

...Excerpt from
HOUSEBROKEN: A Novel
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CHAPTER 1—The Rehearsal Dinner

Listen, I told them to just say no from the get-go, but I was only seventeen at that time, and they were the parents.

“Don’t buy it,” I’d begged. “This house is too damaged and broken. There’s too much that needs to be done.”

But, nope, my desperate pleas for common sense to take the wheel were not heard, and they zoomed full speed ahead, crashing right into my current catastrophe.

I’d tried my best to appeal to my parents’ better judgment back then. When we first viewed the house in 2010 or so, I’d pointed out the stained brown carpet that covered the main floor like a sewage spill and the exposed subfloor that ran through the rest of the home. Rotten wood beams framed and filled the kitchen and dining room. The living room floor moved as you walked on it, and when you turned on the light switch in the foyer, a motor rumbled somewhere in the basement. Watermelon-sized holes riddled the walls and ceilings, and there was even a hole where an entire bedroom was supposed to be. A collection of dollar-store foil pans filled the space where a bathtub and sink should have been, and a shower head jutted meaninglessly from a hallway wall.

And those were just the things you could see at first glance. I’m not even going to get started detailing the busted pipes, the exposed wires, the rust, the cracks, and the termite damage.

The list of horrors went on and on.

“Seriously, Ma, Dad, you can’t just binge-watch shows on HGTV and think you know how to renovate houses,” I’d said.

Like I said, though, I was seventeen at that time, and they were the parents. They had already taken out a personal loan to purchase the abandoned home outright.

Fifty thousand dollars cash.

“Selena, this is called investing,” my father had lectured.

The other townhomes in the development averaged \$250,000. That should tell you all you need to know about the value and condition of the home they’d found online.

My parents were determined to make it work based on some seminar they’d attended at a two-star hotel in downtown Baltimore.

Marlene and Clarence Tucker were the queen and king of infomercial spectators when I was growing up in the nineties and early two thousands. Every \$19.99 deal that flashed on TV seemed to end up in our home, and every nearby self-help symposium had their names as registrants. The year they bought the house was their year of investing. Name it, claim it, sow it, reap it—a revival they’d attended at a friend’s church sealed their decision to move forward.

“We’re listening to the Lord, Selena,” my mother had explained as she’d thumbed the latest brochures on investment properties she’d ordered and received in the mail. “He has blessings waiting to rain down on us.”

“But wouldn’t the Good Lord tell us to get some of the basics fixed before we move in, you know, like, make sure water doesn’t rain down on us from a leaky roof?” I remember scowling as we moved our meager belongings and our rent-to-own furniture from our place in East Baltimore into the fixer-upper in Randallstown. “Is it even legal to live like this?”

They—Ma and Dad—had looked at each other and laughed as they unpacked.

“Getting a home at this price in western Baltimore County is a blessing and a bargain,” my father had asserted. “This is our slice of the American dream pie.”

“It’s an end-of-group townhome with a wonderful view of trees,” my mother had chimed

in.

“Trees.” They both had sighed, smiling, like I should have stopped right there on the unsteady living room floor and started a holy dance and shouted like Sunday morning. We didn’t have trees in our old backyard, and I’m sure they meant to inspire me as they reminded me of the block of cement that separated our former backdoor from the trash-littered alley. It wasn’t quite what you’d call a yard, but it did offer a nice view of what my college professors so poetically termed “urban blight.”

Anyway, they were rejoicing over trees and birds’ nests and blue jays and assuring me Daddy’s handyman friend Kunta X (don’t ask) would be helping him start all the repairs as soon as he returned from his reparations conference.

Now, either that conference was on some serious CP time or Mr. X was waiting for his reparations check to come in the mail to buy supplies because here we are today, six years later. The house is nearly in the same condition as it was the day my parents bought it.

Okay, Ma tried to make the place home-worthy with some new curtains and some splashes of paint on the walls, but ain’t enough Morning Mist (or whatever color blue that was) in the world to make you miss foot-wide holes, flaking plaster, and water damage.

They both tried to make it work. Some projects were started, some patchwork completed here and there. My father had a sump pump installed that reduced the basement flooding. But, as anyone who studies HGTV should have known, one new project leads to another—one wall torn down led to more discoveries. The very foundation of the home was unstable. The stripped bare and exposed horrors of the house meant we lived back and forth between there and the functioning home of my Grandma Verdine my senior year of high school while my parents outlined what to tackle next. There was nothing more I could say or do, my voice an empty echo on forlorn walls and damaged ceilings.

However, sometime during my freshman year of college, while I was working hard to maintain my full ride at Bowie State University and after Grandma Verdine moved on to her golden mansion in the sky, Ma and Dad had a “discussion” about the exponential costs of repairs and materials, the mounting debt, and the ongoing absence of my dad’s handyman buddy, Kunta X.

The result of their exchanged words? My father took the last of the money he’d saved up for renovations and used it as a deposit for an apartment in Lochearn, just blocks away from the Baltimore City line. Ma joined him ten days later, using the excuse that I, the youngest of their two children, was almost out of their house and they didn’t need that much space anymore. That, and also, the Lord had “moved them on to a new season.”

They put the house on the market, and—surprise—it did not sell. Desperate, they tried to talk some of our neighbors from around the old way into buying it, but they all had more sense than to take on a money pit from hell.

They even attempted to get my older brother, CJ, to stop sofa-surfing at his friends’ homes and accept a transfer of the deed.

“You can keep the house for yourself. It’s paid for,” my mother had said to him. “All you’d need to do is fix it up and pay the property taxes.”

That should have been the red flag for me. I should have realized it then, the day I overheard Ma pleading with CJ of all people on the phone they were trying to free themselves of the house by any means necessary. I shouldn’t have snickered to myself and shook my head at their pitiful choices and miserable fate.

Nope. I missed it. I missed the moment the tide changed and roared in my direction to knock me off my feet and leave me sputtering for breath in its merciless wake.

See, now, six years later, after time, money, and sacrifice were wasted on a place that

should have remained abandoned, the tables have turned, and my parents' missteps have become my misfortune.

And, as would seem fitting for me, the tables have turned—crashed down, really—on the very day before I'm to be married. I should have fought harder to be heard at seventeen because here I am at twenty-three about to battle the brawl of my life.

“So, Evan, babe, this is it.”

It was a Thursday evening in late April, my wedding eve. I was standing in the living room of “the house,” as my family calls it. Well, technically, I was balancing precariously on the living room floor. My fiancé, Evan Wayland, stood next to me.

We both should have been at the intimate banquet hall his parents had rented for our rehearsal dinner, finishing the petit fours, or whatever the heck they're called, that his mother ordered from a local French bakery. Everyone else was there, including my parents, enjoying the delicacies and reveling in the elaborate celebration. We were not with them. We left. We were standing here taking in the madness of my parents' money pit.

Let me just say this: I gave Jesus my heart when I was eight years old, and I figured we've been pretty tight through the years. You know, when the praises go up, the blessings come down, and all that? *So, Lord, you could have at least given me a heads-up on what my parents were about to pull on me.*

Evan's mother, Mrs. Wayland, had a catered seven-course, southern France-inspired meal for our rehearsal dinner. I'm talking real linen, silver, crystal, gold, and food I'd never heard of nor will ever be able to pronounce. The queen of socialites and the unmatched planner of charity balls, she'd even used her connections to surprise us with a personalized taped performance by the legendary Razi to serenade us with one of his chart-topping soulful ballads.

I'd wondered at the sixty-five-inch flat-screen TV at the dinner, framed by red velvet curtains and hoisted on a wall near the head table. I'd thought Mrs. Wayland was preparing to play a video montage when she dimmed the lights and used a remote to turn it on. I'd braced myself to see pictures of a ten-year-old snaggle-toothed me set to one of Mrs. Wayland's favorite Motown oldies. Instead (and thankfully), there was the smooth-as-black-silk Razi smiling and winking from a bench in front of a shimmering black baby grand. The Johannesburg nighttime skyline glittered in a window behind him, a stop on his ten-city world tour.

"Hey there, Evan and Selena, this is for you." His tenor voice rippled through the speakers. I'd watched in awe and disbelief as the local Maryland legend turned international R&B superstar—who'd actually said *my name*—crooned his hit love song to me and my beloved through a TV screen at our wedding rehearsal. "Best wishes to the beautiful bride and the lucky groom," he'd ended, blowing a kiss to the camera.

That should have been the highlight of my evening, the sole significant moment from my special night that would be sealed in my memory bank forever, right?

I mean, half an hour ago, Evan and I were at the dinner with everyone else, swooning and swaying along with the vocal runs and smooth vibrato of the one-named wonder. Razi belting out his sultry melody at my rehearsal dinner went beyond any dream I'd ever had, making what happened next the monster of all nightmares.

Right after the television went dark and the room went back to full brightness, my parents stood and made their big announcement. Mrs. Wayland was frowning because of their timing. I was frowning period.

"Excuse us," my father's bass voice had cut through the rousing applause of the sixty or so guests who were still applauding the surprise serenade. I glared at my mother furiously when I saw Mrs. Wayland look up from her typed and laminated program, her perfectly arched eyebrow

raised at the interruption in her carefully scripted affair. My glare turned to horror when I noticed the snicker on CJ's face. I knew immediately it was not going to be a good announcement.

“God has blessed us with a wonderful daughter.” My father smiled too hard. “I’m happy that the Waylands were able to *present* the illustrious Razi for this special night. However, God has blessed my wife and I with the perfect *present* for our daughter and our new son that will last for many days and nights to come. Stand up with me, Marlene.” He beckoned to my mother. As she stood beaming, my father took out an official-looking document and held it up for us all to see.

“Selena, you and Evan don’t have to worry about paying for that little overpriced studio you rented downtown because your mother and I are giving you our house... Signed, sealed, delivered, it’s yours.” He had sung the last words in an off-key falsetto, the tiny diamond stud in his ear sparkling in the crystal chandelier light. “Y’all didn’t know you were going to get a little Stevie after the Razi, did you?” He chuckled.

The crowd *ooohed* and clapped again. Both Evan and I were overcome with tears, except Evan had never seen the house, and his tears were happy ones.

Early in our relationship, I’d mentioned to him in passing that my parents owned a house they were fixing up. The shame and pain of the whole story was too much for me to have provided him further details.

I wished I had.

“Wow, amazing!” Evan gushed. “Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Tucker. That’s so generous of you. Thank you so much.”

I wondered then how thankful he’d be when he saw what we were getting, especially knowing what we’d have to give up. The “little overpriced studio” downtown my father mentioned was on the top floor of a new development near glitzy Harbor East. My parents

weren't aware that Evan's parents had insisted on helping with the high rent. The building was near Evan's job at a law firm, and the address was trendy enough for Mrs. Wayland to name-drop to her circle. Evan had been commuting from his parents' home in Bowie, and I'd made my parents' sofa my home since I'd graduated from college last spring. (Look, there is no shame in taking five years to work my way through school after my scholarship collapsed.) So, what I'm saying is the move to the fancy studio apartment felt like a glamorous step forward and the beginnings of my dreams come true.

"I didn't know your parents owned a house," Mrs. Wayland had whispered loudly to me over the applause and hugs and kisses. A spidery web of deep scarlet found a way to inch up her almond-brown face.

Mrs. Wayland didn't like surprises involving her baby boy that had not been okayed by her first. There were standards to be held, and she was the God-ordained standard checker. Said so somewhere in the Bible. In bright red letters. Mrs. Madelyn Ernestine Wayland was sent to make sure the world was doing right by her only begotten son.

Anyway, that's how Mrs. Wayland surely acted and what she most certainly believed. Imagine what happened when Evan first introduced me to her and the good doctor. But that's another story for another day. Back to the house.

I knew I had to get the house out of our hands before she saw it and before my Harbor East fantasy collapsed. That's why I immediately whisked Evan away from our lovely little wedding rehearsal dinner with the petit fours.

That's why we were there right now looking at holes in Morning Mist painted walls.

"Look at this house. So much potential." I smiled as Evan fingered the kitchen island that was literally a piece of untreated lumber some fool had nailed to the vinyl floor. I had to let Evan believe giving back the house was his idea. My mother told me making a man believe he'd come

up with a plan that his woman had subtly planted in his head was the best trick in the unwritten code of wife ethics. Trickery would build his esteem and keep the peace, my momma said.

Maybe believing and acting on this myth was the traceable moment my disaster began.

Sidenote to mothers: Please don't lead your daughters astray with false relationship advice and bad marriage tips. Tell your daughters their voice matters. Presentation is everything, and silence is not always golden.

But I didn't know any of this. Yet.

"See the trees," I continued with Evan as I pointed out of the patio door. "Can't you imagine all the birds that will come to the birdfeeder we can hang out there? And look, the deck. We can host our own cookouts this summer. Can you say barbecue?"

I actually called it a deck. The wooden beams that weren't missing were splintered and rotten. I wouldn't even try to balance a bottle of ketchup out there, forget a charcoal grill.

I looked over at Evan who stared intently out the glass. A frown tugged at the corners of his lips, and his deep brown eyes had that serious look of concentration I'd seen him give his thick law textbooks during his Georgetown years. When he turned to face me, he was rubbing his chin like an old man contemplating his next chess move.

"What's wrong, baby?" I gently massaged the wrinkles on his forehead with the tips of my fingers.

"Oh, nothing. I mean, it's something we can figure out together."

Checkmate.

This marriage thing was going to be a breeze, I believed in that moment.

"I know my parents meant well." *Yeah, right*, I thought. "But if we sit down with them after the wedding and explain—"

"It's the trees. Not all of them." Evan pointed. "Just that one big oak tree in the center of

the yard. We can get that cut down so the pool will fit.”

“Exactly. I’m sure my parents will understand that we... Pool? Did you say something about a pool?” I think I was too shocked to believe what I was hearing. He was making plans for the house.

“Yes. A pool would be perfect to go along with those backyard barbecues. And I love the trees. We’ll just get rid of that one right there.” He pointed to a massive oak that sat in the middle of the sprawling yard before turning back to face me with a smile. “Otherwise, the house is perfect. Sure, it needs some work, but your parents did say they’re gifting their contractor friend so we can make this home our own.”

Kunta X comes with this package deal? I’d missed that. I must have blacked out after my father held up the deed.

“We can make this house whatever we want it to be.” Evan was still talking. “I’m thinking out in the backyard...”

He continued with his own fantasy, but I didn’t hear the rest of anything he said.

I was stuck on the tree he’d pointed to.

“Trees,” my parents had said, smiling the first time they’d shown me the house years ago.

“I love the trees,” Evan had just echoed in.

I officially hated trees.

“Well, the big day is tomorrow.” Evan was saying something or other about the wedding. “We need to get back to the party so we can end the day and get some rest. CJ said his gift for us is to move our furniture from the studio to here while we’re on our honeymoon. I think that’s a great gift. And don’t worry. My parents will take care of us backing out of our lease at The Wharf Warehouse, I’m sure. One less thing to figure out.” He kissed my hand and led me to the door.

“Ummm, Evan, do you think it’s actually safe to live in here?” Where did I even begin? My feet felt like weights had been added to them as I followed him out of the house. The last time I’d spoken out about this place, my words had led to nowhere. What would change now?

“You’re so funny, Selena.” He laughed. “Your sense of humor is one of the things I love about you. I know your parents would never put us in danger.”

“You don’t know my parents,” I murmured. Then, seeing the slight confusion on his face, I threw in a loud laugh that ended with a snort.

“Well, maybe you don’t know me, Selena.” He joined my forced chuckle. “I’m going to get everything perfect for you. For us. I’m certain I can do that.” He nodded like a madman.

“Of course, you will, Evan—” I reached for his hand and squeezed it— “because you are absolutely perfect.”

And, he was. Absolutely. Perfect. My groom was a delicious looking black man from a well-to-do family, with a law degree and a winning smile. He’d joined my church the first time he’d visited and even volunteered to set up the tables for our annual church picnic held that same day. He towered over my five-seven frame at six feet even, and he got me to join a gym with him, and he watched reality TV shows with me. He had smooth hazelnut skin, a trimmed mustache and goatee, clear brown eyes, and charming dimples.

What more could I want or ask for?

He leaned over and pressed his lips on mine, and then, still holding my hand, led us both back to his car.

And that was that.

Tomorrow is my wedding day. My marriage, my life is not about this house. I am marrying the man of my dreams, and he will fix all the brokenness my parents gifted me. This is what I repeated to myself all the way back to the banquet hall.

“Wait until my mother sees this place.” Evan was giddy.

His mother. My spirit groaned.

“Yes, won’t that be nice?” I mean, what was I supposed to say? “We’ll have your parents over for dinner once we get settled.” Once we get a stove that works. And plaster on the dining room walls. And a refrigerator that doesn’t sound like it’s speaking in tongues. And I still haven’t figured out why there’s an “N” where the “H” should be on the kitchen sink faucet.

“The first thing we need is a brand-new welcome mat.” Evan chatted endlessly.

“That was my first thought exactly.” I rolled my eyes out of his view as an unspeakable fear of the future threatened to put a damper on my pre-wedding glow.

A big, brand-new welcome mat is exactly what was needed to make the house welcoming. A big, brand-new mat that said “Welcome to My Happily Ever After. Watch Your Step.”

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