



## The Bride Next Door (Texas Grooms Book 2)

By Winnie Griggs

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*Love Thy Neighbor?*

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Turnabout is just a temporary stop for newspaper reporter Everett Fulton. Thanks to one pesky connecting door and a local gossip, he's suddenly married, but his dreams of leaving haven't changed. What Daisy wants—home, family, tenderness—he can't provide. Yet big-city plans are starting to pale beside small-town warmth....

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## Editorial Review

### About the Author

Winnie Griggs grew up in Louisiana in an area her friends considered the back of beyond. She and her siblings explored overgrown lots, cut jungle trails, built forts and camps, and looked for pirate ships on a nearby bayou.

She found her own Prince Charming wearing the guise of a rancher - his steed is a tractor and his kingdom a rural community where they're still living out their own happily-ever-after.

You can learn more about Winnie at [winniegriggs.com](http://winniegriggs.com)

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*Turnabout, Texas*

*April 1895*

The ornery, splinter-ridden door refused to budge, no matter how hard she shoved. Or how hard she glared.

Daisy Johnson stood on the darkened sidewalk, glowering at the weathered barricade that stood between herself and her new home. She absently scratched a splinter from her thumb as she glanced down at the black-and-white dog sitting patiently at her heels. "Don't worry, Kip. I'm going to get us inside, one way or the other."

Kip gave her a supportive yip, then began scratching his side.

A noise from over to her left caught Daisy's attention. Down the street, a shadowy figure exited the livery and headed unsteadily down the sidewalk toward the hotel. Probably coming from one of the poker games the locals held there—an activity she was unfortunately all too familiar with.

Other than that, things were quiet. Which was fine by her. Kip was the only company she needed tonight.

Daisy spared a quick glance at the adjoining building, which housed the newspaper office, and thought briefly about knocking on the door to see if she could borrow something to use as a pry bar. But she discarded the thought almost before it had fully formed. Not only was the hour late, but from what she recalled about the man who owned the place, he was an uppity gent with a high-falutin accent of some sort. His attitude reminded her too much of her grandmother. Not the sort who would take kindly to being roused from sleep. Or someone she'd want to owe any favors.

Turning back to the stubbornly closed door, she jutted her chin out and tilted her hat back. No warped slab of lumber was going to get the better of her, not when she was so close to her goal.

Using her foot to shove aside one of the rotten boards she'd pried from across the door frame, Daisy jiggled the key and turned the knob again. There was just enough light coming from the glow of the nearby streetlamp to confirm the door wasn't locked. Which meant it was just stuck.

"If you think you can outornery me," she muttered at the door as she rolled up her sleeves, "then you better think again." With that, she took firmer hold of the knob, twisted it as far as it would go, and led with her

shoulder as she rammed against the door. Kip stopped scratching and gave her a you-can-do-it bark.

The door held a moment longer, then scraped noisily open a few inches. Progress. But not enough. Kip might be able to squeeze through that opening, but not her.

Steeling herself, Daisy threw her shoulder into it one more time, grunting at the impact. With a last creak of protest, the door gave up its fight and opened wide enough to allow her to pass.

With a triumphant grin and a prickling of anticipation, Daisy retrieved her pack, tossed her bedroll up on her shoulder and met Kip's curious glance. "This is it, boy. We're home."

With a deep breath, Daisy took her first step inside the building, Kip at her heels. The room was mostly cloaked in shadows, illuminated only by what light filtered in from the streetlamp, and it took a few moments for her eyes to adjust.

As she surveyed what little she could see of the room, her grin disappeared. "Jehoshaphat!" She'd spent the night in abandoned barns that were cleaner and neater than this place.

Striding farther into the room, Daisy muttered a few unladylike epithets under her breath as she batted at cobwebs and felt things crunch beneath her boots that she wasn't ready to examine more closely.

She spied a lamp sitting on the counter and was relieved to find a bit of oil still in the base. It took several attempts, but she finally managed to get it lit and then took a closer look around.

She could hear Kip sniffing around, picking up goodness only knew what kind of scents. A couple of loud doggy sneezes confirmed that it was as dusty at his level as it was at hers.

She hadn't expected a servant-scrubbed palace, but hang it all, she'd hoped to find something in a little better condition than *this*. No wonder the previous owner had been so quick to gamble it away.

She started to close the outer door, then changed her mind. It wouldn't hurt to leave it open for a little while to help air out the place.

Daisy tromped across the room, ignoring the skittery scrambling sounds coming from just outside the circle of lamplight. Hopefully, whatever critters had taken up residence in here were on their way out. Still, she was glad for Kip's company.

The back room wasn't much better than the front. In the yellowish light of the lamp, she could see dust, debris and a smattering of rickety furniture scattered higgledy-piggledy across the space. Daisy kicked at an old sack lying in her path, then let out an explosive sneeze as a cloud of dust billowed up in her face.

*Great! This was just pointy-fanged-rattlesnake perfect.*

She fanned the air in front of her between sneezes. Why should the day end even a gnat-speck better than it had started?

Then she caught herself up short. *Not that I'm complaining, mind You, Lord. I know You answered my prayers in a powerful way when You took Pa's weakness for gambling and turned it to good by providing me with the deed to this building. And I truly am mighty grateful. Besides, I do know there's nothing wrong with*

*this place that a bit of honest sweat and elbow grease won't fix up just fine and dandy. You've done Your part, and now I aim to do mine.*

Daisy looked around again. *Make that a lot of elbow grease.*

But that didn't scare her none. No, sir. The place was more than roomy enough for what she had in mind. She could already picture how it would look all cleaned up and put to rights. It would be so wonderful to have a place of her own, a place to set down roots and build a proper life. And to finally make some genuine friends of her very own.

And maybe, if she was very, very good, she could have a family of her very own one day, as well.

*I know, Lord, baby steps. I asked for a family of my own, and instead, You gave me the seeds of one by providing a means for me to settle down in one place. I'm going to do my best to make myself an acceptable helpmeet in the eyes of some God-fearing man. I promise to look past appearance, manner and finances to see the heart of whoever You send my way.*

Feeling focused and enthusiastic once more, Daisy went back to work. First order of business was to clear herself out a place to sleep. There was no way she could lie down in the midst of this gritty, grimy, cluttered mess, so if she was going to get a good night's rest, she'd best start cleaning.

She tested the soundness of a crate near the doorway, then set the lamp and bedroll down. Plopping her hat and pack beside them, she rolled up her sleeves. No time like the present to get started.

Everett Fulton forced his heavy eyelids open, peering blearily around his darkened room. The faint memory of his dream lingered a moment—childhood images of his home in England. Already it was fading, leaving him to wonder if the muffled clatter that had awakened him had been real or only part of his dream.

A moment later, another series of thuds answered the question.

Jerked to full awareness, he tossed off the covers and swiveled so that his feet hit the floor.

It sounded as if someone was rummaging around downstairs. If the not-so-stealthy intruder did any harm to his printing press...

Swiftly crossing the room, Everett paused only long enough to pull on a pair of pants and retrieve the iron poker that rested against the cold fireplace.

Just because he didn't own a gun didn't mean he couldn't defend himself.

Without bothering with a lamp, Everett stole down the stairs, carefully avoiding the fourth tread that had an annoying tendency to creak. His ears strained for some sign of just where his trespasser might be lurking.

He moved to the larger front room first, the room that housed his printing press and served as his office. A faint light filtered in from the large window that faced the street. His gaze went immediately to the bulky shadow that was his printing press. Most of the type was already laboriously set for this week's paper. He would have no compunction whatsoever in trouncing anyone who dared tamper with his work.

Everett's brow furrowed. All was quiet now, but he'd been certain the noise had come from down here. And

everything seemed as he'd left it when he locked the doors and headed upstairs earlier.

Tightening his grip on the poker, he eased farther into the room. Taking a deep breath, he sprang around the corner of the press, his makeshift weapon raised. "Ha!"

But no thug crouched behind the machine's shadowy bulk.

Feeling foolish, he lowered his arm. Had he misjudged the direction the disturbance had come from? Everett turned to his desk, a sour smile tugging at his lips. If the intruder was after a cash box, he would be sadly disappointed.

Nothing.

He moved into the back room where he stored his blank paper and other supplies, but again, nothing.

Everett rubbed his neck, slowly exiting the room. Maybe he'd imagined the whole thing, after all.

*Scriiittch.*

He swung back around. It sounded as if something heavy were being dragged across the floor. He approached the far wall cautiously, then heard it again.

The noise was coming from the other side. Someone was in the adjoining building.

He frowned. The supposedly *vacant* adjoining building.

He'd never been inside, but understood the building didn't house anything more valuable than cobwebs and a jumble of rubbish and cast-off furnishings. What possible reason could someone have for rattling around in there in the middle of the night?

Everett shrugged and moved back toward the stairs. Other than the annoyance of having his sleep disturbed, it wasn't any of his concern.

Then he stilled. Except that there might be a story in it. Something more newsworthy than births, deaths and barn raisings for a change. Since he was already awake, it couldn't hurt to check things out. His pulse accelerated at the idea of a *real* story, a chance to resume his role as reporter rather than mere transcriber and typesetter. It had been quite a while.

Everett hurried upstairs, donned a shirt and shoes, then padded lightly down again.

He still carried the poker. Not that he intended to use it unless he had need to defend himself.

He was a reporter, after all, not a confounded hero.

Stepping onto the plank sidewalk, Everett paused a moment to listen. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked and was answered by a second mutt. Four blocks away he could see light seeping from the windows of the livery. An ash-colored moth lazily circled the nearby streetlamp.

Other than that, everything was quiet. Enough light filtered down from the streetlamps and gauze-covered

half moon that he could see the building next door easily.

He moved forward, studying the front of the run-down establishment. The boards that had barred the door were now lying on the sidewalk against the building, and the door itself gaped open.

He peered in, but it was too shadowy to make out anything but irregular shapes. However, he did notice a yellowish light emanating from the back room—the area where the sounds had come from.

Was it a squatter? Or a misguided thief?

Everett hesitated, listening to the scrapes and muffled grunts, torn between his reporter's instinct to find out the truth of the matter and the niggling voice that told him he'd be wise to arm himself with more than a poker before proceeding.

Besides, what if it was Gus Ferguson, the building's owner? Gus was a crotchety old hermit who kept to himself, except for the occasional trip to town to get supplies and indulge in a bit of drinking and poker playing. In the nine months Everett had resided in Turnabout, he'd never seen Gus look twice at the place, much less go inside. Why would the man choose this unlikely time to come here? Unless he'd decided to stop in after tonight's poker game.

Perhaps it would be best if he just quietly slipped away and forgot the whole thing.

Everett winced at the sound of falling crates. The sound of a woman crying out, however, had him through the door as if shot from a pistol. And was that a dog yapping?

He swallowed a yelp as he bumped his knee against the edge of a sagging counter. He kept going, though, albeit with somewhat impaired agility.

Charging into the back room, the first thing he spied was the rubble of storage shelves that had given way, dumping splintered lumber and unidentifiable contents in a dusty heap.

A grumbled *humph* drew his attention to a woman sitting on the floor, trying to pull her foot free of the mess.

"I'm okay, Kip. But as for this worm-ridden, rickety pile of junk, the only thing it's good for is kindling."

Everett recognized the voice before he got a good look at her face—it had a distinctive lilt to it and boasted a slight accent that he couldn't quite place, but was unmistakable.

Daisy Johnson. What in the world was the peddler's daughter doing here? She and her father had left town two weeks ago.

Miss Johnson looked up and recognized him at the same time. "Mr. Fulton. What're you doing in here?"

"Apparently rescuing a damsel in distress." Still concerned about her predicament, Everett crossed to her in long strides.

The dog seemed to take exception to his approach and assumed a stiff-legged, curled-lip stance in front of Miss Johnson.

"It's okay, Kip," she said, giving the dog a reassuring pat. Then she turned a frown on him. "I'm not a damsel. And I'm not in distress. My ankle just got caught under this mess, is all."

Did she even know what distress meant? "Let me give you a hand with that." Not bothering to wait for an answer, he heaved up on the piece her foot was trapped beneath, allowing her to free herself, all the while keeping a wary eye on the dog. And the dog returned his look, stare for stare.

Once she'd shifted her leg away from danger, he set the offending shelving back down. Then he knelt beside her, doing his best to ignore the dust and grime that surrounded him. "Allow me," he said, taking over the job of unlacing her boot.

"There's really no need," she protested, trying to push away his hands. "I can do that—"

He gave her his best don't-argue-with-me stare. "Be still, please. You're stirring up more dust, and I'd rather not succumb to a fit of sneezing."

She paused, an abashed look on her face.

Good. He'd gotten through to her for the moment. Time to drive his point home. "It's important to make certain you're not badly injured before you try to stand. Or would you prefer I ask Dr. Pratt to take a look at you?"

His words had the opposite effect of what he'd expected. She glared at him. "There's no need to be so snippy. And no, I do *not* prefer to have you bother the doc at this late hour over a few bruises."

Snippy? Didn't the girl recognize authority when she heard it? Clenching his jaw to contain his irritation, he gently slid the worn, dirty bit of footwear, including her stocking, off her foot. He studied her ankle, unhappy with what he saw. "It's already starting to swell and darken. It might be wise to have Dr. Pratt take a look at you, after all."

"Glory be!" She brushed his hands away and smoothed down her skirts. "It's nothing more than a bad bruise." She flexed her ankle to prove her point, but he noticed the wince she couldn't quite hide. "It'll be fine by morning," she insisted.

## **Users Review**

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