

---

*Novel: First Chapter – Second Place*

---

# RESCUING SAMANTHA

*Heidi M. Thomas, Chino Valley, Arizona*

---

## Chapter 1

FOR SALE OR LEASE: 360 acres prime pastureland. Ingomar, MT. Great starter ranch. Call Teresa Knudson 555-2589.

Samantha Moser's heartbeat echoed every bump in the dusty country road. She was coming home.

Even though she'd never seen this ranch, it was as much a part of her as the blood pulsing through her veins. Her great-grandparents had once owned this piece of Montana. Made a new beginning here. Realized a dream here. Sam could hardly breathe, and it wasn't just the dust swirling through the open windows of the car. This might just be her chance for a new beginning.

"Yikes." Teresa Knudson let out a yelp as her car hit a large pothole. Sam glanced at the real estate agent, dressed in boots, jeans and western shirt. She guessed Teresa's age about twenty-five, just three or four years older than she.

Scrapbook pictures from the 1940s and '50s when Great-Grandma Nettie and Grandpa Jake lived here conjured images. A white two-story house with a wrap-around porch. A leafy cottonwood tree in front where a hammock swung. And a tall, classic red barn with white trim, and horses in the corral. Sam rubbed her sweaty palms on her jeans. *I can't wait to see it. Teresa said it was a "fixer-upper," but surely, a few repairs and a coat of paint would spruce it up nicely.*

"How much farther?" Sam was ready to get out and walk if it would get them there faster.

"Just over this little hill." Teresa steered around another rut. The spring-fresh prairie spread around them like an endless sea, broken only by undulating hills until it reached the low horizon, seemingly the end of the earth. This is how Sam remembered her

childhood in Montana, before her family moved to Arizona. This is what had been calling to her since she was ten: *Come home, come home.*

Teresa finally turned off onto a narrow track, and they jounced through a gully and up a low rise. Sam's stomach swooped with the motion. She leaned forward as the place came into view.

And gasped.

Silhouetted against the white-hot blue of the eastern Montana sky, the old house's doors and windows gaped like a toothless old woman who had lived too long without proper care. The barn listed and sagged, gray weathered boards showed missing panels, weeds grew over fallen corral fences.

"Oh my." Sam's dream image faded like the remaining patches of red paint. A cloud seemed to cover the sun.

"Well, it's got great bones." Teresa's cheerful voice sounded forced. "And look at that rich pastureland."

They got out of the car, and Sam gazed beyond the buildings. A slight breeze waved through the tall grass. A sage hen chuckled from the gray-green brush. No other houses marred the landscape. No dull traffic roar interrupted the rustlings of the prairie. She took a deep, cleansing breath. All the tension she'd been holding inside began to melt.

She could picture her great-grandparents on their horses bringing in a bunch of cattle for branding. Frisky white-faced calves. Mamas lowing plaintively. An electric thrill ran through her. The images changed. Instead of peeling paint and fallen fences, she could again picture a bright red-painted barn and a newly-fenced pasture filled with sleek thoroughbred mares and their spindly-legged colts.

"Oh, it's beautiful," Sam whispered.

Teresa coughed, but quickly regained her composure. "Yes, it is. Can you picture yourself living here?"

Sam smiled at the woman. "Absolutely. This is family history. What better place for my horse ranch? I have to have this place."

"You do?" Teresa's tone was incredulous for just a second, then she swiftly changed back into Realtor mode. "Of course you do. I knew you were the right person."

Sam laughed, almost giddy. Then she sobered. "But the buildings. Wow. They're in worse shape than I anticipated. I wouldn't be able to live here."

"Oh, don't worry about that. If you want to rent a place in town, I can help you out there."

Sam scuffed the toe of her boot in the dirt. "But I'd really want to live here. If I sign a lease with Jack Murdock, do you think he'd work with me to fix up the buildings?"

"You know, I think he'll be willing to make some kind of deal." Teresa leaned closer to Sam and lowered her voice, as if sharing a secret. "He's been trying to sell this property for years. He just decided to lease it out, so I think he'll talk. And I know some excellent contractors in Miles City. I'm sure they can make it habitable in no time." She fished her

cell phone out of her purse and turned in a circle, looking for reception. "Darn. No cell service out here. We'll have to go back to Ingomar to call."

Sam nodded. "I'd like to lease with an option to buy. And my fiancé is a building contractor. We could do the work, if Mr. Murdock would give us a price break."

Sam followed Teresa back to the car. Every nerve ending in her body tingled. This could be it. A place to start over, to forget the failures, the accident. She shut her eyes against memories, then opening them again, began shoring up the slumping barn in her mind.

Driving back over the eight miles to the tiny town, Teresa kept up a lively chatter. "You know, I think my grandparents knew your great-grandparents. I remember them talking about Jake and Nettie's love of horses and rodeo."

Sam glanced at the other woman. "So you're a native."

Teresa laughed. "More or less. I grew up here. When I graduated high school, I couldn't get away quick enough. Moved to Missoula for college but dropped out my sophomore year to go into real estate. But," she downshifted to drive through a rutted washout, "something out here kept calling to me. I just moved back a few months ago."

Sam felt her eyes widen. *This woman understands.* "Me too."

"Yeah. Must be something in the wind." Teresa laughed again. "What kind of ranching do you plan to do?"

"I have a rescued thoroughbred mare, and I want to start a breeding ranch." Sam was amazed at her confident tone. She would do this. She *could* do this.

"A rescued horse? That's awesome." Teresa glanced into the rearview mirror. "What a cool dream. You know, I've just known you a couple of hours, but I feel like we have some things in common." She paused a moment. "And, I guess I wouldn't feel right if I didn't warn you it's going to be a tough road. Montana, and especially this part of Montana, isn't the best place to make a good living."

Sam waved off her comment. "Oh, I know what I'm getting into. I grew up on a ranch about fifty miles northwest of here, near Horse Creek. I was helping out as soon as I could walk, almost. My parents and grandparents sold it about twelve years ago and moved to Arizona." She smiled at the other woman. "I'm not worried." Her words belied the flutter just under her heart.

Teresa glanced at Sam with raised eyebrows. "Okay."

Leaving the rutted road, the car bounced down an equally rough "main street" with only a few ramshackle, boarded-up buildings. Teresa parked in front of the Jersey Lilly Bar and Café. She pulled out her phone again. "Good. I can make that call now. Why don't you go on inside and order us a Coke, my treat."

Sam walked into the dim, cool bar that smelled of stale cigarettes and beer. She ordered soft drinks from the bartender, the only person in the room, and sat at a table near the window. It wasn't going to be easy. In fact, if it wasn't for Kenny, she wouldn't

have any financial backing. She smiled, anticipating their new life together. And the peace that came over her when she gazed at the prairie landscape was priceless.

"Yes, ma'am." Teresa's shout directed Sam's attention to the door where the agent scurried into the bar toward her. "He'll go for it. Lease with option to buy, one month down with four months' gratis on the lease for fixing up the buildings."

Sam flashed the OK sign with her fingers. "Let's do the paperwork."

Teresa had a big grin. "Oh, that's great. Jack is ecstatic." She laid out the papers on the table and took a sip of her drink. "So, I'll add the new terms here, and then we'll meet tomorrow and you can sign the new contract."

After going over the wording and nodding her approval, Sam fished her cell phone from her jeans pocket. "I've got to call Kenny now and tell him. He'll be so excited. He's always wanted to be a cowboy." She punched buttons and listened to the phone ring somewhere on a jobsite in Phoenix. "Oh, and Aunt Monica, too. She's the one who told me about this."

Teresa held her glass up to clink with Sam's. "This is so great. To the rescuer of horses. And houses too."

The next day after she'd scribbled her name on the last line, butterflies kicked up dust inside her stomach. Sam swallowed hard. *Oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into? This will be a huge undertaking. What if I fail? Again.*

*No. She took a deep breath. I gotta do this. It will work out, I know it will.*



### *About the Author*

Heidi M. Thomas grew up on a working ranch in eastern Montana, riding and gathering cattle for branding and shipping. Her parents taught her a love of books, and her grandmother rode bucking stock in rodeos. She followed her dream of writing, with a journalism degree from the University of Montana. Heidi is the author of the award-winning "Cowgirl Dreams" novel series and *Cowgirl Up: A History of Rodeo Women*.

*Seeking the American Dream* and *Finding True Home* are based on her mother who emigrated from Germany after WWII. *Rescuing Samantha* will be published in the fall of 2019. Heidi makes her home in North-Central Arizona.