

*Rosette*

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Riley

Yellow Rose

*Fearless  
Heart*

Fearless Heart  
*by Johanna Riley*

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Fearless Heart  
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## **CONTENTS**

[Dedication](#)

[Reviews for Johanna Riley:](#)

\* \* \* \*

Fearless Heart  
*by Johanna Riley*

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Fearless Heart  
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Fearless Heart

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## **Dedication**

To my four favorite princesses: Stacy, Bronwyn, Danielle Marie, and Jane. Thank you for your support, brutal honesty when needed, and for opening your hearts to the Chainsaw Weilding Lunatic and her pet, Chauncy. I love you guys!!

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

## Reviews for Johanna Riley:

"I really enjoyed *Christmas Angel* penned by Ms. Riley. I would definitely read other stories written by this fantastic author."

~Diana, Night Owl Review

*Dreaming of You*: "Johanna writes like a dream. Her story will keep you on the edge of your seat until the very end."

~Terri, Fallen Angel Review

"*It's In His Kiss* was a wonderful, light read that I enjoyed very much. I liked the storyline and how the author brought the characters together. It's a modern tale of computer dating and throughout you are hoping that Emma and Tyler are just as physically attracted to each other as they are attracted to each other in other ways. I would recommend this to others to enjoy also."

~Diana, Night Owl Review

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Miranda Hansen stood glued to the paddock fence by the vision of Luke Dannon. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't tear her gaze away from the glorious sight of the big, muscular man. He sat tall and proud on the stallion—a cowboy to the fullest and sexiest. His once shoulder-length, dark brown curls had been tamed and chopped to barely brush his collar. Strong, tanned fingers loosely held the leather reins, while his right hand rested on a taut, jean-clad thigh.

Mona, his mother and owner of the Lazy D, had told her where to find Luke. Not that she needed to be told. The man always spent more time with the horses than he did with guests. His excuse, horses were less complicated.

*Tell me about it!*

From the time she was ten, Miranda and her family had spent their yearly summer vacation with her Grandma Rhoda, the Dannon's long time housekeeper. And from the first moment she saw Luke, she'd lost her heart. Now, watching him ride toward her, love flowered in her breast, and her lips curved in a soft smile.

When he slid from his thoroughbred, Major, she did her best to keep her expression neutral. She knew how he felt about 'tourists,' although, after sixteen years, she'd have thought he would realize she was so much more.

"Hello, Luke." The greeting sounded more breathy than she cared to admit.

"Ms. Hansen." He tipped his hat, a slow smile growing on his handsome face. Leaning against the inside of the gate, he



gestured to the gelding tied to the post a few feet away. "You ready to get on?"

Miranda eyed the animal, chestnut with a white star blazing down his face, her eyes level with the top of his back. "Don't you have one a little shorter?"

He gave a baritone chuckle. "Don't worry, darlin'. Junior's almost as gentle as I am."

It was the same scene played out every summer. She'd been riding horses her entire life, but each year, she pretended to be a helpless female just to watch Luke puff and preen like a peacock. And if it gave her a few extra minutes with Luke, she was more than happy to play along.

He winked a vivid blue eye and patted the saddle. "Put one foot in the stirrup, and I'll help you up."

One hand over hers and the other planted firmly on her backside, Luke handed her into the saddle. The imprint of his palm scorched her bottom. Shivers dancing along her spine.

With effortless grace, Luke swung himself up on his black stallion. He sat tall and proud, yet relaxed, in the saddle.

She briefly closed her eyes, drew in a deep breath and released it slowly. If he didn't acknowledge his affections this afternoon, this would be the last summer she'd visit the ranch. She'd start a new job, a new life. This time, Miranda came to the ranch—to him—straight from graduating top of her Veterinary class specializing in Equine Medicine—and with two ready job offers. One prosperous and more than a recent grad could ever imagine, and the other from a simple dude ranch, a lot less money or prestige, but possibly worth so

Fearless Heart  
*by Johanna Riley*

much more than either. All depending on one thing, one person—Luke Dannon.

So, here she was. Before she made a decision, she needed one more chance to convince him they belonged together. When it came to loving him she was fearless, and to get through his thick head, she was going to have to take drastic measures—including give up a possible dream job to be with him.

"Let's ride." With a soft click to Major he put them in motion.

The pace was slow and steady. The trail took them through a canopy of weeping willows and along a happy, babbling creek. Her heart thumped in time with the ducks as the feathered friends bobbed and floated with a lazy quack hello. The innocence of youthful laughter, cherry blossoms dancing on a cool breeze and visions of her and Luke floating down the creek in inner tubes—memories of summers past—assailed her senses. Life was so simple then.

Miranda could have made this ride alone, she'd done it so many times, but today she needed Luke's company. The whole flight from Orlando to Charlotte, North Carolina, her mother tried to talk her out of her plans, tried to convince her to take the job in Kentucky. Miranda knew her mother meant well, but she wasn't about to turn her back on a final opportunity to tell Luke she loved him.

If her fearless heart got broken, so be it. At least she'd know she took the chance, and didn't run away like a frightened rabbit.

"Have you guys been busy?" Miranda asked, drawing up alongside Major.

Luke tilted his head to one side, regarding her silently. A wary frown marred his handsome features.

*Gee, Luke, I'm not asking for family secrets here.*

"Steady, but nothing we can't handle." The words rumbled from his throat like a low growl.

*Wow, he's getting testy in his old age. "I didn't suggest you couldn't handle being busy." So much for trying to make conversation.*

They stopped under a patch of oak and maple trees, near a small creek adorned with purple, pink and white wild flowers. Luke picked a spot by the bank, the very one Miranda had hoped he would. Didn't he realize how intuned they were, how they seemed to read each other's mind? In previous years, they'd spent many hours sitting under those trees, listening to the water dance over the rocks. They'd talked, shared secrets and dreams, and, little by little, year by year, Miranda had fallen deeper in love.

Desperately, she hoped Luke had fallen in love, too. Moments of tenderness in the depths of his blue eyes, a hand at the small of her back, soft smiles and sidelong glances spoke his feelings louder than any words ever could. So then, why did it feel like he was holding back?

In one fluid motion, he dismounted and took hold of Junior's reigns to help her do the same. It required no effort on her part to get out of the saddle, but she waited until he wrapped his arms around her waist to brace her palms against his shoulders and slide to the ground. Her legs

wobbled slightly, and Luke's arms slipped just a bit around her middle, holding her a little closer, sending her pulse into a frenzied spasm.

He kept his hold on her just a moment longer before stepping back.

Wringing her hands nervously, she waited for him to secure the horses to the hitch tie he'd installed a few years back. He moved with a cat's grace, each step, each hand gesture precise and smooth. Luke pivoted toward her, and advanced. With determination, she stepped in front of him, placed both hands on his solid chest and backed him up against the tree trunk.

He didn't fight the force of her hand, and backed up willingly enough. To Luke's credit, his only sign of surprise was a slight widening of his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"I'm proving a point." She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck, into the dark curls of his hair and pulled his head down to hers. As their lips met in satisfying heat, a sense of completion and rightness washed over her.

Luke's long fingers tangled in her hair, his palms framing her face. His tongue slid into the recesses of her mouth, caressing hers with a lover's touch. Euphoria filled her, floated her on a cloud, as his hands worshiped her skin.

But, as suddenly as he deepened the kiss, he pulled away.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this, Randa." He wiped a hand across his lips as if wiping away her touch. "You're asking too much of me, and I can't."

Her cheeks flamed at the rejection as she gulped a ragged breath. Finally, after years, she got to kiss him. *And he'd*

*responded, damn it.* Year after year she'd laid her heart in his hands, and year after year he'd returned it, keeping a sliver for himself. Now, he tossed all the jagged pieces back at her.

She shoved her fingers through her hair, readjusting the strands in the tight pony tail before dropping her hands to her sides. "Can't or won't? Do you have any idea what it took for me to come here this week? What I gave up? My God, Luke, I love you and you..." The anger deflated when she met his gaze. Those electric blue eyes held a hint of pain, but a stronger glimmer of steel finality. "You *don't* care, do you?"

"You don't understand."

He stood, arms crossed, and stared down his nose at her, as if a principal scolding a naughty child.

"Don't patronize me." She scowled and matched his glare.

He threw his hands in the air and walked to the edge of the water. "You city girls are all alike. You come here, forced by Mommy and Daddy every summer, fall in love with the idea of being with a cowboy, and when you go home, I'm forgotten. This ranch is my life. I can't put it on hold every time a woman thinks she's in love with me." Luke ran his hands down his face. "I can't care, Miranda." He gripped the back of his neck and gave a frustrated growl. "You just don't get it."

"What don't I get? That you're bullheaded? That you're so afraid of being hurt you refuse to *even try*?" She untethered Junior's reigns. "Grow up, Luke."

"What do you want me to say, Randa? You don't belong here, you're a city girl. Why would you want to hold on to something you can't have? You have your trust fund, your

posh city life, and the world is your playground. This"—he spread his arms wide to gesture to the land—"this is all I have, and it's all I want."

Sadness stabbed her deep in the chest. He didn't want her.

She pinned him with an icy glare, then put one foot in the stirrup to mount.

"Give me your reigns." He held out one hand and put the other on his hip. "Let's talk about it."

Miranda mounted unassisted. She frowned down at him, her heart twisting painfully. "I came here to fight for you, Luke Dannon. But even I can't fight against your stubborn pride." She wanted to say more, but what was the use? Men like him never changed.

She jabbed her heel into Junior's haunches and, together, she and the chestnut gelding flew across the prairie back toward the ranch house. Tears streamed unheeded down her cheeks, her sobs drowned out by the pounding of hooves. Her heart might have been fearless but it wasn't shatterproof. The sooner she got to the main house, the sooner she could put Luke Dannon out of her heart.

Luke wanted to kick himself for putting the hurt in Miranda's beautiful brown eyes.

*I love you.*

Those three little words thrilled him, and destroyed him like no other. He loved Miranda. When she'd kissed him, his heart jolted in his chest, and, for the first time in his life, he felt whole, alive. Hope sprung, their future danced before his eyes. But what he said to her held true. The ranch was his life, and he couldn't just give it up because she said she loved

him. He wasn't cut out for city life. If he left the ranch to be with her anywhere, after awhile neither of them would be happy. He couldn't do that to himself ... or to her. No, he needed a woman who wanted him *and* the ranch—all or nothing, not just a seasonal relationship.

He watched her ride away, the words from her lips not making any sense. *What had she given up? A week's vacation? A winning lottery ticket? An old boyfriend wanting her back?* No matter how puzzling the words, the *I love you* kept coming back.

The moment Junior turned, Luke took his hat off his head and wiped his brow with a frown. He slapped the Stetson back on his head, tore Major's reigns free of the post, and mounted the horse in one smooth motion.

He was barely five feet from her when he saw Junior rear back, startled by a raven taking off from the weeds.

As if in slow motion, he watched in horror as Miranda tumbled out of the saddle and over Junior's flanks. She landed on her tailbone and jolted backward, her head bouncing off the ground before coming to a sick, motionless stop.

And his world crashed to a terrifying halt.

*"Miranda!"*

Heedless of his own safety, he swung off Major and ran to her side. His boots skidded in the dirt, and he dropped to his knees beside her. Fear slammed his chest. Only the slow, steady rhythm of her breathing assured him she was still alive.

Fearless Heart  
by Johanna Riley

Luke ran his hands over every inch of her body, checking for broken bones and injuries. Despair clawed at his gut. How could he be such an idiot? *Damned stubborn pride*. If Miranda was hurt, he'd never forgive himself.

Partial relief coursed through him as he finished his inspection. She had a slight bump on her head but otherwise had no external injuries.

"Miranda, honey, can you hear me?" He wanted to tell her he took back everything he'd just told her, if only she'd open her eyes and smile at him. He would let go of his pride, risk his heart...

He brushed her silky blonde hair from her cheek. Slowly, she stirred, her beautiful face contorting in pain. "Oh," she moaned and started to rise.

"Don't move. Lay still until you've been checked out." He tried to hold her down, but she shoved his arms away.

"Cowboy, if you don't help me up, the paramedics will have to check *you* out."

She staggered to her feet and a smile twitched at the corners of his lips. That was his Miranda, stubborn and feisty as ever.

"Are you hurt?" *Please don't let her be hurt because of me.*

"Just my pride." Miranda swatted the dirt from the seat of her jeans and took a step toward Junior.

Luke eagle-eyed every breath she took. She swayed slightly, her arms jutting out for balance. He caught her and secured her against his chest. Her scent teased his nostrils, cherry blossom mixed with pure woman. Her curves melded



into his embrace, warming his very core. "God, woman, you scared the life outta me."

Miranda squirmed within Luke's embrace. *Why won't he let me go?* Reaching for him had been reflexive. She didn't need him to lean on, wouldn't ever again ask for *that* privilege.

"Relax, and let me hold you," he chided against her hair.

She stilled and, just for a moment, allowed her body to melt against his. *Just this last time*, she told herself.

"I'm sorry, Miranda."

*Did Lucas Dannon just apologize?* Reluctant to leave his arms, she nevertheless pulled away—before she was powerless to do so.

"It's not like you pushed me off the horse, Luke." Trying to remain steady, ignoring the blazing headache and pain in her tailbone, she walked over to Junior. He lifted his head when she approached and nuzzled her shoulder with his snout. She wasn't sure what hurt more, her bruised body, or her pride. Miranda just wanted to escape, to lick her wounds—physical and emotional—in private.

"It's okay, baby, I know you didn't mean it." She rested her forehead against Junior's neck.

Luke's shadow crept beside her own seconds before his hand cupped her shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay?"

The concern in his voice was almost her undoing. Pride steeled her backbone. She wasn't about to let him get back under her skin that easily. "I'm fine. I've got a hard head and a lot of padding in my backend. It'll take more than a fall to hurt either." Her heart, on the other hand, might not recover so easily.

With infinite tenderness, he urged her around and stepped closer. His six-foot-five frame enveloped her, comforting, a safety net for her soul. Her heart tugged painfully as she stared up into blue eyes so dear. She knew every line of his face, every curve in his smile. How would she bear never seeing him again?

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Randa. You know better than anyone how hard headed I am."

Not wanting to look at him, she dropped her gaze and snorted in agreement.

"Mom and I worked so hard to build this ranch into a success. I can't throw it all away just for love."

His sigh cut straight to her heart.

"You know what, screw it. The truth is, Randa, the thought of you loving me is terrifying."

That statement brought her head up. Stars whirled in front of her eyes like dancing snowflakes, but she fought against the dizziness. This conversation was too important to stop for a little headache. "I scare you?"

He brushed the pad of his thumb over her lower lip. "*You* don't scare me. Okay, you scared the hell outta me when I saw you fall, but what really scares me is the responsibility."

Miranda cocked an eyebrow, and tilted her head away from him. His thumb was wreaking havoc on her senses. "Now I'm really confused."

Luke closed his eyes and gently cupped her face bringing her head back to touch his forehead. "You really aren't going to make this easy on me, are you?"

"You've already made your feelings for me very clear, remember? You can't get involved. What more is there to say?"

"What did you give up?"

"What?" Confusion wrinkled her brow.

"Earlier, you said you gave something up. What was it?"

"Oh. That." She pushed away from him, once more putting space between them. Tears threatened to blind her and she blinked them away furiously. She didn't want to think about leaving Luke. Nonetheless, she needed to give him an answer. She needed to completely clear the air before she left. "I was offered a job on a horse ranch in Kentucky, but I've been putting them off."

Luke's handsome face held a frown. "Why?"

"Because of you. Even though I knew you didn't want a city girl, I had to give it one more shot. I had hoped you would finally realize I'm a country girl at heart. I belong here." Miranda released a shaky sigh and waved her hand, gesturing over the land to emphasize her point, then wrapped her arms tightly around her middle. "Your mom emailed me a few weeks ago and told me the Lazy D was looking for a new vet and I applied. This morning she offered me the job, but..."

She closed her eyes so she didn't have to see the anger build in his. After their conversation, there was no way she could accept Mona's offer. Day after day of seeing Luke, having him in arm's reach, knowing she could never touch him, but also knowing they'd never be able to go back to the easy comradery of their childhood would destroy her. Nope,

her declaration of love and his ultimate rejection had killed that hope. She planned to go back to the ranch, pack her suitcase and take her battered heart immediately to Kentucky.

Luke closed the distance between them. "What does your heart want?"

"You haven't listened to a word I've said, have you?"

"I love you, too."

Miranda blinked once, twice. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

He gave a sad smile. "When you told me you loved me, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. But letting you love me is a big responsibility. You represent everything that terrifies me about love. You need to understand, Randa. I'm afraid that by loving you I have to face the fact that I'll lose you, and have to let you go. Every summer, I have a few cherished weeks of seeing you leaning against my corral fence, but then you go and my heart is ripped out. *Every* summer. And I'd be alone again."

He sighed, a deep exhale that pierced her heart. "I thought if I kept you at some kind of distance, lied to both of us, I could protect myself." He stroked her cheek. "But then you said you gave up a dream job to be here with me. Your words give me hope. I want to keep you here forever, but it has to be because *this* is where you want to be." Luke touched his forehead to hers again. His eyes closed and his warm breath whispered over her face. "I love you so much, Randa. And I was stupid enough to almost let you slip through my fingers."

He covered her mouth with his, wrapping one strong arm around her waist to pull her flush against him. Desire, hope

Fearless Heart  
*by Johanna Riley*

and love flared deep in her belly. Hot lips, firm yet sensual, teased and caressed, pulling and nipping a response from her.

When he slowly ended the kiss, he looked deep into her eyes. "If I haven't ruined my chances, do you think we could start the afternoon over?"

"Do I have to fall off the horse? Because I don't think my butt could take it again."

Luke laughed and lifted her in his arms. "I do love you, Miranda Lee Hansen."

Heart overflowing with love, Miranda kissed him again, this time confident her fearless heart had not steered her wrong.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Fearless Heart  
*by Johanna Riley*

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