

What

she
takes
away

A NOVEL BY ADELE ANNESI



BORDIGHERA PRESS

For my mother

Chapter 1

Gia peeled the swatch from the padded mailer and examined the sample, the muddy shades and inarticulate pattern, the transparent uneven weave. Who would want a dress made of this? Certainly not a women's wear house that prided itself on quality. She checked her laptop—seven minutes to the video meet with Martell. She looked down at her carryall, inside it the scarf her father sent. In the forgiving natural light of her co-op, the material had fairly glowed. What about here in her office, under the fluorescents?

Taking the poly mailing pouch from the carryall, she removed the scarf and checked the time. Six minutes. She held a section of the scarf under the magnifier. The material had a natural hand-woven quality, a tight even weave. The paisley mosaic in chiaroscuro shades spoke of changing seasons. At the center of the repeat, the lustrous yellow gold of sunflowers. She drew the fabric over the uncut diamond on her finger to her wrist above the palm. The translucent border threads shimmered, absorbing the light. The material's hand against the skin was supple, breathable, a gracious covering.

Well, she thought, her tailor father had outdone himself, assuming he somehow created the piece. She turned it over and examined the underside, the narrow rolled hem, the familiar baste-style lockstitch in invisible thread a signature, one her mother had never cared for, having branded it common.

She laid the scarf on her desk and pushed Adrian's sample away with the heel of her palm. How she hated handling the wholesale stuff Fiber carried now, synthetic blends whose flypaper stick instantly made her want to wash her hands, lifeless poly that drooped

on hangers and shoulders and pilled after a first wearing—*stracci*, her mother had called them, rags.

She heard the buzz of the downstairs door. Not even downtown Boston traffic on a Friday afternoon could keep Rafael Bautista from the meet with Martel. She heard Bautista's step shuffle up the cracked linoleum steps and slipped the scarf back in the pouch.

Bautista stood in her doorway. "So, Adrian sent the sample? It got here okay?" He dipped his mirrored shades, revealing bloodshot eyes.

She nodded at her desk. "He sent something." At least this time the sample arrived before the meet.

Bautista raised his hand and waggled thick fingers. "Let's see it."

She stared at him. "You can't see it from there?"

"Ha, funny. Let's see what he sent."

She nodded at the swatch. "Try and pick it up."

Assailing her desk in short strides, he grasped at the thin cloth. Permeated with static, the fabric clung to the desktop. "Damn thing," he muttered. He bunched the cloth and held it to the light. "So it's sheer, so what? It's for dresses next summer, not suits."

"Expensive for disposable, don't you think?"

Bautista shook his head and tossed the swatch back on her desk. "You think your contacts can do better? You can't—not for this price."

She studied him a moment then glanced at the laptop. Five minutes. She reached for the pouch. Even under the fluorescent glare the scarf's material was suffused with color, vitality, inviting human touch.

"Ho, and what's this?" Bautista looked at her over his glasses. "You been holding out?" He opened his palm. "Let's see."

She held onto the scarf. "I thought Adrian was a colleague—with benefits."

"Adrian is a toad. But a toad with good prices. Where'd this come from, anyway?"

"Italy."

Bautista gave his head a hard shake. "Uh-uh, sorry, no. We gotta go global, we deal Asia, Indo—places I know people."

She glanced at her laptop. “I have Martell in four.” She peeled the swatch from her desk. “I’m not showing him this.”

Bautista snatched the cloth. “I can talk to Martell, too, you know.”

“You have his number?”

“Well, aren’t you all that cause you know somebody.”

She draped the scarf lightly over her arm.

Bautista grabbed the swivel chair and shoved it against her desk. “Fine, make the call. I like to hear what he says.”

She laid the scarf beside the laptop and clicked the live meeting link. Three minutes remaining. The display gave a passcode prompt. She moved the cursor to the side of the screen.

Bautista leaned forward. “So, is he there?”

“We’re waiting for him to enter.” She crossed her fingers under her desk. The electrician was supposed to call with a verdict on rewiring. She glanced at the laptop. Three minutes. No, two.

The cell in Bautista’s shirt pocket vibrated. He stared at her, ignoring it.

“Are you going to answer?” she asked calmly, her legs jiggling.

“It can wait.”

“Isn’t Walsh supposed to call?”

“I said it can wait.” Bautista’s cell sounded an upbeat Pinoy pop ringtone. He slipped the phone from his pocket and squinted at the display. “Dammit. Walsh. Says it’s urgent.”

She held out her hand. “Want me to talk to him?”

Bautista stood and aimed his cell at her laptop. “Better you do what you supposed to.” He pressed the phone’s display and held it to his face. “Now what?” He moved to the doorway.

She waited until she heard the scrape of chair rollers in the adjacent office. One minute. She got up and quietly closed the office door then moved the dressmaker’s form nearer the laptop.

Angling the computer away from the wall, she entered the passcode. The live meeting window opened, revealing James Martell’s profile, black horn-rimmed glasses stationed on a broad, hooked nose magnifying lateral eyes sharp as an eagle’s.

Chapter 2

“Mr. Martell, good to meet you. Thanks so much for your time.”

Martell faced the screen. “You have five.”

“Don Roccia sends his greetings.”

“He says you have something to show.”

She moved the laptop around and stood. “Normally, I would send the sample, but I wanted to show you what this does on.”

She took the scarf and draped it across the dressmaker’s form. “Even on this.” The fabric’s vibrant shades made the tattered shoulders of the form appear broader, the dull cloth body more like human skin.

“And here’s what it does off.” She tossed the fabric onto the cutting table in front of the screen. The piece drifted downward, holding its shape.

“I know we don’t usually show samples this way, but I wanted you to see how the material moves and traps color even in an intricate pattern and saturated shades.”

She laid the scarf across the laptop near the screen so the fibers caught the light of her desk lamp. How she would love to pitch to Martel’s interest in an organic line. But first she needed the material’s fiber content—and its source.

Martell’s hand flexed as if to reach through the display. “Don told you we’re already into next summer?”

“Fiber is agile. We can turn on a dime.” Or less, she thought. “You’ll be in Milan next week? I’d like to show you this in person.”

“After the shows.”

“Perfect.” The later the better.

Martell peered into the screen. “I don’t do this for everyone.”

“I know, Mr. Martell, and thank you. You won’t be disappointed.”

“Good. There isn’t time.” Martell glanced to his right. “David will set it up. Tell Don I’ll see him in Maggiore.”

The jangle of her nervous energy rushed to her belly as she worked with Martell’s assistant to set a meet for next Friday evening, a week from tonight.

Closing the live link, she felt lightheaded, disconnected, as if gravity had failed to hold. She sat back in the chair with a creak and gazed at the dressmaker’s form.

This was the connection she had hoped for, longed for even before leaving Boston School of Design and that unfortunate project for Roccia’s course. It was the only class she hated leaving. Don had stopped in again last week to wheedle her into finishing the degree.

“Surely you’re not staying here forever?” he asked while Raf was out having his grays retouched.

“I like it here, Don,” she answered. “It’s comfortable.”

Roccia looked across the showroom, his tall trim form in black jeans and a white button-down shirt in stretch poplin. “You believe this suits you?” He stared with tawny, almond-shaped eyes at the corner of the ceiling where a leak had discolored the tiles.

“I have a place here, Don, stability.”

He looked at her. “And inspiration?”

Her smile felt stiff, unnatural. “Why not,” she answered. “I’m needed here.”

Roccia shook his head. “Not the same.” For a moment, he looked as if he wanted to say more. “Well, contact James, anyway. We’re out at Maggiore until the end of the month so I’ll put in another word. Now let’s see that little stone you’re wearing.”

She nudged the band, still in need of sizing, with her thumb and glanced at the phone. She dreaded the next call like an internal. How to approach a man after sixteen years and half a lifetime? Ask for an audience and the proprietary, step-by-step of the scarf’s creation? Please, God, it hadn’t come from that flyspeck of a mill near him in Italy whose name she couldn’t recall. And if he said no? The fact that this year he had sent a birthday gift might only be a more elegant form of apology.

The brow over her left eye pulsed. She pressed it down with her thumb. Maybe she should do a search for the mill first and talk with Peter at dinner, make the call in the morning.

From the adjoining office she heard Bautista's voice getting louder. It was a small but saving mercy that the walls of this decrepit space were plaster and not sheetrock. She opened a document on her laptop and quickly made a to-do list. Next door Bautista burst into a torrent of protests that ended in an oath. She slipped the scarf back in her bag and nudged it under her desk with the toe of her ballet flat.

Her office door opened. Bautista hovered in the threshold. "Walsh. That butt end of an ox. Says the electrical has to be to code next month or they shut us down. I told him lower the cost or we go someplace else." He came and draped himself over her chair, the black hair of his forearms on end.

"We knew it would happen eventually." She made a note. "Meanwhile, good news. Martell wants to meet."

Bautista stared at her. "About?"

She stared back at him. "What do you mean, about? The new fabric."

Bautista's mouth hung open. "He was just in front of you. You didn't pitch him?"

She gave a laugh. "Without the numbers? Please. I demoed the material. He was impressed. The next meet is in Milan."

Bautista's foot slipped from the chair rung. "I said no Italy. Didn't I say we don't deal Italy?"

"It's not we, Raf."

"You think you're going? No—not to Italy or Europe anyplace. Time was you could get the Romanians cheap. Now not even that."

"But we can get the process and the fiber content." Her father owed her that at least. "Then we can have another mill produce it cheaper, maybe through your contacts."

Bautista blinked through heavy lids. "Well, now that could be something."

"What we can't afford, Raf, is to hand the head of an international woman's apparel house cheesecloth. Besides, I have contacts where

this was made so the trip won't cost more than airfare." She recrossed her fingers. She'd be lucky not to end up on the street. "Besides, what choice do we have?"

Bautista scratched at his bald spot with his pinky nail. "So, who are we dealing over there?"

"Relatives."

"These relatives have a name?"

"Same as mine, Falcini."

Bautista threw back his head. "I can't take another of you."

"You won't even have one of me. I won't be here. It'll give you a break."

"It's giving me a headache. You're sure Martell is interested?"

"Why else would I go?"

Bautista took his foot off the chair. "Then find out how those *tanga* make this stuff. Don't let them get up cause they know you. And I want to hear you every day—before you pitch Martell, not after. I know you, you know. Without me you'd give away the store. So no deals, no percentages, nothing without my approval. We need the order but for the right money." He rolled up the sleeves of his checkered shirt and went to the door. "You hear me, *tama*?"

"How could I not?" she said, her jaw clenching.

"Good. Be back in a week."

He swung the door so hard the knob smacked the wall, another ding in a structure that despite its walking distance from Faneuil Hall needed painting, new flooring and the repair of a roof leak that not even the prior owner could find. The electrical, by comparison, made the rest seem livable. She hated to admit it, but her mother had a point about this place.

"You're just like your father," she said shortly after the second heart attack. "The minute I'm gone you'll buy into that sinkhole. Why can't you be happy with what you've got? An education and a name for yourself at that nice Italian company with the good material. Okay, it's a little she-she, but so what? They pay you decent."

She had just started working at Tessero and hadn't had the heart to tell her mother college was over. Yet, in the end, it was hard to know which accusation had stung more, that she was a spendthrift

lurking at her mother's deathbed for funds or that she was like her father.

She checked online for flights of out Logan to Malpensa and found one late Sunday afternoon that gave her time with Peter and time to pack. She keyed her credit card into the airline website, opened another browser window and checked email. A confirmation appeared in her inbox. For this price, she would stay on Don Roccia's floor.

She clicked Trenitalia for rail schedules then a newsfeed of Milan. An afternoon protest had fulminated from downtown to the Rho fairgrounds where the textile shows were held. A journalist held a microphone under the nose of a young man wearing a form-fitting leather jacket ripped at the shoulder. He hadn't planned to join the rally, he told the interviewer, but with the rising tide of immigrants threatening more than just the country's economy the time had come.

She added the Trenitalia site to favorites and closed the browser. She had kept up with news from *il bel paese* via cable at her North End co-op until the provider axed the free Italian station from its lineup.

"That's not the place to save money," her mother had surprised her by saying. "Pay for the better menu and keep up your Italian. You had my language first."

She took the carryall from under her desk and moved the tattered dressmaker's dummy to the corner by a teetering tower of sample books. Why was it that no matter how often she tidied the space it still looked shabby?

She switched off the desk lamp, shoved the pouch and laptop in her bag and went downstairs past a protruding bolt of duck cotton in garish geometrics that would make better slipcovers than dresses. Through the front window, Atlantic Avenue sparkled in sunlight that glinted off the wharf, the morning's thunderheads swept away by the wind. She buttoned her denim vest for the trek up the uneven cobbles of North Street. For now, she would have to table the question her attorney had asked when she signed the papers for Fiber, whether or not she wanted to walk away from this.