

*The*  
House Guest

*Persuasions, Perspectives  
& Prejudices*



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& Prejudices*



DEBORAH L. NORRIS

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*Dedicated*

*to my husband, Quincy who is my quiet inspiration  
and gentle encouragement to follow my dreams.*

*Also,*

*to my family, for leaving infinite legacy footprints.*

*You are the story.*



## FROM THE AUTHOR

*T*he kitchen table. In my family, it was here that important discussions had their genesis. Opinions were readily expressed in religion, politics, family values, money matters, raising children, taking care of the elderly, education, social responsibility and death. Typically, the children listened, and the adults talked. That said, at a very young age I had a clear idea of the persuasions, perspectives and prejudices of those who sat around the kitchen table with their cups of strong, black coffee. Occasionally, discussions were heated, and tempers flared. For emphasis, there was an occasional smack of the hand on the table top. But, at the end of the day these same strongly opinionated kinfolk showed their unending love and respect for each other with hugs, kisses and goodbyes – until the next spirited visit took place.

I cordially invite you to take an enjoyable, heartwarming journey with me to Tilden, Nebraska and pull up a chair at Maggie's kitchen table to listen in on the latest town gossip, consider the varying opinions expressed during discussions of contentious subject matter, and maybe even catch a glimpse of ourselves or someone we know in the spirited characters. Perhaps at the end of the day we'll be challenged to love more and judge less.

Happy reading!





# CONTENTS

FROM THE AUTHOR ♦ VII

FOREWORD ♦ XI

*Chapter One*

THE INHERITANCE ♦ 1

*Chapter Two*

A LEGACY OF INTEGRITY ♦ 11



## FOREWORD

*Spring 1935*

She pressed her face between the front porch balusters, watching intently as the shiny black Model A Ford turned from the frontage road and onto the elm tree-lined dirt lane leading to the manor. She grabbed her doll and jumped up from her crouched position on the porch. Running quickly to the far end of the wraparound structure, she peered over the top of the railing to see who might be arriving on this warm Saturday afternoon.

The car stopped just shy of the front porch, and all three passengers stepped out to greet the little auburn-haired girl that anxiously awaited a chance to inform them of pertinent news. “Guess what? We’re having strawberry ice cream today,” she blurted, smiling broadly, and at the same time revealing the recent loss of a front tooth.

“Well, do you suppose there will be enough for *me*?” Amelia asked, walking toward the porch steps. In one hand, she carried her bright red purse and in the other, a brown wicker basket draped with a blue and white checkered cloth.

“How about *me*? Your Uncle Allen likes strawberry ice cream, too,” he teased, patting the little girl on the top of her head.

“Well, if there isn’t enough, I’ll share mine with *both* of you,” she offered, seemingly quite comfortable with her solution if there should be an unfortunate ice cream shortage.

“You’re such a sweet girl, Maggie,” Amelia said, smiling warmly at her young niece. “Where’s your Mama?”

“She’s in the kitchen with Rachel, and they’re fixing dinner and I’m supposed to stay outside and play because Mama said so and because sometimes I get in the way,” she rattled on, oblivious to Amelia’s amused expression.

“Where’s your brother Michael?” Amelia asked, as soon as Maggie took a breath.

“Um, he’s out by the barn looking for bugs,” Maggie answered, shuddering at the thought of the many crawly insects held captive in a quart size Mason jar. “He has a whole lot of bugs and he likes to chase me with them.” Her eyes widened as she whispered, “Sometimes Michael gets in trouble with Daddy for scaring me with bugs.”

“Where *is* my brother?” Amelia asked, obviously enjoying Maggie’s breathless chatter and her many animated expressions.

“Who’s *your* brother?” Maggie’s eyes narrowed with a look of bewilderment as she studied Amelia intently.

“Your *Daddy* is my brother,” she explained, reaching for the screen door handle.

“Oh. Well, he’s turning the handle to make strawberry ice cream,” Maggie said, matter-of-factly.

Randall brushed against her and plopped his hand on top of her head. “Hello there, Miss Carrot Top.”

“My name is *Maggie*,” she corrected with emphasis, puckering her lips as if preparing for a confrontation.

“Randall, don’t tease your cousin,” Amelia reprimanded, handing him the basket of fried chicken. “Take this to your Aunt Jenny for me, please.”

Maggie darted through the living room and into the kitchen. “They’re here everybody!” she shouted, her excitement nearly bubbling over.

“Use your *inside* voice, dear,” Jenny softly instructed her young daughter.

“Sorry, Mama,” she said, several decibels lower this time.

“Why don’t you run out back and tell your Daddy that family is here,” Jenny suggested, placing the potato salad, baked beans, and homemade rolls on the countertop.

Everyone gathered around the dining room table for a meal specially

prepared in honor of Randall's sixteenth birthday. They all held their iced tea glasses high, and Daniel offered a toast. "May your years be long, and your life filled with happiness." The round of applause was almost as loud as the sound of laughter.

"Mama, is everyone using *their* inside voice?" Maggie shook her head as if to answer her own question.

"Is anybody in the mood for fresh strawberry ice cream?" Daniel asked, knowing that it was unlikely anyone would decline his offer.

"I am, Daddy," Maggie said, clapping her hands with delight.

"Me, too," Michael chimed, just as excited as his younger sister at the prospect of the frosty treat.

"That sounds wonderful, Daddy," Rachel said, trying to act more mature since her handsome older cousin was at the table.

"Do you need any help, Uncle Daniel?" Randall asked, pushing his chair from the table. "I'll be happy to help you in exchange for an extra scoop of ice cream."

It was nothing less than a picturesque afternoon. The family relaxed on folding lawn chairs, ate strawberry ice cream and sipped iced tea. The air was heavily perfumed with fresh cut grass and cherry blossoms. Maggie giggled as Michael pushed her on the tire swing, and Rachel sat on the porch steps alongside her cousin making small talk. Suddenly, Randall set his ice cream bowl on the step and walked toward the car. "Uncle Daniel, wait until you see what I got for my birthday."

A shotgun blast. Screams that could not be silenced. A dead child.

Destiny is defined as a predetermined course of events considered as something beyond human power or control. The events that unfolded on this otherwise picturesque afternoon were surreal, becoming horrid snapshots in the minds of all who gathered together on that day.



## Chapter One

### THE INHERITANCE

*No inheritance is so great as honesty and integrity.*

~ Deborah L. Norris

*Summer 1959*

*I*t was an unusually hot afternoon in mid-July. Nebraska hot, with rising humidity that made the air feel thick. Maggie leaned against the front porch railing, cupping her hand against her forehead to shield her eyes from the glaring sun. Since she wasn't expecting company, the fast moving dust cloud on the dirt lane leading to the manor was a source of interest. She took a long drink of iced tea, hoping for a cool respite from the sweltering heat – and then turned her attention once again to the approaching vehicle.

The light blue Ford Fairlane rumbled past where she stood, whipped around the back corner of the house, and skidded haphazardly to a stop alongside the walkway that led to the wraparound front porch. Maggie walked slowly to the far end of the porch and arrived just in time to catch a glimpse of the driver's side door swinging open. It creaked loudly. She wondered if, someday, the old car door might just give way and fall to the ground as if to proclaim a triumphant end to its dismal role. Maggie wiped the perspiration from her hands onto her apron and moved with reluctance to greet her all too familiar, but unexpected house guest.

It was Fred. He always arrived in a dusty, abrupt fashion. No advance notice, just him and his little dog. Even though Maggie was averse to speaking it, she had certainly given it ample consideration

– that Fred McRae had to be the most presumptuous person on the face of the earth, pleasant enough in conversation but entirely centered upon his overconfident self. Fred’s imposing height, daunting circumference, and replication of chins gave the initial impression of a force to be dealt with, but when he opened his mouth to speak, the notion soon evaporated. His puffed out chest and strange pompadour offered a profile resembling that of an arrogant cockatoo. A harmless, but arrogant cockatoo.

Fred’s Boston Terrier, Mugs, was even more disturbing, busily marking his territory, and claiming ground that clearly was not his own. Maggie didn’t care much for the pesky little dog, but she tolerated him because he had been Fred’s faithful travel companion for more years than she could count.

All told, it was the good-natured side of Fred that prompted Maggie to continue the welcoming charade and keep a guest room prepared for him on the second floor of the old three-story manor.

**FRED WAS** from Bloomfield, Iowa and had worked for thirty-two years as a salesman for Miracle Suds, a cleaning supply company headquartered in Des Moines. He traveled several days a week within his three-hundred-fifty-mile distribution radius, which included stops in Tilden once or twice a month.

Although he had been a bed and breakfast guest for many years, he rarely paid his room and board fees in full. Maggie figured that Fred must have long ago justified in his skewed way of thinking that swapping cleaning product samples for a portion of his charges at the manor was an equitable exchange. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that she had grown weary of his business travel stopovers, along with his empty promises to bring current his overdue account, which had now reached astronomical proportions. Maggie was certain that Fred was being compensated by his company for travel expenses because he never failed to ask her for a detailed accounting of charges when he checked out.



Middle-aged widow Maggie Anderson Davis inherited the Victorian-style manor and several acres of land as part of the estate of her deceased parents, as well as a sizable trust established for her and nine-year-old Jenna.

The stately manor that Maggie shares with her daughter, as well as occasional house guests, was built by her paternal grandfather in 1901 and remains a proud landmark in Tilden, Madison County, Nebraska. Following in the family footsteps, she rents two of the six rooms in bed and breakfast fashion to what was once a fairly regular but now transitory clientele.

For several decades, the bed and breakfast business proved to be a lucrative venture for the Anderson's, and there remained yet a remnant of obligation to continue the longstanding commitment to family tradition. Unfortunately, Maggie also inherited the free pass situation with Fred, a goodhearted arrangement initiated by her mother.

“GOOD AFTERNOON, Maggie,” Fred muttered as he struggled with his suitcase and the one-handed process of tucking his shirt into the back of his pants. By the time he reached the front porch landing, he was out of breath and thoroughly exasperated when he finally asked, “How are *you* today, Maggie?”

“Quite fine, thank you,” she answered, having learned over time that brevity was the best method of dealing with the likes of Fred McRae. A simple, uncomplicated response to his shallow inquiries always seemed to suffice since he wasn't looking for dialogue – unless, of course, he was the center of it. True to character, Fred's interests were confined to one-way conversation and meal time.

The only one who seemed to have an uncanny knack for unsettling Fred's fragile nerves was Lee Osborne. Without a doubt, Maggie's nose and strongly opinionated neighbor, who lived less than a quarter of a mile down the road, had also witnessed the familiar dust cloud passing by her own farmstead a few moments

before. It was a given that Lee would soon be arriving to ruffle Fred's cockatoo feathers. She lived for this. The only unknown was whether she'd drive the old Pontiac or hustle on foot down the back lane to the manor. But one thing was for certain – Lee was on her way.

Fred carried in his tattered, brown suitcase, the left side held precariously in place with four strips of gray duct tape. Maggie was certain that the suitcase had far more stories to tell than Fred. He stopped briefly in the living room, glanced around as if drawn into some nostalgic moment, and then, with a quick whistle to Mugs, made his way up the two flights of stairs to his room.

Once she heard the last of his heavy-footed steps at the top of the stairs, she announced, "Dinner will be ready at six o'clock, Fred."

He responded with a winded acknowledgement, "I'll see you then, Maggie." The guest room door opened and closed.

Maggie stood for a moment at the base of the stairs, allowing the soft, steady hum of the oscillating fan to become the catalyst for whisking her to a pleasant place of memory. She could easily get lost in this glorious, spacious room with a small adjoining parlor. Her recollections were many, and for the exception of a few complimentary furnishings that she and Jenna added to the interior, very little had changed throughout the years. Maggie's grandfather spared no expense, using only the finest of building materials; baseboards, chair railings, staircases, spindles, hand railings, crown moldings, and doors were all handcrafted with rich cherry wood.

**APART FROM** chicken frying on the stovetop and biscuits baking in the oven, everything else had been gathered from the garden: fresh green beans, red potatoes, sweet corn, and vine ripened tomatoes. The cumulative aromas coming from the kitchen had roused the slumbering giant and his little dog, which was Maggie's cue to set the table and get mentally prepared for Fred's incessant prattle.

The screen door slammed on the back porch and the door into the kitchen swung open. It was Lee, and she was more than ready to spar with the house guest. “So, where’s the freeloader?”

Maggie had a deep fondness for her spirited neighbor and was grateful for her longtime friendship and loyalty throughout the years. On the other hand, Lee was overtly critical of Maggie’s more passive and gentle nature, seldom missing an opportunity to advise her in the art of speaking her mind. Although she rarely pointed it out, Maggie was astutely aware of Lee’s inability to recognize her own personal failings.

“Lee, maybe you should consider giving Fred a reprieve this evening.” Maggie’s suggestion sounded more like a plea than a statement. “Perhaps just this once.”

“Lord have mercy, why on earth would I do that?” Lee appeared totally bewildered by Maggie’s proposal.

“So he can enjoy his dinner in peace,” Maggie countered while reaching into the cupboard for a serving bowl.

“Oh, I see. Is that by chance the free dinner, that’s thrown in with the free breakfast, and the free one night stay?” At this point, Lee was past concealing her irritation. “If Fred is that strapped for cash, he should go to the shelter in Newman Grove.” Lee seemed genuinely pleased with her off-handed solution for Fred’s apparent financial woes. “Now, if it’s peace he’s looking for, may I kindly recommend Marshall-Harlan Funeral Home?” She smiled ever so slightly at her wittiness, but Maggie’s expression remained the same.

“Lee, do you suppose you might give me a hand with setting the table?” Maggie no sooner spoke, than Fred appeared in the kitchen entrance, looking like an odd, life-sized photograph framed out in the doorway.

Lee rattled on as though she were entirely unaware of Fred’s presence, “I don’t understand why you’re using the good dishes, Maggie.” She slowly and methodically arranged the plates on the table. “The China should be reserved for *paying* guests.”

Fred's face reddened and a neck muscle twitched involuntarily, but he readily accepted Maggie's invitation to be seated at the table as a timely diversion. It was clear that he had no intention of allowing Lee Osborne the pleasure of spoiling his hearty appetite. Although she had not been invited to stay for dinner, it mattered little, and Lee went about the business of seating herself directly across the kitchen table from him. It was no secret that Fred cared little for Maggie's meddlesome neighbor, but he wasn't intimidated enough by Lee's sarcasm that he should forego enjoying his meal or telling his many colorful stories, most of which Maggie had heard countless times before.

Only taking a short breath between forkfuls of his dinner and Lee's occasional barbed comments, Fred was seemingly quite comfortable draining the very life out of the room. "I don't suppose I ever told you about the time I ran out of gas just on the other side of Omaha?" He stuffed the last of the butter laden biscuit in his mouth before continuing in a garbled tone, "It's a good thing help arrived soon because all I had in the car was a bag of corn chips and some dry dog food."

Lee rolled her eyes and sighed deeply. "I seriously doubt you were in any imminent danger of starvation, Fred."

**BY EIGHT** o'clock, everyone was exhausted, with the exception of Fred. Even Mugs finally dropped to the kitchen floor from what Lee was swift to identify as unadulterated boredom. Fred finally excused himself to go upstairs, happily accepting Maggie's offer for a few homemade chocolate chip cookies on a nearby plate. He smiled, picked up the plateful of cookies, and swaggered out of the kitchen. Lee shook her head in total disbelief and wasted no time in expressing her utter annoyance. "See what I mean? He has more nerve than a canal horse."

Anxious for some lighthearted dialogue with Maggie once Fred had departed to his room for the rest of the evening, Lee was quick

to ask, "When does Jenna get back home?" She was suddenly aware of the spunky, young girl's absence. "It seems a little *too* quiet around here."

"Well, we can always invite Fred back to the table," Maggie suggested, trying to suppress a smile.

"That's not exactly what I had in mind," Lee said, with a dull expression.

"Anyway, to answer your question, the Bouchard's are driving her home tomorrow afternoon." Maggie sighed wistfully. "It's been a long week without her."

They cleaned up the kitchen while chatting about Jenna's trip to visit mutual friends and longtime neighbors, Doc and Anna Bouchard. After several decades of living in the small, close-knit community of Tilden, they had recently moved to the suburbs of Omaha to live near their son William. Doc was fairly closemouthed about the transition, but Anna had been more forthright with Maggie concerning their struggle to adjust – and why.

Although Lee had little if anything to substantiate her ill feelings about Doc and Anna's son, she refused to whitewash her opinion. "Pray till, I wouldn't live a cow pie's throw from William. Plain and simple, they need to move back to Tilden where they belong." She shook her head at the very thought of William Bouchard. "He always looks like the cat that just swallowed the canary. Mark my words, when you look guilty, you usually are."

Maggie stacked the last of the blue dinner dishes in the cupboard, reaching to the second shelf to retrieve a small plate of chocolate chip cookies that she had squirreled away from view of Fred's greedy self. Turning to Lee with a fun loving smile, she asked, "Would you like a little more coffee to dip your cookies in?" The two friends sat around the kitchen table and shared several heartwarming stories about the Bouchard's until they both started yawning.

"Maggie, do you remember that little black Cocker Spaniel they had that growled and showed his teeth whenever we looked at him?" Lee chuckled at the recollection.

“What I remember is that we teased the poor thing unmercifully,” Maggie answered with a half smile.

“What was his name?”

“Murphy.”

“He was a cranky old dog.”

“No wonder.”

Lee finally pushed her chair back from the table after glancing at the clock. “Lord have mercy, I need to get myself home.”

Traditionally, after a late visit, Lee remained overnight at the manor, and Maggie was always quick to suggest it. “Why don’t you just stay and go home in the morning?” As if an afterthought, she added, “Besides, I probably shouldn’t be left alone with Fred.”

Lee glanced at her with a stunned expression before stating flatly, “There is no way I could handle a dose of Fred first thing in the morning, so I guess you’re on your own.” She shuddered at the thought, picked up a couple of chocolate chip cookies, and made her way out the back door toward home.



**FRED WAS** up earlier than usual the following morning, partly because he had an appointment in Tilden at ten o’clock, but more so because he smelled breakfast. He wasn’t that complex; in fact, Maggie concluded that ulterior motives were probably too deep for him.

“This is a delicious breakfast, Maggie.” Fred hungrily attacked the pancakes, eggs and sausage like a Neanderthal after an extended food shortage. Oblivious to her look of disbelief, he stuffed an oversized bite of pancake into his mouth, and then mumbled, “You’re a fine woman, Maggie.” He gulped his orange juice while simultaneously taking an opportunity to admire her shapely profile. “My, it sure is a wonder that someone hasn’t come along and plucked you right off your feet.”

“Someone?”

“You know, a man.”

“Fred, would you like any more pancakes before I turn off the griddle?” Maggie struggled to keep her annoyance at a manageable level.

It was obvious that Fred felt more at ease without Lee’s challenging presence in the mix. She frequently set him on the defense and caused his neck muscles to twitch against his will. That said, Maggie was certain that Lee’s personal assessment of Fred was accurate – especially when she recalled the conversation they had the night before around the kitchen table.

“Fred is not good-natured, Maggie, he’s manipulative,” Lee remarked with an edge to her tone. “God rest her sweet soul, but your mother should have been horsewhipped for ever allowing him to skip out on his bill the first time. Pray till, he’s been leaving cleaning samples for twenty-five years instead of paying what he owes.” She hesitated for a moment as if trying to come up with a prime example for why Fred should be banished from the manor forever. “Besides, that bar soap is terrible,” she grumbled. “It gave me a fierce rash the first time I used it, and not in a good place either.”

WITH HIS ragged brown suitcase in tow and Mugs standing close beside him, Fred was ready for checkout. As usual, he requested a detailed receipt of his room and board charges and then slowly handed Maggie a few dollars to put towards his bill. Fred’s pained expression at checkout always puzzled Maggie. She wasn’t sure if he felt badly that he wasn’t taking care of his full obligation or if he simply disliked parting with any money at all. He left pretty much the same way he arrived, in a cloud of dust.

Maggie turned her thoughts to cleaning the vacated guest room before the Bouchard’s and Jenna returned to the manor in a couple of hours. Fred’s signature trademark, a handwritten note expressing his appreciation and promising to settle his debt the next time around was propped conspicuously against the antique dresser





## Chapter Two

### A LEGACY OF INTEGRITY

*The goal shouldn't be to live forever,  
but to leave a legacy that will.*

~ Deborah L. Norris

The gold Lincoln Continental rolled smoothly down the dirt lane toward the stately manor, no dust cloud at all, just an air of graciousness that could only belong to the Bouchard's.

In 1908, Canadian-born William "Doc" Bouchard established his osteopathic clinic in Tilden. Along with his wife Anna, who diligently maintained the books, they built a thriving practice that served a clientele as far away as Lincoln. Even though Doc himself was insulin dependent, he religiously adhered to a simple set of health principles to offset his diabetes. He was a strong advocate of eating healthy, exercising regularly, fasting one day a week, regular chiropractic alignments, colonic irrigations, positive thinking, fresh air, God, prayer, plenty of sunshine, and sex until pronounced dead. It went without saying that Doc Bouchard's unconventional beliefs and strong advocacy for fighting disease with changes in diet and lifestyle were not often popular within the medical community.

Now retired and in their late seventies, Doc and Anna Bouchard recently, and somewhat reluctantly, moved to Omaha to live near their son. They always looked forward to visiting friends in Tilden whenever William was agreeable to driving them to Maggie's place for a few days.

UNLIKE WHEN Fred thundered in the day before, and Maggie observed his dust cloud entrance from the safety of the front