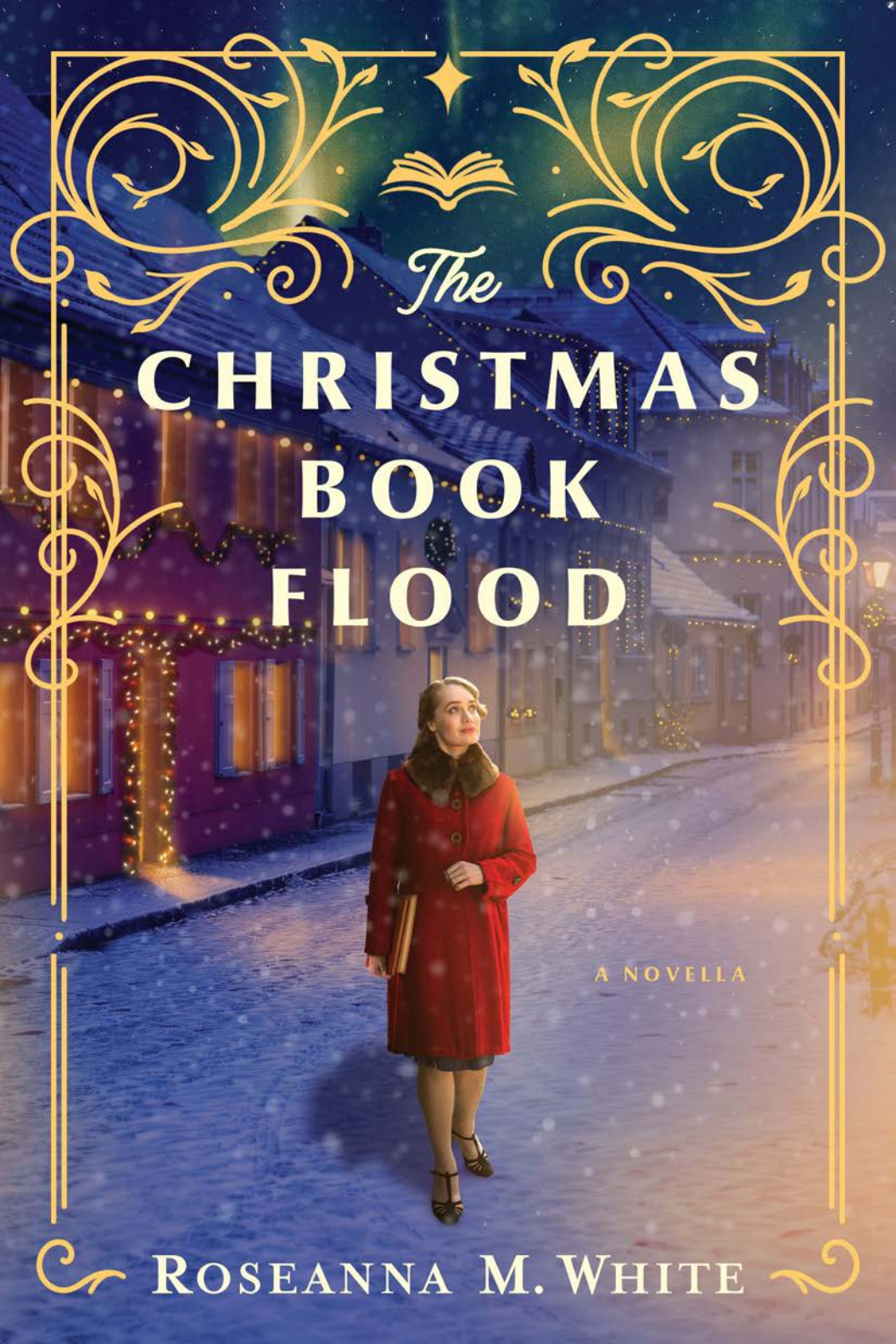
The
CHRISTMAS
BOOK
FLOOD
A NOVELLA
ROSEANNA M. WHITE

Praise for Roseanna M. White

With her customarily reverent research, Roseanna M. White weaves a tale destined to reach deep into the hearts of word lovers everywhere. *The Christmas Book Flood* will be revisited by readers every Christmas . . . time and time again.

RACHEL MCMILLAN, bestselling author of *The Mozart Code*

With a strong baseline of little-known history, a sweet melody for Marcel and Zelie's building love, the rich harmony of Zelie's personal growth, and jarring notes of danger and betrayal, *The Spy Keeper of Marseille* thrills. Roseanna M. White has written another stellar World War II novel.

SARAH SUNDIN, bestselling, Christy Award–winning author of *Mists over the Channel Islands*

The Spy Keeper of Marseille captures the quiet ferocity of a woman and mother who lives out the dangerous beauty of doing what's right—even when it could cost her everything. Roseanna M. White delivers a story as brave as its heroine, proving that love and courage can change the course of history.

JANYRE TROMP, bestselling author of *Darkness Calls the Tiger*

Propulsively plotted and richly detailed. . . . A captivating historical romance and a resonant ode to the power of literature in dark times.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *The Collector of Burned Books*

Brilliantly written. . . . [*The Collector of Burned Books*] captures the volatile intersection of art, academia, and authoritarian control, with the spark of unexpected romance bringing warmth to an unforgettable novel.

BOOKLIST starred review

The CHRISTMAS BOOK FLOOD

ROSEANNA M. WHITE

Tyndale House Publishers
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The Christmas Book Flood

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The Christmas Book Flood is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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ONE

REYKJAVIK, ICELAND
8 DECEMBER 1944

THE RINGING OF THE PHONE quite possibly kept Tatiana Eliasdottir from getting sacked. Its shrill cry brought her jumping to her feet, and a startled look at the clock on the wall showed her that had the phone not pulled her from the sentence half written on the paper in the typewriter, she would no doubt have been late to her job.

Frantic, she dashed for the telephone, silently thanking the Lord for whoever thought to call her so ridiculously early in the morning. Snatching the receiver from the cradle, she said, "Hello?" in a voice that probably sounded as breathless as she felt. She stretched the cord as far as it would go so she could reach the red jacket that matched her skirt. She'd

draped it over a kitchen chair when she emerged from her bedroom an hour ago and made a mad dash for the typewriter, hoping to get down the idea she'd had before it flew away like a migratory bird.

"Oh good, you haven't left yet. I was afraid I'd missed you."

Tatiana's lips curled up at the voice on the line. She ought to have known, she supposed. Her sister was the only one who ever called first thing in the morning—something she'd only just been able to start doing six months ago, when phone lines were finally run to their rural hometown. "Ari! How are you feeling? How's Gunnar recuperating?"

Even across the miles, Ari's exhaustion came through loud and clear in her sigh. "That's why I'm calling. Gunnar reopened his wound yesterday, working."

With a wince, Tatiana cradled the phone between her head and shoulder so she could slide an arm into her jacket sleeve. Her brother-in-law had been on a fishing trawler that had been the unfortunate recipient of a German torpedo intended to attack an Allied shipping convoy. They'd been mistaken as part of it. The sailors had all survived, praise God—but several had been injured, including Gunnar. The doctor had ordered him to stay off his injured leg two weeks ago, but of course, this was Gunnar. He didn't understand the principle of *rest*. "How bad?"

"Bad enough that he's actually staying off his feet now." Ari's voice sounded strained. "And to make matters worse, the doctor ordered bed rest for me too."

Though she'd been reaching with an extended foot for her black pumps, Tatiana stopped at that, her hand tightening around the receiver. "Are you all right? The baby?" Her sister wasn't due to deliver until early January. And the last time the doctor had ordered bed rest, Ari had lost the child anyway, just a few weeks before she was supposed to give birth.

It couldn't happen again. It *couldn't*. Not now, so close to Christmas. Not now, when Ari had just finally, finally emerged from the fog of pain and grief of that late miscarriage two years ago, and the earlier ones three and four and five years ago. *Please, God. Please, spare my sister another loss. Please, keep the babe and her healthy.*

"I don't know." The crack in Ari's voice said far more than the words. "We're just . . . it's a hard time. And Elea—that's why I'm calling. With neither of us able to get up, it's going to be a miserable Christmas here for her. I'd hoped I might convince you to take a guest through the holidays."

"Truly?" A bubble of joy slipped past the concern keeping her throat in a death grip. Her seven-year-old niece was, quite possibly, her favorite person in the world. "You know I'd be delighted! But you really want to be separated at Christmas?"

"Of course I don't *want* to." Tears clogged her sister's voice. "But I think it would be best for her. You know how sensitive she is to everyone else's pain. She's as miserable as we are, and that's just not fair to her. She deserves a real celebration for once."

Tatiana finally slipped her feet into her shoes and glanced at the clock again. Two minutes until she had to be out

the door. But the urgency didn't keep the sting of tears from her eyes. "You've done the best you could, Ari," she whispered into the phone. The series of miscarriages had wreaked havoc on her sister's soul. It was hard to think about Yule Lads and gifts and even the miracle of Jesus coming to earth as a babe when your heart was broken over the loss of your own babies. But she'd always tried to bring joy to her one living child. She deserved credit for that. "Elea doesn't begrudge anything."

"I know. That's why I so wanted this year to be different for her. And I know if she's with her favorite aunt, she'll have a festive holiday for once."

Tatiana smiled at the "favorite aunt" business. She was Elea's *only* aunt, given that she and Ari had no other siblings and Gunnar had only two younger brothers, neither of whom had married yet. "You know I'll gladly keep her. Perhaps she can even come with me to the office, and then to Uncle Valdi's for Christmas itself—she's always been so fascinated by the publishing company."

This marked the first Christmas since Tatiana moved to Reykjavik five years ago that she wouldn't go home for the holiday. She just couldn't get away, not this year. Not with the success of the Book Bulletin. It had been a heavy realization at first, but she'd cheered herself with the thought of spending more time with Valdi and his family. Having Elea here would make it even better.

"Thank you, Tatta. I feel so much better, knowing she'll have a cheerful holiday."

Another glance at the clock told her she needed to be out the door in five seconds. Hurriedly, she asked about how Elea would get to the city and promised to be home to meet the neighbor who'd be driving her on Monday afternoon. With a quick assurance that she'd call over the weekend to verify everything, Tatiana hung up the phone, grabbed her coat and hat and handbag, and dashed out the door with only one longing look at the half-finished sentence in her typewriter.

Stars twinkled overhead as she dashed out into the street, tugging her coat on as she went. Sunrise was still hours away, and they'd have less than four hours of daylight before night overtook them again. All of which she'd spend inside the proud brick facade that housed Sogufelagith—the Story Society. She probably wouldn't even get more than a fleeting glimpse of the sun through the window in her uncle's office, truth be told. Her own desk was in a windowless section outside his door, and the warehouse space in the basement where she'd likely be spending most of her time had nothing but electric lights.

But to get to work at one of Iceland's premier publishing houses, directly under her uncle, the publisher—it was worth the sacrifice of seeing any daylight this time of year. And really, she made up for it in the summer months, when day stretched on and on and nighttime was the one in short supply.

Uncle Valdi was a stickler for punctuality though, and had warned her from the start that she'd get no favoritism just because she was his brother's daughter. She'd seen him

dismiss other people for late arrivals and didn't intend to be added to the list. So she ran the whole way to Fakafen, ignoring the snow that worked its way into her shoes when she misstepped and landed in a pile of it.

When she turned the corner onto the street that housed the publisher, the allure of a warm interior was enough to make her pick up her pace still more. "Hold the door, please!" she called out to whoever was entering before her.

The man paused and turned her way, giving her a glimpse of his face instead of just his fedora and wool coat in the light that spilled out of the open door. A face that, lately, had begun to make her chest go warm. She tried to act nonchalant whenever circumstances put her in the same place as the star of the Story Society, but to herself she could admit it was nothing but an act. When her uncle had offered her the position as his assistant, Anders Johannsson had been one of the reasons for her quick acceptance.

It wasn't the handsome face that now offered her a bashful smile, though that certainly didn't hurt—she hadn't known, then, how handsome he was. It wasn't the scads of books his editorial eye had helped bring to publication in his seven years at the company—though her uncle had bragged about his best editor on multiple occasions. It was his sagas that had intrigued her at the start, rewritten specifically for children and illustrated by his own hand. She'd always loved the old Icelandic tales of Nordic heroes of old, but the way he brought them to life was nothing short of brilliant. She'd purchased every single one he'd done thus far for Elea and

already had his new release bought and wrapped for this year's gift.

She'd been quite certain she'd stumble and stutter the first time she met him . . . but was strangely comforted by the fact that the brilliant writer and illustrator was an absolute dunce in social situations. Hence how they'd gone years working together, and yet she hadn't begun to feel as though she knew him at all until these last few months.

The irony being he didn't know *she* was the one he'd been getting to know through letters. Thoughts she'd better stow away again now, lest she give herself away.

He paused in the doorway but couldn't seem to decide whether he should shut the door while he waited for her to dash the last few steps, thereby keeping the heat within the building, or hold it open for her. He half closed and then reopened it twice before she reached him, his cheeks flushing in that way they always did.

She couldn't have stopped her smile even had she wanted to. Which she assuredly didn't. Slipping in, she sent him the grin that Ari had always said could warm the heart of a snowman and waited for him to close the door behind himself. "Good morning, Anders."

He nodded, throat bobbing with a swallow. "Morning, Tatiana."

She wiped the snow from her shoes on the rug inside the door kept there for that purpose. "Are you excited for next week?"

He looked at her blankly. "Next week?"

A breath of laughter slipped out. "The official release of your new book."

"Ah." Why did his smile look so sad? They'd already had enough orders come in for it to guarantee it was as big a success as his last one—which was saying something. "Yes, of course. I always forget the actual day—given that I get my copies early."

As she had hers. Yet another perk of the position. She waited for him to join her before turning toward the stairs. "My niece is going to be ecstatic. They're her favorite books." She'd already told him as much each time she asked him to autograph them for her, but it bore repeating. In fact . . . "Oh! She's arriving in Reykjavik on Monday and will be coming into the office with me, assuming Uncle Valdi says it's all right. She'll be so excited to meet you."

At that, Anders's face relaxed a bit, his smile more genuine. "And I her. She's visiting before the holiday?"

"For it, actually." As they climbed up to the third floor where all the staff offices were, she gave him the short version of Gunnar's injury, Ari's bed rest, and their decision to ask for help. "I'm so excited to have her," she said as they reached the landing for their floor.

Anders grinned, pausing rather than turning immediately to his office on the right. "I imagine. And will the Yule Lads find her here?"

Tatiana's eyes went wide. She hadn't paused to consider that yet—but the Yule Lads would begin making their deposits of gifts in children's shoes the morning after Elea arrived. It was perfect timing . . . except that she had no gifts to sneak

into her niece's footwear. "Well, I know what I'll be doing this weekend."

Anders watched Tatiana dash toward her small office attached to her uncle's large corner one, his lips refusing to give up their smile. He could admit that he'd been dubious at first, when he heard Valdi was hiring his niece to act as his assistant. In Anders's experience, working with family was as much a headache as it was a boon. But within a week, he'd had to recant his silent objections.

Tatiana was a spot of sunshine in the winter darkness. A trill of laughter in heavy silence. A scent of sugar and spice in a world of rations and lack.

He never dared say anything like that aloud, of course. If ever he tried, his tongue would tangle and his face would heat and his brothers' taunting would fill his mind. *Anders the Red-Faced Bookworm*, they'd called him as a lad. *Too backward for friends. You could bore a volcano to sleep.*

His fingers tightened around the handle of his briefcase, and he turned toward his own office door, since Tatiana had gone straight to her desk. It was different here at the Story Society, yes. These were his people. Other lovers of books, of the written word, of the storytelling that had undergirded Icelandic society for centuries. Here, he was understood. Appreciated. Lauded, even.

But it was hard to remember that after a visit from one of his family members, and it seemed one or another was

dropping by his flat every other day. To ensure he was eating—his mother. To ask a favor—his little sister. To remind him of who he was and where he came from—all three of his elder brothers.

"Morning, Anders."

He looked up at the familiar voice of his assistant, Helga—who had quickly adopted Tatiana as her best friend upon the younger woman's hiring. Which of course meant Tatiana lingered outside his office, chatting with Helga, every spare moment, thereby distracting him constantly with her laughter and lyrical voice.

He smiled at the assistant who could still outwork anyone, even with gossip breaks factored in. "Morning, Helga."

"I put the post on your desk. There were several you've been waiting for." She named several of the authors he'd been working with, all of which made him nod.

"Perfect. Thank you." There was nothing like attending to his correspondence to get his mind back into publishing and away from home.

Last night both Mother and his eldest brother, Dalmar, had dropped in after the fishing boats had returned to Reykjavik harbor for the day. Their mother had fussed over his largely bare cupboards, as always, and put a pot of fish stew she'd brought for him on the stove to heat. "From yesterday's catch," she'd said, sending him that look of disapproval as pointed as an icicle. "You should thank your brothers for providing for you."

Twelve years since he'd left the life of a fisherman and pursued higher education. Seven since he'd landed the job at the

Story Society. One would think that would have been time enough to grow a few calluses when it came to his family. But each jab hurt anew.

He knew his lines in the script of their lives, though. He'd nodded to Dalmar, head of their family's trawler since Father had passed away six years ago. "Thank you, Dalmar. Though you didn't have to bring me food. I was going to the grocer's after I put away my work." Though he knew it was useless, he pulled his wallet from his pocket. "Please, allow me to pay—"

"Don't insult your brother." Mother had frowned and pointed the wooden spoon at him, spattering a few drops of stew on the floor. "You are still part of this family. We take care of our own."

Yet they refused to allow him to use his salary to help with repairs to the boat. Fishing could support itself, they always said. Especially now that they were exporting their catches to America—one of many benefits to find them since the Americans had occupied their country.

Part of him couldn't help but think they refused, though, so that they had something to hold over him—all the fish they brought him, despite the fact that he never asked for any of it, was a debt he then owed. Never mind that he didn't need it, never mind that he brought in more money through his editing work and his books than they did put together from fishing. In his family's eyes, he was nothing but a pretender. Stories, they'd always said, might be what made an evening bright as they gathered around the fire, but they weren't something to make a living from.

He set his briefcase on his desk and shucked off his coat, scarf, and hat, praying for the millionth time that the Lord would give him armor to protect him from those opinions. He knew he was following the call of God by dedicating his life to words instead of fishing. He'd never for a moment doubted it. But somehow, knowing it didn't make his family's disapproval hurt any less.

Coffee. He needed coffee to help dislodge the fog of stress from his brain, and he hadn't had any at home. He'd meant to pick some up from the grocer's last night but had ended up not going, since his mother had provided dinner and then lingered, telling tales of his nieces and nephews, until after the store would have been closed.

The coffeepot was a relatively new addition to the office, but a popular one. He could have asked Helga to fetch him a cup, but she was already on the telephone, so he opted to go himself rather than wait. A crowd of his colleagues were already queued up, waiting for their turn, chatting amongst themselves. Anders took his place at the back of the gaggle, wondering not for the first time how they could be so fortunate.

The other Nordic countries were occupied too—but by the Nazis. There, they knew from the few Icelanders who had managed to come home after being trapped in Denmark or Sweden, private citizens were starving and dying of cold, because the Germans took it all. All their resources, all their livelihoods. The people were left with nothing.

Here, it was the opposite. The Americans had brought prosperity with them. Money they were eager to spend in

Icelandic shops, for starters. Then they opened exports of fish, bringing another influx of cash, and that trickled down to everyone. For the first time in their history, he and his neighbors not only had enough, they had *extra*. Industry was booming. Cities and towns were growing. They'd gone from being the poorest country in Europe to one of the wealthiest, per capita.

It was a humbling thing, to be benefiting from the war that had been tearing so much of the world apart.

"I don't know, Tatta." Valdi's voice snagged Anders's attention, drawing his gaze to the publisher's door, which stood open, displaying both the middle-aged man and his beautiful niece on opposite sides of his wide wooden desk. "Things are going to be hectic between now and Christmas. Having a child underfoot . . ."

A hole cleared in front of the coffeepot, but Anders edged forward only a few inches. None of his business, he knew that. But he couldn't help but feel a little invested. Tatiana's face always lit up so when she was speaking of her niece. He often asked about little Elea, just to see the way her eyes would go bright.

Surely Valdi wouldn't deny his grandniece the company of family in the days before Christmas. Would he?

Tatiana's back was to the door, but he could see the plea in the line of her shoulders, even before he heard it in her voice when next she spoke. "You know Elea won't be any trouble though. She'll stay at my desk and occupy herself with books or drawings or the schoolwork she'll be bringing with her,

since she's missing the last ten days of class. I promise, you'll scarcely know she's here, but for the smiles she'll inspire."

Valdi's lips were pressed together, his eyes declaring himself conflicted. "You know I want to help—but if you leave her at your desk while you're overseeing the mailings, then she'll be unchaperoned unless I put aside my work to watch her."

"Helga and I could help." The words were out of Anders's mouth before he could think better of declaring to his boss that he'd been unabashedly eavesdropping. And his feet, fools that they were, were propelling him toward the open door. All for exactly what he'd been hoping—Tatiana spinning around, beaming a smile of gratitude at him.

Fool, without question. He knew very well that nothing would ever convince a woman like Tatiana to give him a second glance. He had only to stand beside his hulking older brothers with their strapping good looks to be reminded of all he wasn't. Dalmar and Ulric and Ram had always had girls swooning—and had all been married for years at this point. He, on the other hand, could never keep a woman's attention for more than five minutes.

Still, he could never help himself when it came to Tatiana. She was never stingy with her smiles and gave them to everyone, it was true, but he lived for the ones directed his way. Like the one currently cutting through the clouds like a ray of sunshine.

Her uncle, on the other hand, lifted his brows. "You think you or Helga will have time for babysitting, Anders?"

"I'm a few days ahead of schedule on the manuscript I'm editing. And there's plenty of room for her in my outer office with Helga—and you know how she loves children, and she can outpace the rest of the Story Society anyway. She wouldn't be a bother." He offered a smile of his own. "And perhaps she'll do me the favor of looking over my own work in progress. I could use the feedback of a few children and haven't had the chance to show it to my own nieces and nephews yet."

Because when he'd tried after dinner with the whole clan on Sunday, Ulric had told him to put his rubbish away so the children could go outside to play.

Tatiana drew in a happy gasp, hands clasped together before her heart. "Truly? She will be over the moon! Elea adores Helga."

He let her pleasure warm him for a moment before looking past her to see what Valdi's reaction might be.

Thankfully, the publisher was smiling too, though with a few more reservations in his eyes. "All right. We'll give it a try. But if it doesn't work out, she'll have to stay with Beta during the days instead. Fair enough?"

Having met Valdi's wife many times, he had no doubt she'd be eager to host little Elea if it came to that. But taking her to her aunt and uncle's house and then picking her up again would steal the moments he knew Tatiana was hoping to spend with her niece.

She moved her smile from Anders to her uncle and back again. "Thank you. Both of you. You won't regret it—I promise."

Elea could be a little monster, and he still wouldn't regret it. Anything that earned him that smile was something he'd do gladly. Feeling his face begin to heat in that way he hated, he merely nodded and ducked back into the coffee line.