



Annette M. Irby

**HER Nerdy
COWBOY**

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Dedication

To my husband, who is neither nerd nor cowboy, but
who has my heart.

Other Annette M. Irby Titles

Love Letters
Husband Material

1

Logan McDaniels lugged his baggage through the airport. So many people wearing cowboy boots and hats. How in the world was he going to fit in here, what with his black-rimmed glasses and lean build? You never saw cowboys in glasses. Maybe they wore contacts. Now, that was a picture—cattle proddin' macho dudes jabbing lenses into their eyes.

His sister Macy stepped forward, a baby on her hip. Where did that little tike come from? Last he knew, she had only Cody, age eight; and Aubrey, age five. He hugged Macy with one arm, careful not to scare the kid. "What gives, sis? You have another one when I wasn't looking?"

"Har har. No, she's a neighbor's daughter. I'm just watching her for a couple hours while her mom's at an appointment. Another baby on the way."

He sighed to himself, glad his sister and bro-in-law stopped at two. Especially now.

The threesome headed toward the airport exit. He glanced around. "What? No niece or nephew for me to pester?"

"Nope, they're with the nanny. Lucy here wouldn't stay with Nanny Claire." Even now, the rug rat clung with white fists and wary eyes.

Wait a minute. Back this truck up. "Your nanny?" Since when could she afford one?

She clicked open the pickup with its crew cab—the

ideal “family” vehicle for ranch owners. Then, she nodded toward the open truck bed and his luggage. “Just strap it down back there.”

He reached for a bungee cord and checked the sky. Not a cloud. Then the horizon. No hills, mountains, bodies of water... anything. When had he agreed to come to Oz?

“I know what you’re thinking, little bro. You’re not in Seattle anymore.”

“What gave me away?”

“That look of the land-locked. No Puget Sound or Cascades, Olympics, or foothills. I’m sure I wore the same expression the first three years Nick and I lived here.”

He latched the bag and tugged the cord.

Macy snapped the tot into a car seat directly behind his spot in the truck. “So, Cowboy Logan, you ready?”

He snorted. “I’m *not* a cowboy.” He climbed aboard with a leery glance in the backseat. “She’s not going to projectile vomit at my head, right?”

“No promises.” Macy pulled out of the parking lot onto a traffic-free road. “She’s in a rear-facing seat. So, even if she does, it’d have to ricochet to reach you.”

“Comforting thought.” He spied an umbrella on the floor. Might come in handy.

Macy looked different. Rounder, calmer than her busy exec days in Seattle. “By the way, nice plaid.”

She tugged on the unbuttoned shirt she wore over her tee. “All part of the garb. You’re going to need new duds, yourself.”

“What, these khakis and canvas tennies won’t cut it?”

“Nope.”

“Don’t say it.” He adjusted his glasses and faced the straightaway, which was indeed one straight, long, endless country road leading to his new adventure. *Yippee.*

“Nerd.”

“Ha! You weren’t supposed to say it. Anyway, I’m trying to keep my geek status a secret. I won’t be accepted into the club if we’re not discreet.” He played at checking left then right.

She laughed. “Get you some plaid, boots, and a cowboy hat, and you’re golden.” She eyed him. “And maybe lose the glasses.”

“Right.” He smiled, but the humor faded. They should address the proverbial elephant in the cab, before the kids and *nanny* were all over their personal space. “Listen, sis, I’m real sorry about Nick.”

She gripped the steering wheel with both hands, locked her elbows, and pressed back into the seat. It’s a wonder she could reach the pedals in this oversized truck. After a couple of swallows, she cleared her throat. “Thanks, Lo.”

He nodded once.

“And you being here is everything. It means everything.” Her voice went all raspy. He couldn’t handle that. Time to revert to razzing.

“So, a *nanny*?”

She chuckled. “What? She’s a great help right now.”

“OK, OK. Can’t wait to meet her. Let me guess. I’m picturing five foot nothin’, grandmotherly, kind eyes, wrinkly. Some cooking skills.”

“She’s amazing in the kitchen. You’ll appreciate that after our foreman gets through with you every day.”

"Ugh."

She glanced at him. "Just having you here lifts a serious burden, Lo. I mean it. *You* are a hero."

"Hmph. We'll see if I can even stay on a horse."

"We'll see if you can walk *after* you do."

"Hear that, little Cindy Lou?" he called to the baby. "Trash talk from your babysitter. I'm in for it."

Claire Langley reached for the bubble wand. "Cody, play fair. Share with Aubrey."

"No!" Cody ran off, splashing bubble soap as he went. Well, so much for having any left when he returned.

Claire prayed for naptime.

Aubrey cried, and Claire tucked her into a hug. "Cody! Go into the house. Right now."

The insolent child ran to his favorite climbing tree, faced her, and poured the rest of the open bottle's contents on the ground. Ever since his father's death, he'd been a menace to his sister, his mother, and Claire, no matter what she tried. Perhaps a male influence would help. But the foreman and other ranch hands were too busy trying to keep the place running.

Maybe he'd respond to Macy's brother. They were due home from the airport any minute. Claire had seen a photo of him as a ten-year-old standing next to seventeen-year-old Macy. He was all brown hair and eyes, black-rimmed glasses, and lanky. Nerdy, but cute.

"Here, Aubrey." Claire dried her tears. "Wait there on the porch. Your brother and I will be back in a sec; then we'll have a snack."

She marched toward the tree Cody had managed to climb. "Let's go, Cody." He stared down at her. "You have ten seconds to climb down." *And those same ten seconds will help me keep my sanity.* "Ten... nine..." She made it to four before he moved. As he hit the ground, he took off toward the house.

Inside, Cody had locked himself in the bathroom.

What was she going to do with him?

Tires crunched gravel in the driveway, and Claire glanced out the farmhouse's kitchen window. Macy was clearly visible. The sun blocked her view of Macy's brother or baby Lucy. Maybe her brother would take enough of the burden off Macy so Claire could return to Seattle. Her mother needed her.

"Unca Lo-Lo!" Aubrey hopped down from her barstool, but Cody beat her out the door. Claire followed.

Poor "Lo-Lo" had barely cleared his door when Cody dove into him.

"Oomph! Dude!"

"You're here!"

Macy tended to Lucy while Logan—wasn't that his name?—scooped up Aubrey next.

"Hey, princess!" His eyes closed and he held her tight, spinning her in a circle with a look of sheer bliss on his face. Bliss and thick black-framed glasses. Far from cowboy material, at least at first glance.

His eyes popped open, and his gaze landed on her. He yanked his attention away and lowered a smiling Aubrey to the ground. Then he straightened, attention on Claire. "Who's this?"

That jawline and defined chin. He may not be alpha material, but he had beta sown up.

Macy stood beside the truck, patting Lucy's back.

“That’s Nanny Claire.”

His brow creased in a comical expression. “Really?” He tripped as he stepped forward, reaching to shake her hand. “I’m Logan McDaniels. Nice to meet you, Nanny Claire.”

Semi-awkwardness aside, his voice was mesmerizing. If he didn’t already do voice-overs, he should. She might want to sneak in while he read to the kids and just listen along. “Hi, Logan. Please, call me Claire.”

He shook her hand. Those glasses held her for a minute. They’d be ridiculous on most people, but somehow they worked on him, wide rims and all. His almost-black hair, short as it was, waved up from his head a bit—in little half-curls. But his eyes. Up close, their light caramel color captivated her, and for just a moment they were the only two people on this land, in this county, in this state.

“Ahem, earth to Logan.” Macy’s teasing shook her from the trance, and Claire was gratified to see, based on how he rubbed the back of his neck and an adorable red shade crept up his neck, that he’d been just as affected. A grin hijacked her own face.

Cody grabbed his hand and tugged hard, given the way Logan’s upper body jerked to the side.

“Hey, buddy! Easy,” Logan scolded. “You want me to go somewhere with you, ask.”

Cody tipped his head. “Come see the tree for my new fort.”

“In a sec, buddy.” Oh, good, he knew to set boundaries. He *would* be good for Cody.

Macy tended Lucy who’d started to fuss.

“Kiddos, let’s finish our snack.” Either of these children with low blood sugar could drive Claire to

exasperation. Same with missed naps. Of course, getting them to settle down might be tricky with their excitement over “Unca Lo-Lo.”

“No! I will not go in.”

“Cody.” Logan put his fists on his waist. “You apologize and obey. Treat Nanny Claire”—he gave her a small smile and then returned a stern expression to his nephew—“with respect. Got it?”

No answer. Just a huff and a deliberate avoidance of eye contact—the same reaction Claire kept getting from Cody these days.

Logan lowered himself, came face to face with the obedience-challenged eight-year-old, and raised one eyebrow high. “Got. It?”

Cody’s lower lip trembled. “I just wanted to show you my tree.”

“After snack time, unless Nanny has other plans.”

They both looked to Claire.

“That would work.” Wow. Having another ally already made a difference. Before Logan arrived she’d been seriously considering handing her apron and title back to Macy with an “I’m sorry, but I can’t help your son” letter.

Little Aubrey headed toward the house, but Cody elbowed her out of the way again.

“Cody,” Claire called as she hugged Aubrey. “Apologize.” He continued right into the house.

“I’ll deal with him.” Macy covered Lucy’s ear and pressed her to her chest. “Young man!” she called and followed him inside. Aubrey joined her mother.

Logan moved to the back of the truck where he unlatched his luggage and set it on the ground, extending the handle. “Must stink to lose your father.”

Claire hugged herself. “Hmm.” Mom wasn’t

promised another day up there in Seattle. And here was Claire, states away. She had to make it in time. To see her. To help.

"Everything OK?"

Get it together. Her pep talk didn't work. Her throat burned. "It's my mom."

Logan released the handle on his luggage. "What's wrong with her?"

"She may be dying." Just saying the words brought a rush of emotion up from her chest, made her heart thump hard inside.

Logan frowned, tilted his head. "I'm sorry to hear that. Where does she live?"

"Seattle."

"You're from the Emerald City?"

"Well, not exactly. Near there."

"Me too." Compassion crinkled his eyes. "Sorry to be nosy, but why are you here if she's so sick out there?"

"To help my cousin's wife."

"Oh... Wait, if you're their cousin, why the nanny title?"

"Macy thinks it helps with respect." Not that it helped much. "Anyway, my sister and dad are staying by Mom's side. It's just hard sometimes."

"Which only makes you heroic." All that admiration in his voice touched something that hadn't been accessed before, something in the vicinity of her thumping heart.

"Macy said you left college to come here. I'd say *you* win where heroism is concerned."

"Aww, shucks, ma'am," he said, grabbing his luggage handle again and tipping the suitcase for rolling. "I'm just here to help my sis." He pinched an

imaginary hat and nodded for her to go first.
She chuckled and preceded him indoors.

“Macy was right. You rock in the kitchen, Nanny Claire.”

All was chaos as Cody and Aubrey munched on their servings of homemade lasagna and fought over who would have the last dinner roll. His niece and nephew were driving him crazy already. How did their nanny stand it?

Claire gave him that cute half-scolding look again. “You can call me Claire. I mean, unless you want me to call you Cowboy Logan.”

Somehow teasing her pressed some pleasure button in his brain. “Sure thing, Nanny Claire.”

A grin spoiled the scowl this time. “Got it, Cowboy.”

“So,” Claire began during a lull between the kids’ noises. “What are you studying in college?”

“I’ve almost earned my teaching degree.”

“Ooh, that’s cool. Which grades are you hoping to teach, and what subjects?”

She seemed genuinely interested. He tried not to think about it. Depending on how long Macy needed him, he wasn’t sure when he’d ever get back to school.

“English, and high school.”

“Great age.”

“Right.” Few people agreed there, but he believed in stirring the minds of teens. Those were the years when he’d discovered his calling, right there in a ninth grade English class. “Or college. I’d have to get my master’s first, though.”

He felt Macy's eyes on him. "But I am glad to be here. Ready to become a cowboy." *Joy.*

Mace slugged his shoulder.

"Ow!" He rubbed the area unconvinced he wouldn't find a bruise later. She'd gotten stronger. "Good example for the kids, sis."

Mace smirked at him, then addressed her offspring. "Never hit your brother or sister, OK, children?"

"You di—" Cody started. Brave kid.

Macy raised her eyebrows, and Cody dipped his head.

"OK, kiddos. Time to clean up. Almost bedtime!" Claire made the statement sound cheery. Good luck with that. He didn't like being sentenced to bed either.

"I want Unca Lo-Lo to put me to bed," Aubrey whined, using Logan's least-favorite nickname. But coming from her, it fit, and he certainly wouldn't deter her and break her heart. She'd been through enough.

"Me too!" Cody demanded from his spot, glaring at his sister.

He waited for Macy's nod and Claire's smile. "Only if you two help clean up," he said.

As they carried their dishes to the sink where Mace rinsed them, he addressed Claire. "Please tell me it isn't bath night."

"Every night is. You wanna verify Cody gets clean, while I help Aubs?"

Aubs? Cute. Like Claire. All that golden blonde hair sweeping over her shoulders and those hazel eyes. "Sure."

A half hour later, Claire already had Aubrey in her princess bed. He'd cajoled Cody, finally having to resort to mean uncle tactics to get the kid to cooperate.

As Cody climbed into bed, Logan tugged off his foggy glasses and used his T-shirt tail to wipe them. They needed a de-humidifier in the hall bath. Crazy fan wasn't working. That was something he could fix.

"Night, Aubs. Unca Lo-Lo will be right in," Claire called from the hallway before entering the room behind him. He rubbed the last of the condensation from his glasses, looking at her blurry face for a moment before re-donning them. Her image crystalized. *That's better.* Wow, those eyes. A cross between green and golden brown—jewel tones. Engaging. Gentle. Perfect nanny material, though she did lack the grandmotherly wrinkles.

She studied him a long moment then turned to Cody. "Good night, Codester." Another cute nickname.

"I wanted Uncle Logan to read me a story."

Logan crossed his arms. The kid was trying to delay the inevitable here. "I read you one while you finished drying off, Cody. It's getting late."

"Time to sleep," Claire chimed in. "Did you say your prayers?"

Cody threw back the blankets and dropped to his knees beside the bed. "C'mere Uncle Logan."

Hadn't prayed on his knees in years, but to humor the kid, he'd do it. He dropped down, folded his hands like his nephew, and checked with Cody. "You first, or me?"

"Me first. You can finish up."

He almost chuckled. "Got it."

"God, thanks for Uncle Logan and my new tree fort. I hope it's comin'. Help me not get in trouble so much." He elbowed Logan. "Your turn." His stage whisper needed work.

“Oof.” Eyes closed, Logan hadn’t seen that one coming. “OK. God, thanks for safe travel and for this family. Please help all of us do what we need to do every day and to be kind to each other. Show us Your goodness so we love You more. Amen.”

Cody’s elbow again. “You’re supposed to say ‘in Jesus’ name, amen.’”

“In Jesus’ name. Amen.”

“That’s better.” Cody untangled his fingers and jumped into bed. “Good job, Uncle Logan.”

Logan tucked Cody in. “Sleep tight, bud.”

“You too.”

Logan spun to see Claire watching from several steps away. He’d forgotten she was there. She wore a warm expression. He flicked off the light while she preceded him into the hall.

Aubrey was already fast asleep when they peeked in, but Logan kissed her forehead. Then, Clare and he thumped down the stairs—Claire decidedly quieter than he.

Back in the kitchen, Macy had finished cleaning. She made decaf coffee, and they sat around the table.

“So, when can you get contacts, bro? You’re going to need them.”

He grimaced. “I do not want to poke myself in the eye every day.”

“Twice a day, actually, and more often, as needed.”

“Wait, you used to wear glasses, didn’t you, Mace?”

“Yup. But lenses are more practical, so I made the switch. Years ago.”

“Plus, you look amazing without them,” Claire told him from her spot across the table.

He choked on his java. "Sorry?"

"Oh, I just mean..." She shot glances between them. "Well, I mean, I saw you cleaning yours upstairs and noticed... uh—" She went silent. And pink.

He should let her off the hook. But she was so cute sitting there, head down over her mug. "You one of those people who poke themselves in the eye every day?"

She gave him her jeweled gaze. "Nope. Perfect vision."

"So far."

She shrugged. "Maybe forever. Neither of my parents have ever needed eyewear."

"Good, because it'd be a shame to cover them up." Had he really voiced that thought aloud? His turn to come across as addle-brained. Not that she—

She swallowed. "I always thought I'd get tinted ones to go either brown or green, or maybe turquoise just to land on a solid color."

He studied her. "I've never seen eyes like yours, and I wouldn't change them." He could get used to this delicious feeling of provoking a reaction out of her—all that fussing she did with the placemat.

"So"—Mace cleared her throat once more, her new habit whenever Logan concentrated too long on the nanny—"our foreman expects you at 4:30."

Logan checked the stove clock a few feet away—9:30. "In the morning?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

"You'll see." She eyed him up and down. "Oh, did you look through Nick's clothes? Will anything fit you?"

"You sure, sis?"

She gave a solid nod. "Yup. Let's get this place in shape. I'll be out there with you."

If she really meant it... "Yeah, Nick and I were near the same size. I'll just notch my belt a little tighter. He must have enjoyed the chow around here."

Macy tapped the back of his hand. "You'll get there."

He patted his not-rounded-tummy. "Especially with Nanny Claire's lasagna."

Claire chuckled. "If you don't stop calling me 'Nanny Claire...'"

He fought a grin, really. Tried his hardest. Her scolding expression wasn't helping.

Humor danced in her eyes. "You're good with the kids. They adore you."

"And I, them." True enough.

"Aww, Lo-Lo. That's so sweet," Macy teased him.

He faked a swat.

"Listen siblings, I have a suggestion."

He zeroed in on Claire, and Mace did too. "Shoot," he said.

"You've seen how much Cody wants to be 'one of the guys.' He's pretty rotten to Aubrey—which, I'm working on, by the way."

"No worries," Macy put in.

She turned her jewel-tones on him. "I wondered if you could take him out tomorrow, let him pal around with you."

"I barely know what I'm doing."

"It's not safe, Claire."

"Listen, not for the entire day, OK? Just some of it, maybe after lunch? I could use the opportunity as a bribe." She whispered that last part, but Logan caught it. Hey, sometimes you did what you had to.

"Sure. Works for me. And I think somebody better figure out how to get that kid a fort built."

"That's your job, bro. That and fixing things around the house."

Like the bathroom fan upstairs. "OK, but I haven't built anything since I was sixteen."

"Lyn will help you. He's great with wood."

"I thought you needed me on the ranch. You know, out with the cattle." Not that he liked the idea.

"I do. Sometimes. But the hands pretty much cover that. Where I really need you is with Cody." Macy wrapped her fingers around her cup. "He's a mess since Nick..."

Logan covered her free hand.

Claire's brow furrowed, and she glanced between them.

"I think you're right," Macy said, her voice a little wobbly. "He needs some guy time. He doesn't always obey me lately, either."

Macy sighed through pursed lips as if trying to control her emotions. She seemed so weary that Logan decided to do something he rarely did. "C'mere, sis." He stood, opened his arms.

She came without the usual fuss. The wetness on his shoulder gave her away before an actual sob sneaked out. "Aww, Mace."

At the table, Claire's eyes watered while she watched them. His own stung although he'd only known Nick a few years, and from a distance. Poor Mace had lost a husband. And Claire, a beloved cousin. And the kids, a father.

Ugh. He was not up to this filling-another-man's-shoes task, no matter what his mother said or Macy thought. He wasn't heroic, as Claire and his sister