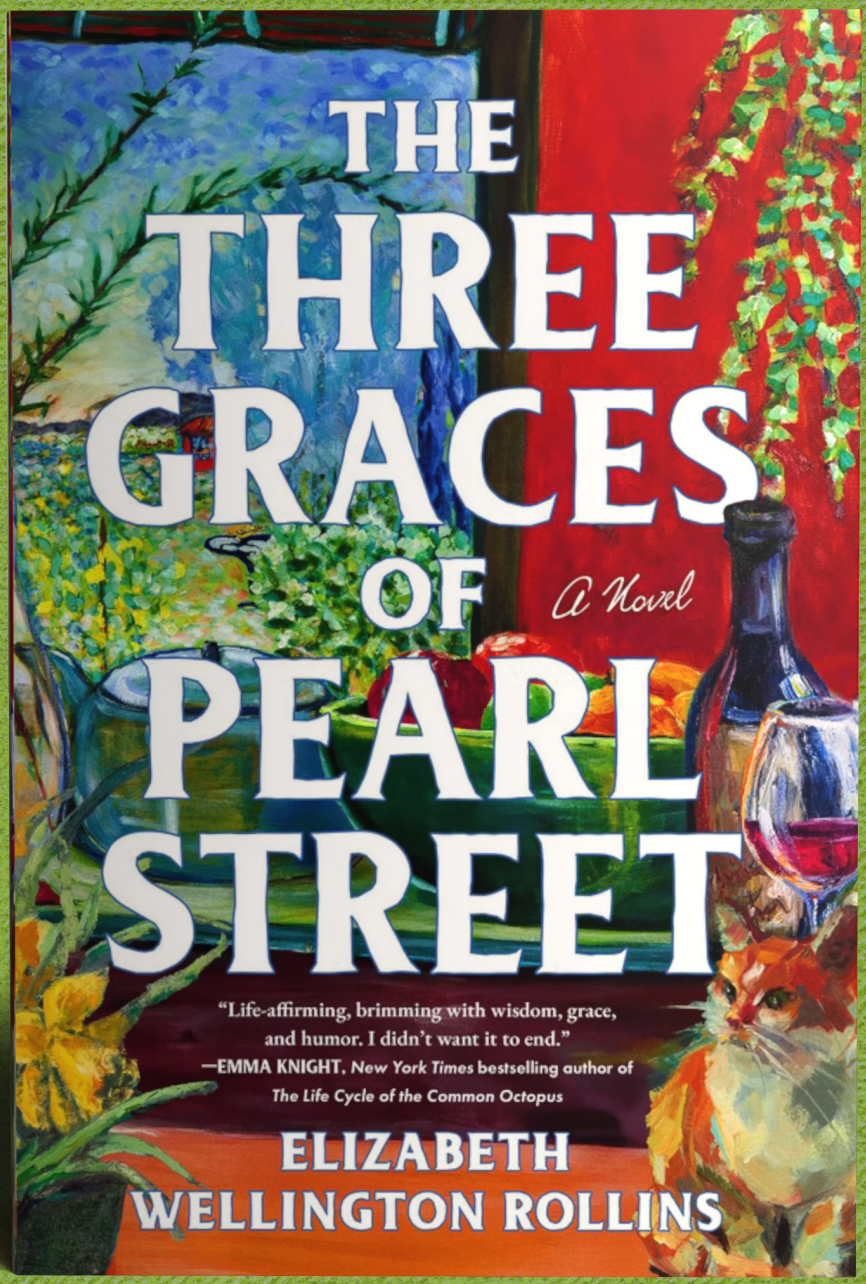


EXCLUSIVE BONUS CHAPTER

The Great Kitten Rescue

NOVEMBER 2016
ELLA

"I can't believe this floozy," Graziella whispered.

"It's not her fault," Grace said.

"She'll go two towns over to get some action. Always with the funny business. It's to spite me," Graziella spat back.

"So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love," Ella said. Rage rose off Graziella like steam. Ella had spent years memorizing bible verses so she could throw them at her grandmother like darts. Last week Ella had refused to speak to Graziella in anything but The Gospel, and Ella had been kicked out of the house on Pearl Street for it.

"Ma, let it go," Grace said, her free hand patting Graziella's knee. Ella's insulin pump tube had failed that week. After every close call, Grace became forgiving of her daughter and clingy to her mother. It was the only reason why she was out here in her Pucci puffer.

"This child of yours is a born agitator," Graziella said. "She would get Mother Theresa to consider the virtues of violence." Ella let out an involuntary laugh.

"Shh," Graziella snapped, her hand waving as the black cat with six toes emerged on a tree branch. It had taken Graziella seven long weeks to track it here, to the steep slope of a small wooded park that led to the river.

Ella knew the neighborhood had always flooded. It was soggy and low lying, in the historic floodplain between two rivers. That's why it was deemed fit for Italians when they had arrived here with no money for the high ground. Graziella had explained this to Ella in blunt terms that still made her nauseous: low class, low land.

The local weatherman did not think that this November Nor'easter would flood the homes on and around Pearl Street, but Graziella had prepared the food kitchen and the shelter anyway. She asked Ella to keep watch over the seven kittens, which the black cat had hidden in a drainage pipe that fed into the river. Ella had spent her week configuring and reconfiguring the ethical traps around the pipe's entrance with the hopes the kittens would emerge. It was a feat of engineering that she could win a science prize for, if scientists cared about saving feral kittens.

Of course, the cat could have also used the storm drains to slip in and out of the pipe. But in the cat's five years, Graziella had never seen it do so. The waifish feline didn't like them. Ella looked up at the darkening sky and then at the six-toed black cat, who was not yet old by house cat standards but profoundly weathered. Its face covered in scars, its tail flitting in irritation.

The feral creature had been a fixture in Ella's life as much as their house cats and foster cats, in great part because the black cat often trailed Graziella, as if to mock the eldest Valentini. Sometimes, the cat would jump out around corners as if to spook them and fall on her back to show off its pregnant belly, all the while Graziella saved 12 litters of its kittens. Now, it was the only unspayed cat left in the neighborhood, forever evading Graziella's elaborate schemes of capture. Never had its kittens been in peril quite like this, though. Even the fire department had been at a loss. The pipe was just too narrow.

Ella heard the heavy exhale of a large engine as a truck drove by. The black cat scurried away, and Graziella launched into a blitz of Italian curses that lightened into lengthy Latin prayers for her four-legged adversary.

A fat raindrop hit Ella's forehead and dripped down her face. And then, a cascade of rain fell. The three Graziellas opened a succession of Bill's golf umbrellas—his only contribution to their efforts—and they stared at the pipe.

Ella could tell that Graziella was making calculations. She was always advocating to fix the dam, widen the river, strengthen the drainage systems, and increase the height of the banks. Her greatest fear was not what would happen to these

kittens, but that her neighbors would be trapped in their homes as the water rose. It had happened before.

Grace raised her voice above the sound of the pelting rain. “Ma, maybe you can wait for us at the Grazianos’ house?” Ella had tried to avoid looking at the house across the street, but she saw the outline of Mike’s figure through his bedroom window.

“Gracie, I will not leave these kittens to die,” Graziella countered. “The floozy can get high up in a tree, but she cannot carry them all. It’s her biggest litter, and one of them has your name on it.”

“I told you we’re not ready. We just lost Sigmund,” Grace said, referring to their late cat.

“I’ll decide where these cats go!” Graziella yelled back, frustration mounting. Ella squinted and looked at the traps. The plates of sardines hadn’t washed away in the rain yet, and a thought rippled through Ella’s mind.

“Nonna, I swear she senses your energy. She won’t let them come out if you’re here. Go get warm,” Ella said.

“Absolutely not. This is my hunt,” Graziella said, refusing to yield control.

The sky faded to the darkest gray, the streetlights dimmed by the rain. Ella felt so hopeless that she was tempted to fall back onto the ground, surrendering to the wet cold. Instead, she kept her spine straight and held the giant flashlight aimed at the pipe as the water began to trickle.

She saw something appear, and her heart rate rose.

“There’s one,” Graziella yelled.

“Be careful, honey,” Grace yelped as Ella dropped the umbrella and scrambled a few feet with the flashlight. She grabbed a tiny tabby cat by the scruff of her neck before the kitten fell out of the drainpipe. Grace made her way toward Ella, her Pucci puffer deflating in the heavy rain. Ella passed the kitten to Grace and braced herself to grab another.

But there was no next kitten. With each minute passing, the fear that snaked around Ella tightened. They could not stay here once the pipe filled with water, risking a river overflow while they were so close to its banks.

“Ella, stay focused,” Graziella said. Ella had always been clumsy, failing at every extracurricular that included movement, from dance to gymnastics to soccer.

Even pottery classes seemed beyond her grasp given that she couldn't manipulate the clay correctly.

She reached for what she thought was one more kitten in the fading light, but it was only a dark brown beer bottle bobbing on the rising pipe water. Ella let it go. She thought she saw another, but it was more garbage. The water from the pipe began to surge as the rain continued, and the land under her feet was turning to mud.

"I want you out of there now," Grace said. Ella let out a wail of defeat and moved toward her mother and grandmother, weighed down by the thought of the kittens left behind. She grabbed Graziella under her arm, helping her up the slope and across the bridge. With the downpour and the kitten in Grace's arms, she knew they would ask for a ride, even though Graziella's house was just up the road. Ella looked at the Jeep in the familiar driveway and steeled herself.

"*Mostriciattola*," Graziella said to Ella, squeezing her hand. Graziella's eyes glimmered with some sense Ella lacked. "You saved one life today."

"It wasn't enough," she replied, her chin quivering. Ella wiped away tears with the arm of her magenta ski suit, one that Bill had bought her years ago and she had never used.

Grace knocked on the Grazianos' door, and Mike bounced down the steps two at a time. He helped Graziella into the front of his Jeep while Grace and Ella got into the back. Grace handed Ella the kitten, and she cradled its frail body in her hands. The tiny cat felt like wet skin and bones. There were six toes on every paw, and its faint heartbeat was a comfort.

"How many kittens in the litter?" he asked. Mike knew Ella had been out there every day setting up the traps. Every time he had pulled into the driveway after practice, he had always looked her way and pushed up his chin in brief acknowledgement.

"We got one out of seven," Graziella replied.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. V," he said.

When they pulled up to the house on Pearl Street, Mike helped Graziella out of the Jeep. Grace slid out of the backseat, followed by Ella. Grace helped Graziella up the driveway with the cane and umbrellas. Ella held the kitten to her chest in their wake, wanting to weep.

"Thanks," she said to Mike, as he turned back to the car.

“Ella . . .” he started, holding her eyes. He seemed to have lost the words. They never spoke to each other, despite having five classes together.

“Were you watching?” she asked.

“Of course, but you didn’t need me,” he replied. She nodded, too sad to analyze what that could mean. By the time Mike was back in the driver’s seat, Ella heard shouting. She ran up the driveway, worried her grandmother had fallen on the slick backstairs.

Instead, she found Grace and Graziella staring at the outside steps. In the shadows under the stairs, Ella saw them. The black cat—as slick as an otter—circled six drenched kittens with her tail lifted. Ella wouldn’t dare get any closer, but she leaned down and put the seventh kitten on the ground. The tiny family reunited.

This would be the neighborhood’s last litter. Her grandmother could retire now from her rescue operation, rest easy in her success, though Ella knew she never would.