arm. 'She didn't mean it. She said she was sorry.'

My father shook her off and turned to my mother. 'Get me a rope.'

My mother darted into the bedroom and returned with the cord from her robe. My mother had owned this robe for as long as I could remember, and even now I can still recall how she wore it in the mornings making breakfast and how it felt against my cheek when she hugged me, ever so slightly coarse from years of washing.

My father took the cord from her and used it to tie my hands behind my back. It bit into my skin and made my fingers tingle.

Amelia started to cry, her face crumpling like a piece of paper and sobs ripping through her chest.

‘Get back into your room,’ my father said to her.

Amelia’s wide, terrified eyes flickered between us. ‘Don’t do it, Dad,’ she said, her words distorted by her gulping cries. ‘She said she was sorry. It was only this once...’

My father flashed my mother a look and she nodded. She pulled Amelia away, back into her bedroom, before closing the door behind her.

That was the last time I saw my sister.

Seven years have passed since that day, but it’s as if the darkness that consumed me that night on my way to Wildsmoor, terrified beyond anything I’d ever felt before, has never lifted. I’m not the same person that I was.

I’m sick. I know that now.