I was seventeen when Francesca and Stefano arrived in Monforte – arrived quite suddenly, so that it seemed one day they weren’t there, and the next they were open for business. They’d taken on Bruno Cavelli’s long-closed enoteca, a tiny cupboard-sized wine shop with a 7 little apartment above it, so small that no one had bothered to lease it for years. To be honest, I wasn’t terribly interested at first to discover that a lingerie shop had opened in our town. The garments that appeared in the tiny window that autumn weren’t the sort of thing that appealed to me; not remotely. Francesca’s goods were luxurious, sophisticated, a little over-the-top; intricate assemblies of padding and bows and embroidery. Some were decorated with lace flowers, or embedded with tiny seed pearls. I bought my underwear from department stores in Alba or Turin. They were cream or pale, in plain pastel shades. The garments that Francesca and Stefano sold were like objects from another world, one that had no relevance for me. Garments – I realise that, even after all these years, I’m lapsing into the language Francesca herself habitually used. I don’t think I ever heard her say the word lingerie, still less underwear. Even the words which described various styles – bustier, basque, babydoll and so on; or in the case of bras, half-cup, plunge, underwired, balconette – she used only in a technical way, to distinguish one shape from another. The garment was always the garment, or occasionally the piece. She’d been trained, Stefano later told me, at a prestigious fashion school in Paris, and that was the way they spoke of such things there.

“She’s called Gavuzzo,” I reported to my mother and Nonna Rosa when the pharmacy reopened later that evening. “That’s a Piemontese name, isn’t it? Perhaps she’s from round here after all.” “Perhaps,” Nonna Rosa said. “Or perhaps she just wants to give us that impression.” “Why would she do that?” 10 “If you’re going to take a name, better to choose a common one, wouldn’t you say? That way we all assume she’s local, without actually being able to check. She’s certainly not related to Eleonora Gavuzzo, or any of the other Gavuzzos I know.” “But why would she take a fake name in the first place?” Nonna Rosa shrugged theatrically. My mother and I exchanged glances. Nonna Rosa’s appetite for gossip was legendary, and when there wasn’t enough of the genuine article to go around she created more out of very little, like the thrifty housewife she was. So we didn’t take her theories very seriously at the time. “They’ll be gone by Christmas,” she repeated.