

Refuge at Rattling Forks Ranch

A SILENT VOICES NOVEL



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A Third-Generation Story

By Polly Mae Cashin

A novel by Polly Mae Cashin

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Chapter 1 | Shelter

*The ground beneath your feet
isn't really dirt.*

✿ SEED ✿

Olivia: The Storm

The storm didn't care that Olivia Grace had already had a week from hell.

It came anyway—howling, ruthless, throwing sleet at her windshield like it wanted to erase the road entirely.

She gripped the steering wheel with white-knuckled determination. The wipers thumped in protest, barely keeping up with the ice that smeared across the glass.

Olivia reached for the radio—anything to break the tension winding tight in her chest. But the speakers only crackled with dire forecasts of black ice, road closures, and temperatures plunging fast. She snapped it off.

She swallowed hard and leaned forward. Her headlights blurred into a tunnel of white. Each mile felt like a negotiation between faith and fear.

Then—suddenly—the rear of the Jeep broke loose.
The world jerked sideways.

Olivia corrected, but too late. The Jeep swung across the road, its headlights sweeping over the snow before

she saw the oncoming semi through the whiteout—too large, too close, its horn splitting the storm.

The scream lodged in her throat never made it out.

Metal shrieked. The seat belt snapped tight, and the sky disappeared.

The Jeep struck the frozen edge of the ditch. Gravity shifted.

Sky—snow—dirt—sky again.

Her ribs cinched beneath the belt's bite as glass shattered beside her like brittle ice. Metal struck frozen earth with a force that rattled through her bones. Something hard caught her temple.

And then—

silence.

Not true silence—more like the world had been shoved underwater.

Olivia hung upside down, suspended by the belt, breath trapped somewhere behind her teeth. For several seconds, she could hear nothing but the faint tick of cooling metal and the blood rushing in her ears.

Her shoulder burned where the strap cut into her. Something warm slid down her temple. Panic crept in slowly, like cold rising through the seams of her coat.

She blinked hard, trying to make the spinning stop.

Somewhere above the ditch, the semi thundered past.

She reached for her phone, but the familiar weight in her pocket was gone. Her hand searched blindly beneath

her—across loose papers, a can of seltzer, and the contents of her purse scattered over the ceiling.

Everything except the one thing she needed.

The air shifted.

Sharp. Acrid.

Gasoline.

Her heart slammed once, twice, like it was trying to break free of her chest and run without her. She fumbled for the ignition, her fingers slipping over the key.

The engine coughed, hissed... then died.

For a few breaths, Olivia did what she always did. She tried to fix it.

The panic in her throat.

The dead engine.

The seat belt holding her upside down while gasoline seeped into the air around her.

Fixing had kept her alive once.

But control couldn't un-flip a car.

The truth pressed in with the cold.

She was alone.

Crumpled.

Trapped.

Snow gathered against the broken glass, and the smell of gasoline grew stronger. If she didn't find a way out, the cold could take her.

"Okay," she whispered, though nothing was okay.

Her breath shook.

"God..."

The word came before she decided whether it was a prayer, an accusation, or a bargaining chip.

Maybe it was all three.

Benjamin: The Rescue

Benjamin Blackstone had learned to recognize the sound of storms that demanded attention.

Inside the old timber church beyond Pine Haven, he worked beneath cedar-paneled walls while the blizzard battered the windows. The building had survived more than a century of Minnesota winters, though time had left its testimony in leaking plaster, tired wood, and windows that trembled whenever the wind struck hard enough.

Benjamin dipped his brush and returned to the section of trim he had been painting. He had begun to think of the renovation as devotion. Every brushstroke, every nail driven into place, felt like an offering—something useful he could do with his hands when prayer did not quiet everything inside him.

A gust struck the stained-glass windows hard enough to make them shudder. Benjamin looked up.

Through the snow, light swept once across the ditch beyond the church grounds—then vanished.

He stepped closer to the window.

At first, he saw only white. Then the storm shifted, revealing the dark underside of a vehicle where no vehicle should have been.

Benjamin dropped the brush.

He grabbed his coat and flashlight and ran.

The wind struck the breath from him as soon as he left the church. Ice slashed across his face, finding the narrow spaces between scarf and skin. His boots broke through the crusted snow and sank deep, forcing him to wrench each foot free before taking the next step.

A knot of dread tightened in Benjamin's stomach with every step.

Twisted metal. Shattered glass. A vehicle broken open beneath a winter sky.

For half a second, the years collapsed. He was approaching another wreck in another storm, already too late to change what waited inside.

No.

Not this time.

Benjamin forced himself forward.

"Hey!" Benjamin shouted, bending near the windshield. "Can you hear me?"

No answer.

His heart struck hard against his ribs. He swept snow from the glass with both gloved hands, trying to see through the fractured windshield.

"Are you okay?"

For one terrible second, there was only wind.

Then a faint voice reached him from inside.

"I think so."

Relief moved through him so sharply it almost weakened his knees.

“All right. Stay with me. I’m going to get you out.”

“Hang on. Let me see if I can open the door.”

The Jeep rested partly on its roof and passenger side, the driver’s door angled above him. Benjamin planted one boot against the frame and pulled. The door shifted less than an inch before the bent metal caught.

“It’s jammed,” he called. “I’ll be right back.”

A fallen branch lay half buried beneath the snow several feet away. He dragged it free, wedged the thick end into the narrow opening, and leaned his weight against it.

The branch bowed. Metal groaned.

Benjamin reset his grip and pushed again.

The door broke loose with a violent pop, spilling snow and shattered glass around his boots. Inside, a woman hung upside down from her seat belt, blood running along one side of her face.

He made his voice calmer than he felt.

“We need to take some pressure off the shoulder strap. Can you brace one foot against the passenger window and lift your weight a little?”

She struggled to move in the confined space. Her boot slipped off, taking her sock with it, and her bare foot struck the freezing passenger window.

She flinched but pushed against the glass, lifting as much of her weight as she could.

Benjamin leaned into the wreck, carefully reaching across her without trapping her more tightly beneath

him. There was no room for distance, so he kept every movement deliberate.

“I need you to shift toward me a little,” he said, his voice tightening with effort. “The angle is bad.”

He braced one foot against the doorframe and worked his fingers beneath the buckle.

“Almost there. Hold that position.”

The Jeep creaked around them.

“Just a little more...”

The buckle released.

She dropped—

Too fast. Too close.

He caught her on instinct, his arms closing securely around her as her weight struck his chest.

For one suspended second, neither of them breathed.

Her face was inches from him. Her hair smelled faintly of cold air and something floral beneath the gasoline. Benjamin became aware of the warmth of her body against his—and immediately hated himself for noticing.

He helped her find solid ground, then bent for her boot as though recovering it required his complete attention.

“Sorry,” she blurted.

“You’re okay,” he said at the same time.

The collision of words made them both pause.

Benjamin pointed through the snow toward the dim silhouette of the parsonage.

“My house is over there,” he shouted. “Can you walk?”

She tested her weight, winced, and nodded.

“Then let’s get out of this wind.”

The woman looked toward the house, then back at the overturned Jeep. For a moment, he saw the calculation in her face—the danger she understood behind her weighed against the stranger standing in front of her.

Another gust tore across the ditch. Her teeth began to chatter as the adrenaline released its hold.

Finally, she nodded.

He kept one arm securely around her as they stumbled through the drifts. Each time she lost her footing, he adjusted his pace instead of pulling her forward.

He did not hurry her.

He did not let go.

Olivia: The Parsonage

When Olivia stepped inside, warmth rushed toward her—woodsmoke, firelight, and the deep, sheltered quiet of a house holding back the storm.

Benjamin shut the door against the wind and slid the bolt into place.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice softer now that he no longer had to compete with the storm.

Olivia looked up at him. His eyes were calm without asking her to be. The kind of calm a person trusted before she understood why.

She swallowed. "Thank you... for finding me."

"You're welcome," he said, and the quiet warmth of his smile unsettled something in her that the storm had not.

Olivia tried to focus on practical things—the wreck, her purse, her missing phone.

Her body had noticed him already.

Benjamin nodded toward the stone fireplace. "Go sit by the fire. You're freezing."

Olivia removed her boots and crossed the room in damp socks. She lowered herself onto the broad hearth, holding her injured shoulder close while heat pressed through the chilled fabric of her clothes. Her heart still raced, adrenaline humming beneath her skin, but something quieter had begun to move beneath it.

Benjamin came nearer, snow melting in his dark hair and along the shoulders of his coat. He did not crowd her. He only stood close enough to make certain she was steady before helping her ease the coat from her injured arm.

"Better?"

She wrapped her arms around herself and nodded. Then the wreck returned to her all at once.

"Wait. I need to go back out."

"Why?" His attention sharpened immediately.

“My phone and wallet. My purse scattered when the car flipped.”

“I’ll go. You stay here and get warm.”

“You don’t have to—”

Her shoulder throbbed before she could finish. The memory of gasoline tightened around her chest.

Benjamin seemed to recognize the protest for what it was. “I know I don’t have to. I’m offering.”

He added two logs to the fire, stirred the embers once, and reached for his gloves.

“I’ll be quick.”

Olivia watched him disappear into the storm.

The house settled around her, silent except for the crackle of the fire and the wind pressing against the windows.

Olivia had spent years counseling people through crises—teaching them to breathe, to ground themselves, to name what they felt instead of drowning in it.

But now, sitting before a fire she had not built, inside a house that was not hers, she realized something humiliating.

It was easier to guide someone else through fear than to admit how completely her own had taken hold.

The warmth seeped into her fingers, her ribs, and places she had not known were cold. Beneath the adrenaline, another sensation moved. Relief, yes, but something stranger.

Peace—not because the danger was over, but because someone had come.

Someone had seen her.

When the heat began to sting her chilled skin, Olivia moved from the hearth to an oversized chair near the fire.

A white cat with ice-blue eyes emerged from beneath it and brushed cautiously against her ankle. When Olivia patted her thigh, he considered the invitation before springing into her lap.

She sank her fingers into his soft fur. His purr vibrated against her ribs, steady and uncomplicated, and her breathing began to follow it.

Heavy footsteps crossed the porch. The door swung open, sending a blade of cold air through the room.

Olivia laughed before she could stop herself. The stranger stood in the entry coated in snow, her purse slung over one shoulder like an accessory he had chosen with complete confidence.

He kicked the door shut, pushed back his hood, and shook snow from his shoulders. When he unzipped the heavy coat, Olivia caught an unexpected glimpse of the broad frame beneath it.

Apparently surviving a rollover had not disabled every part of her nervous system.

He dropped onto the entry bench with an exaggerated shiver and attacked the ice-knotted laces of his boots.

“That wind is brutal. We’re likely to lose some limbs before morning.”

“Thank you for everything,” Olivia said. The words felt painfully small. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

He handed her the purse and phone. “I’m just glad I looked out the window when I did.”

He noticed the phone in her hand. “I have a friend who owns a towing company nearby. Let me call them.”

Olivia was too tired to argue. “That would be great. Thank you.”

He dialed. “Hey, Nic. Ben here. I’ve got a little problem. Someone flipped into the ditch near the parsonage.”

He listened for a moment, his expression growing serious, then hung up.

“The authorities have pulled the tow trucks off the road until conditions improve. Glare ice. The plows need time, and they’re predicting another six inches.”

Olivia groaned. “Of course.”

He hesitated, as though he understood what the news meant for both of them.

“You might be stuck here for the night.”

She stiffened.

A stranger’s house. A blizzard. No easy way out.

“I don’t want to intrude,” she said carefully.

Benjamin raised his hands slightly, palms open. “You wouldn’t be. This parsonage has hosted plenty of guests. I can sleep at the church.”

That helped more than it should have.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. “I was about to eat dinner.”

Olivia realized she had eaten nothing since breakfast.

“Starving.”

She followed him to the kitchen table. “My name is Olivia, by the way.”

“I’m Benjamin. Nice to meet you.”

Benjamin.

He said his name plainly, without the performance Olivia had learned to expect from men who wanted to be admired. Maybe that was why it stayed with her.

Steady. Uncomplicated.

Or perhaps she only wanted him to be.

Dinner was casserole—warm, simple, comforting.

Benjamin bowed his head and thanked God for the food, the shelter, and Olivia’s safety. The prayer was simple. He did not perform it for her or use it to explain what had happened.

That may have been why she listened.

When he finished, Olivia took a bite and sighed. “This is amazing.”

“I can’t take credit. One of the ladies from church made it. Her husband brought over some leftover building materials this morning.”

Benjamin glanced through the window toward the steeple, barely visible through the snow.

“That old church,” he said softly. “She’s beautiful, but she’s tired. The roof leaks, the basement takes on water, and the wiring makes me pray harder than it should.”

“Is that why you’re renovating?”

He nodded. “It isn’t just paint and drywall. The church has been through some difficult years. We’re trying to rebuild trust. Restore purpose. Give people something to gather around again.”

Olivia’s chest tightened. “Sounds like you’re not just restoring a building. You’re restoring hope.”

“That’s the prayer.”

He told her about donated lumber, casseroles arriving faster than the workers could eat them, and teenagers slipping handwritten Bible verses into the window frames before the trim went up.

Olivia grew quiet.

Benjamin noticed. “You okay?”

She hesitated. “I’ve been living where neighbors barely speak. You can share a wall and still feel completely alone.”

He did not fill the silence. He waited.

“I used to think I liked the independence,” she admitted. “But lately, I’m wondering.”

“Being known can be messy,” he said after a moment. “But I think it can heal something too.”

Olivia’s throat tightened.

Being known was what she wanted.

And what she feared.

Benjamin smiled slightly. "Of course, small towns have their drawbacks. Everyone knows everyone else's business. Usually before the people involved do."

Olivia laughed. "I suppose not much stays under wraps for long."

"So, what brings you to Pine Haven?"

"Work. I'm an in-home therapist." She pushed a small piece of casserole around her plate. "I used to love it. Lately, it's draining."

Benjamin waited.

"The caseload keeps growing. The stories never stop. And I'm beginning to feel numb."

Benjamin turned his fork slowly against his plate. "That sounds dangerous."

"What does?"

"When the work that used to give you life starts taking more than it gives."

She nodded. "I keep thinking about doing something different. Then I talk myself out of it."

"Fear can make a convincing argument," he said. "Doesn't mean it gets the final word."

His words reached somewhere deeper than Olivia expected. "Maybe. It just feels daunting."

"Take one step and see where God leads."

It was not his faith that unsettled her. It was the ease with which he listened, as though nothing she said required him to take control of the conversation.

“Thank you, Benjamin. Talking about it makes it feel a little less impossible.”

He smiled. “Maybe you don’t have to solve your whole life tonight.”

“That would be convenient.”

“I’ve found God is rarely intimidated by unfinished things.”

Beyond the window, the storm erased the road beneath fresh snow.

Olivia should have felt stranded.

Instead, sitting across from a man she had met only hours ago, she felt the faintest opening inside her—not certainty, not yet. Only the possibility that the life exhausting her might not be the only life available.

For tonight, that was enough.

Benjamin: The Guestroom

The old staircase announced each step as Benjamin led Olivia upstairs. A single lamp burned at the end of the hallway, its low light warming the faded wallpaper and the dark wood polished by generations of hands.

“This house feels like it belongs to another time,” Olivia said.

Benjamin glanced back. “It’s been in my family for generations. Sometimes that feels like a gift.”

“And sometimes?”

“Like everyone who lived here before me is still checking my work.”

She smiled.

Benjamin kept his voice deliberately casual. There was nothing improper about showing an injured guest to her room, but the quiet hallway, the late hour, and the awareness of her walking behind him made the moment feel more intimate than he wanted it to.

The guest room was soft and old-fashioned, with faded roses climbing the wallpaper and lace edging the quilt. It was the kind of room that seemed to remember every person who had ever slept safely inside it.

“If you need something more comfortable to sleep in,” he said, “there’s a bathrobe in the closet.”

Benjamin opened the walk-in closet, and Olivia followed him inside. Several boxes had been stacked neatly along the back wall. A bassinet stood in front of them, still wrapped in clear plastic, a folded blanket resting on top.

Benjamin’s hand paused on its curved wooden edge before he moved it aside. The gesture was quick, almost practiced, but something in his face closed as he did it.

Olivia noticed. She did not ask.

They began searching through the boxes. After a moment, Olivia lifted a bright floral dress and turned toward him with one eyebrow raised.

“This would look spectacular on you. It goes with your purse.”

Benjamin laughed, shaking his head.

“Those are my wife’s clothes. I’m saving them for the church rummage sale in the spring.”

Something in his voice shifted, but Olivia could not tell what it meant. Before she could ask, Benjamin reached into another box.

“The robe has to be in here somewhere.”

Olivia held the floral dress against him and narrowed her eyes thoughtfully.

“I still think this is your color.”

Benjamin stared at her.

Then he laughed.

While they continued searching, Olivia uncovered a wide-brimmed hat and handed it to him.

“Since you’re already carrying the purse.”

Benjamin put it on without argument. When she found a pair of oversized sunglasses, he added those too, turning toward the mirror with an expression of solemn self-admiration.

“I think Pine Haven is ready for this,” he said.

Olivia laughed so suddenly that she caught her bruised ribs and bent forward. “Stop. It hurts to laugh.”

He removed the glasses immediately. “Sorry.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t worth it.”

Somewhere in the middle of the ridiculousness, Benjamin realized he was laughing too—not the polite

laugh he used when a church member told the same story for the fourth time, but something unguarded and real.

The sound startled him.

It was such a small thing, laughter, yet it felt like evidence that whatever had gone quiet inside him was not completely gone. The realization should have comforted him. Instead, fear followed close behind.

If joy could return, it could also be taken.

“Found it.” Olivia pulled a bathrobe from beneath a stack of folded clothes.

Benjamin stepped out of the closet and gave the moment back its proper distance.

“I’ll let you get some sleep.”

Still wearing the hat, he gave her an exaggerated turn at the doorway. “Good night, madaaaaam.”

Olivia laughed again, softer this time. “Good night, Benjamin.”

“I’ll lock up when I leave. If you need anything, call me. I’ll leave my number on the kitchen table.”

“Thanks.”

Benjamin left because Olivia deserved to know that his offer of shelter carried no hidden expectation.

He might have enjoyed lingering in the doorway. He might have wanted to hear her laugh again. But she was hurting from the accident, stranded, and dependent upon his hospitality. Whatever stirred in him tonight belonged to him alone. It was not hers to manage.

So, he gave her the house and crossed to the church.

Bundled again in winter gear, Benjamin crossed the narrow stretch between the parsonage and the church. Snow had already begun filling the tracks they had made earlier, softening every sign that two people had crossed there together.

He let himself into his father's old office. The familiar smells of paper, worn leather, and radiator heat met him in the dark. His father's books still lined one wall, their cracked spines giving the room the feeling that every answer had already been considered by someone older and wiser.

Benjamin pulled blankets from the closet and began making up the couch. The motion pressed memory like a bruise touched too hard.

Hannah smoothing wrinkles from a fitted sheet.
Her laugh when he stole her pillow.
The way she could make an ordinary room feel lived in before they had unpacked a single box.

Upstairs, he had moved the bassinet without looking at it.

The ache settled beneath his ribs, familiar enough to feel almost like company.

Olivia's laughter remained there too.

That was the part he did not know where to put.

Benjamin lay down on the narrow couch and stared into the dark. Beyond the walls, the storm moved across

the church grounds, covering the road, the wreck, and
the tracks between the two buildings.

Benjamin smiled in the darkness.

Then felt guilty for smiling.

And smiled once more.

Olivia: The Dream

That night, Olivia dreamed.

Snow covered everything.

The world was quiet.

Not the silence of loneliness.

The silence that settles over the earth after a storm
has spent itself.

She stood alone.

She didn't know how she'd gotten there. Only that
she'd been walking. For a very long time. Something
made her stop. She looked behind her. The snow
stretched across the field, smooth and untouched.

No footprints.

She frowned.

She looked down at her boots.

Then back again.

Nothing.

No trail.

No sign she had ever been there.

A familiar ache settled quietly over her.

I don't matter.

The words didn't sound cruel.

They simply felt...

true.

Like something she had believed for so long she no longer remembered learning it.

She looked toward the horizon. Far in the distance stood an open gate. Beyond it, she could just make out the edge of a meadow. She couldn't see what lay inside. Only that something about it stirred a longing she couldn't explain.

She thought about walking toward it. Instead, she sank into the snow where she stood. She wrapped her arms around her knees. She was tired.

Not the kind of tired sleep could fix. The kind that comes from walking for years...without believing another step would make any difference.

The gate remained open.

Waiting.

She watched it until the world slowly faded...
and she woke.

The story continues...