

Isabelle Lehn

The Gambler

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From banker in Zurich to global accountant for the Calabrian mafia - a novel about an inconspicuous woman.

In the 1990s, a young woman moves from the provinces of Lower Saxony to Zurich to pursue a career as an investment banker. There she gets to know the world of bad banks, where neither borders nor laws seem to apply. However, when her career stagnates, she realizes how much freedom it gives her to be a woman who is overlooked: Away from legality, she soon invests millions. Finally, she remains silent in court. Her story is told by others.

In *The Gambler*, Isabelle Lehn creates an ambivalent heroine who knows how to make the most of her inconspicuousness. A smart and smooth novel by an incorruptible author - and an exciting game with our own expectations. Inspired by a true story.

"The history of literature is full of male impostors – here comes a heroine who makes them all look pale." – Simon Urban

Isabelle Lehn, born in Bonn in 1979, now lives in Leipzig and leads a successful life, at first glance: a PhD in rhetoric, the author of the award-winning debut novel *Tie Two Birds Together*, a lecturer and research fellow at the German Institute for Literature in Leipzig. Everything else is a matter of interpretation.



Synopsis

The Gambler tells the story of a young woman from rural Germany, provincial Lower Saxony, who tries to have a successful career in investment banking in the 1990s. When her career stagnates and she is sidelined, she realizes how much power and freedom is granted her to move unnoticed in others' shadows.

She accepts a client's offer to take care of his family's financial affairs and becomes a key figure in the shadowy world of organized crime. Under the cover of an inconspicuous bourgeois façade, she spends years "laundering" the money of a Calabrian mafia clan and invests millions in Eastern Europe and Asia – as well as in a financially strapped German media company. Only in 2006 is her double life exposed and she was caught by the authorities. As she remains silent in court, her story is told on the basis of speculations from those close to her.

Isabelle Lehn was fascinated by this character, whose biography breaks with the conventions of femininity that ultimately guarantee her criminal success. As a woman, she appears unsuspecting and incapable of playing a decisive role in the illicit culture of organized crime, which is why she is able to operate in this nebulous world for years without attracting the attention of investigating authorities.

Part one (2004 to 2007): A. is arrested in 2006 and is put on trial in early 2007. She does not comment on the charges made by the prosecution. She prefers to remain the cipher she has been for a long time, when it was easier to overlook her. At this point in the novel, it remains unclear what she is accused of and A. is stubbornly silent, not given a voice of her own in the first part of the novel. Instead, our impression is made up of the changing perspectives of those around her. A.'s colleagues, superiors, family members and acquaintances are called to the narrative witness stand and paint the picture of a woman they remember as A.. However, in retrospect it seems that this was an illusion and that A. only led this life as a cover.

The testimonies take us back to 2004, when A. was living in Berlin. There she was employed as a telephone operator at the news agency DND (“Deutscher Nachrichtendienst” or German News Service). She is a reliable worker and otherwise lives in seclusion. Not much is known about A. – a middle-aged woman, single, childless, presumably divorced. Only her father occasionally thinks back wistfully to the grand plans young A. had when she left her home in the small town in Lower Saxony at the beginning of the 1990s to pursue a career in Zurich. However, what followed proved to be a series of bad decisions: A. had tied herself to the wrong men, whom she followed abroad, to Eastern Europe and as far as Asia, at the expense of her own career and only to return after the break-ups and have to start all over again. This is how A. consistently worked downward from Deutsche Bank to account manager at DND.

A. seems to have accepted her lot and no longer expects much from life. She rarely goes out and hardly socializes in Berlin. Occasionally she has a beer with her neighbor Joachim Oldenbrink, who works as a business consultant for the DND. She shares her worry that she might soon lose her job: DND is highly in debt. A solvent investor is needed to avert the threat of insolvency.

As the agency’s financial situation grows increasingly glum and a few promising investors pull out, A. receives a tip from a former colleague from her time at Deutsche Bank in Zurich: a wealthy client who holds a majority stake in a traditional brewery wants to invest in the media sector. She passes on the tip and ultimately connects with the brewery heir Werner Tieck, who initially insists on only meeting with A.: He trusts her assessment because A. does not have much to lose.

His list of assets is impressive, which is why the managing director of DND, Holger Prinz, agrees to the terms. A. meets with Tieck and is also impressed. His reservations also seem to have dissipated after the meeting. Tieck’s trustee and asset manager, Dr. Gröger, a lawyer from Göttingen, contacts Prinz to initiate the deal. The contract subsequently signed by both parties shortly makes Tieck a DND partner. However, he commits to transfer a three million euro bridging credit to the press agency. DND management

investigates following delays in the transaction. And the heir turns out to be a swindler who has no assets whatsoever and lives with his mother on a run-down farm in the Eifel mountains. This results in an inability to avert DND's insolvency.

The case seems clear: A. was deceived by a charming impostor who made her believe she was important in this charade. The lonely middle-aged woman was an easy victim. Even the press reported on the telephone operator who believed she had a chance at greatness. However, A. sealed the fate of around 400 colleagues by falling victim to the false heir's ploy. A. can no longer be reached. She disappears before she can be fired. No one is surprised. The only person who waits in vain to hear from her is her father.

Part two (1990-1998): Now the narrative is from A.'s perspective, starting with a depiction of the 1990s. After initially studying in Göttingen, A. hesitates to settle down in her hometown of Einbeck with her childhood friend Markus after graduating. Instead, she has dreams of a career in investment banking. An assessment center evaluation results in A. being offered a promising position in the sales department of Deutsche Bank in Zurich at the beginning of 1991. However, she encounters resistance from her team there, but is eventually accepted and valued as a colleague – for her specialized knowledge, as well as the fact that she can hold her liquor and is not afraid of ending client meetings in the table dance bar. She is not perceived as a competition. A. knows that she must succeed in moving up the career ladder before she is too old to work in sales. Over time, her personal boundaries continue to shift and she signals that she is willing to operate in legal gray areas in order to satisfy customers and meet her quotas.

Her goal is to go to London with her team leader Jeremy and rival her role model Nicola Horlick, who is celebrated as the "Superwoman of the City". But her plans are shattered when a group of boys from Merrill Lynch moves to Deutsche Bank, where they soon push out Nicola Horlick and take over her investment department in London. Despite predicting the collapse of the heated markets in Asia, A. falls out with her mentor Jeremy in Zurich, who then lets her go and forbids any contact with her old clients.

As A. predicted, there is a crash in the “Asian Tiger” states’ markets and an economic crisis that spreads to Russia. As the Russian ruble plummets, A. accepts an offer from a long-standing client to take exclusively administer his family’s financial affairs. She and a few employees are tasked with opening a branch in Russia, where they hope to profit from the crisis. Her task is to penetrate the market in the Moscow area to invest and launder money by inventing legends that sanitize the origin of the dirty money, making it legal. Her business partner, who is a member of a Calabrian mafia clan, sees this as her strength. She already learned to abandon all moral qualms at Deutsche Bank. She has mastered the necessary skills to conceal illegal practices. And above all: she is easily overlooked and underestimated, as the investigators at regulating authorities do not trust a woman like A. to operate in this criminal environment. She hopes to gain freedom, influence and recognition by entering this shadowy world.

Part three (1998–2007): Following her arrest in 2006, A.’s bourgeois facade and her life in the shadows are brought together and the events that took place in secret from 1998 to 2007 are reconstructed.

In 1998, with great criminal energy, A. began laundering millions for her client’s family. She preferred to invest the money in convoluted projects in the former Soviet states, where a capitalist gold-rush atmosphere was prevalent after the fall of the Iron Curtain. A. sets up a team and creates a legend for herself, which she clings to with her family and former acquaintances. At the start of the new millennium, she moves from Moscow to Shanghai, where she trades in counterfeit securities, before returning to Germany in 2003 following the bankruptcy of a Munich media entrepreneur.

There are ideal conditions and stable investment options for A.’s money laundering business in Germany. The clan’s “washing machines” are located in East Germany, so A. moves to Berlin, where she plans to invest in the media sector. She buys a rental building completely in cash as an investment and to launder her own money, then takes a job as a telephone operator at the ailing Berlin news service DND.

When DND starts looking for an investor, A. brings in her front man Werner Tieck to play in a conversation with her neighbor Joachim Oldenbrink. He promises to save the agency as a supposed brewery heir with the best references. A. became acquainted with Tieck as a “financial agent” – she uses him for the practice of “money muling”: he acts as her money laundering straw man. But Tieck wants more, and he proves to be a talented swindler.

While she is working to buy her way into the DND with the clan's millions, the family of her client in Milan comes under the scrutiny of investigating authorities. The situation comes to a head and A. is ordered to cancel the transaction because the timing would be too risky. She tries to gain some time, until the situation has relaxed again. But Werner Tieck is exposed as a fraud following Holger Prinz' investigations and the deal with the DND falls through.

A. disappears and from that point on lives under different names in Italy, where she decides to reconsolidate her identities in spring 2006. She checked into a hotel in Florence under her real name and has herself arrested by Interpol. The trial – beginning in early 2007 – is ultimately unable to prove much, as there were too many competing narratives. She had been remanded in custody only to emerge from the trial as a free woman. She still owns a considerable fortune, which is hidden in an offshore account in the South Sea country of Vanuatu.

Following the verdict, A. leaves Germany in July 2007. She has left the game when the world financial crisis was already looming on the international markets.

Sample Translation: Bradley Schmidt

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Prologue

The man in front of her is already naked – that’s how we can imagine it will end. He is still half boy, slim and handsome, but with an old face. He will sit on the bed and watch as she undresses herself. She strips off her clothing, slowly, until there is nothing left on her body but her jewelry, which she places on the bedside table, piece by piece. We assume she wants to stand completely naked in front of him, unprotected, she wants to see the desire in his gaze, sense his disbelief, his fascination, maybe even his fear of her, while she tells him everything.

That is why she has brought him here. A cheap boy from the train station who does not take his eyes off of her as he is sitting in front of her, beneath the wood-paneled ceiling and between brocade curtains, on one of the most expensive beds in the city. He is the one she chose to look at her in this way: disgusted and filled with lust, aroused and revolted by her story.

His muscles twitch with anticipation. At some point, everything has been said, and then he is finally allowed to possess her with the fury of wanting something that will remain unattainable for him. Serious and focused, he performs his duty and makes it look like he is making all the decisions.

“Take what’s on the bedside table,” she says to him when he has finished. He looks at her quizzically, because it is more than he has ever owned, and before he pockets the jewelry, she turns away from him and steps onto the balcony in her robe, lighting a cigarette and letting her gaze wander over the rooftops of Florence. She looks past the river and memorizes the silhouette, the bell tower of the Franciscan church, the Duomo’s terracotta dome, the Palazzo’s crenellated tower and the Badia Fiorentina’s tall steeple. She presses her pelvis against the warm stone of the balustrade. The spring sun is already powerful, and she will also remember the voices wafting up from the street, the soft wind cooling the back of her neck where her skin is still damp. She inhales while behind her, the boy takes her jewelry, slips the rings over his

fingers, puts on the watch, hides the earrings and necklace in his jacket. Only once she hears him closing the door behind himself does she turn around and stroll into the room.

She is not in a hurry, she still has some time before time will no longer play a role. The boy was thorough and quick, taking everything she had entrusted him with, and her story will end as it began, as incredible and untraceable as a Florentine station boy who has disappeared just as nameless as she had gathered him.

He shall remain the only one who knows how she would tell everything.

She gets her bag ready before going into the bathroom and turning on the shower. She did not pack much because she will not be allowed to bring much along with her. She is accustomed to getting by with very little. People like her travel light, and for one last time it will not be difficult for her to be someone who leaves behind everything.

This is how we can imagine the ending with which this story begins. For us, it seems reasonable that A. has written this ending for herself, that she has written herself out of this story, a goodbye present to herself. And because all stories that end in court begin with their ending, A. has also written the beginning – in the spring of 2006, when she checked in at the Palazzo Magnani Feroni and paid with a credit card issued to her old, full name.

The loose threads have to be held tightly to untangle the rest of the knot. You have the ending in your grasp, not much more than that, and people left and right are sure: A. must have known what she was doing. She must have known the whole time – that is why she is on trial now. That is why this all is so outrageous.

A. is sitting up straight, her face opaque, as if all of this no longer concerned her. It is up to others to make sense of her and try to read her gestures. Everything about her becomes a sign, everything about her is a reference, whether sitting up straight or slumped, hands folded as if in prayer or arms crossed. The downturned corners of her mouth might indicate arrogance, or is it simply that her features have gone limp? She might be considered tired or disinterested; maybe she just slept poorly. A.'s name is abbreviated by the media to protect her identity.

A. seems inconspicuously put-together with her chin-length bob, which ends above the collar of her cream-colored blouse. An anthracite coat hangs off the back of her chair. From a distance, it is difficult to tell whether it is made of cashmere or synthetic fibers, and if anything could be objectionable to the audience, it would be that A.'s hair looks slightly too slick and she is dressed a little too tastefully for a woman who is in custody, after all.

She is described as a middle-aged woman. She conforms to this role, her defining characteristic is her averageness. She could be taken for a court stenographer who had simply taken the wrong seat, if you encountered her on the street, you could easily overlook her.

Now, however, all eyes are on her. A. returns the glances, exercises her right to remain silent now that people would listen to her.. She prefers to remain a cipher, the blind spot in the system that she spent years representing, and as long as she remains silent, she will disappear into the stories others tell about her to circle around the cipher that is A.

There could be no better hiding place for A. And we too, sitting in the audience to ensure her silence, we too are already curious to find out what contours will emerge.

(...)

Part Three (1998 to 2007)

1

We are dependable because trust is the beginning of everything.

We have purchasing power.

We are corporate body and organ.

We create structures and provide networks.

We cooperate when it pays for us.

We bet on the silent powers of money to clear the way.

We abstain from violence that causes unnecessary controversy.

We have cleaners, top lawyers, like all investment banks that cover their tracks.

We operate globally.

We have grown in the shadows.

We are successful, our balance sheet is 50 billion.

We are the power of the state and the state within the state.

We profit from deregulation.

We make money from lawless realms.

We are men of the people and Patrones.

We have roots in the soil we come from.

We are the forest you get lost in.

We are the ravines, the foundation, the territory.

We are our children, and their children's children.

We are the women who speak for us.

We are the colleagues.

We are the good deed.

We live where we do not attract attention.

We live in houses with crumbling facades.

We wash ourselves with water flowing from golden taps.

We drive sports cars parked in dilapidated garages.

We know you do not brag when you have made a big score.

We survive because we do not consider ourselves immortal.

We are entrepreneurs and fundraisers.

We regulate the market.

We are welcomed with open arms.

We have global networks.

We understand a thing or two about politics.

We see development opportunities and invest.

We transcend borders.

We are generous and globalized.

We are service providers, producers, and traders.

We value safe transportation routes.

We are commendable citizens.

We are balance and counterweight.
We administer justice and make the laws.
We cooperate with the competition.
We are disciplined.
We evolve.
We discover new territory.
We send representatives to our provinces.
We are specialized and highly educated.
We are investors and brokers.
We are shareholders, financiers, creditors.
We are involved and too big to fail.
We own government securities and bonds.
We are the dependence that others find themselves on.
We are the infrastructure.
We are contractors and waste incinerators.
We do not arouse suspicion.
We are prosecutors, village policemen.
We are accomplices and middlemen.
We know that everyone has their price.
We delegate and outsource.
We leave as silently as we came.
We are everymen and rarely arsonists.
We transfer money.
We are of no interest.
We connect people.
We have time and long-term objectives.
We retreat to quiet spaces.
We are resilient and flexible.
We think strategically and act with foresight.
We are nuclear families and global markets.
We have been baptized and excommunicated.
We are everything and everyone.
We wear the mask of legality.

We are obedience, strength, and brutality.
We are the goal we do not lose sight of.
We are the triumvirate.
We are couriers and collaborators.
We are your alias, your legend.
We are emancipated, but never exposed.
We are the word that does not exist.
We are the shadow from which we do not emerge.
We are invisibility, the blind spot.
We are your stepping stone to the top.
We do not get our hands dirty.
We are clients and employers.
We arrive wearing white vests.
We are headhunters and bounty hunters.
We are commanders and protectors.
We have a competitive edge.
We wear angelic faces.
We are your legal protection, your life insurance.
We have codices and hierarchies.
We are something you can believe in.
We have mastered the art of disappearance.
We are what people say we are.
We are the myth, the hagiography.
We are meaningless and not worth mentioning.
We expect your loyalty.
We are a life of abundance that takes place behind closed doors.
We are what will pay off.
We demand a price of you: not being allowed to show yourself to anyone.

2

Trust was the beginning of everything. And in the beginning of everything, there was a creation story. In the beginning of everything that could be spent, there was the myth about the origin of money. An origin within the value

chain, a narrative that had to ring true enough to make us forget all the other stories. This is exactly what A. was supposed do for us: invent legends that left out the Fall and returned our money to a state of innocence. Stories that would be sent all the way around the world, passed on by some many figures until all counter-narratives had been extinguished. Because nothing is as worthless as a fortune that cannot be spent. So we needed A. to write the book of Genesis for our money.

We considered it an added stabilizing factor that in the end it had been her who approached us with an offer of cooperation. Although motivation by means of pressure and violence was not to be underestimated, Newton's laws had already stated that force was always met by counter force, the application of force generated resistance, and more compelling than physical coercion was the idea that you were acting according to your own convictions and in your own interest.

After all, A. did not need to know that we had already invested significantly in her. Trust, time, and, yes, money as well to ensure that no one would poach her from Zurich, where she was doing good work for us. Tancredi's calculation was working out: she would turn to him eventually when she could no longer stand watching others move past her. The first time they met, he had already sensed she might be worth betting on. That had been in the early nineties, when he had an appointment at Bahnhofsquai 9-11 and A. sat at the conference table in silence. He could still hear the song he had listened to in his car on the drive down. It was the first track on the CD, In ogni senso, which he had listened to constantly back then, a song that strangely moved him, and while they were shaking hands – A.'s name must have been mentioned – he still silently hummed the first lines of the chorus, which seemed full of hope and defiance and had often moved him to tears:

Dedicato a tutti quelli che sono allo sbando
Dedicato a tutti quelli che non hanno avuto ancora niente
E sono ai margini da sempre
Dedicato a tutti quelli che stanno aspettando
Dedicato a tutti quelli che rimangono dei sognatori

Dedicated to all those who are falling apart
Dedicated to all those who haven't had anything yet
And have always been on the margins
Dedicated to all those who are waiting
Dedicated to all those who remain dreamers

Yes, that is how Tancredi viewed himself. He was a dreamer who watched events unfold from the margins. He merely pretended to be like everyone else, even if he did what reality demanded, because in his world, dreamers did not get old. He had turned fifty in 1991, coming to terms with things, and was milder, less restless than he had been before, perhaps even thankful for everything he had achieved. And yet, he was moved by this song, which reminded him of the restlessness of his earlier years, the rage and the longing that had pushed him before he had become lethargic. As if it had to take this vocal artist from Rome to come along and sing so fervently about life on the margins of society to bring him back to life.

Tancredi hailed from the barren heart of the south, still felt tied to it despite having lived in Zurich for fifteen years. At the time, the government in Rome was promising to cut the north's funding for his home region because people like him had been pocketing state subsidies. But the world simply wasn't fair, Tancredi thought. And even here, at Bahnhofsquai 9-11, surrounded by these show-offs, he only had to look around to recognize the injustice of it all. Every single one of them made a living from doing business with his money. And yet they seemed to look down at him. At the pair of shoes on his feet – which he regularly took to the cobbler – at his worn leather briefcase, at his suit, which would never go out of style because it had never been in.

He lived in moderation, the inconspicuous life of a middle-class entrepreneur. There were not many options where he came from. The men at the conference table, by contrast, could have chosen any kind of life for themselves, but they too had ultimately chosen money, and even the young woman sitting with them, apparently from northern Germany, was here for that reason alone: to prof off of other peoples' money.

Tancredi was not yet certain about her role. The young woman only spoke when asked something – she seemed to be some sort of assistant, because she appeared to take notes, placed transparencies on the projector, occasionally named a page number when he was flipping through the folder she had presented to him. But otherwise she said nothing, while Henning – who years before had drunkenly suggested they were on a first-name basis – strung together one word of English jargon after another, as if he was making a deliberate effort to be incomprehensible to his client.

Tancredi was trying to follow and asked Henning to explain one more time what “hedge fund” meant. The word had already been used several times, but van Heusten still looked at him as if Tancredi had just asked what was the capital of Honduras. Then Henning regained his composure and talked about highly complex financial contracts, efficient risk allocation and forward transactions, which had proven to be potent tools instruments, independent of the real economy. Even in a bear market, derivatives could still generate substantial returns, which could be increased further through leverage if the price of the underlying asset fell.

Tancredi tried to follow. “And what does independent of the real economy mean?” he asked, because surely someone had to earn money before they took their cut. At least that is how it worked in his business, and out of the corner of his eye he noticed the young woman take a page out of her notepad and begin to write something on it. Henning, who must have been following his gaze, promptly leaned over the table. “May I?” he asked, pulling the paper out of A.’s hand to briefly skim over the sentences before bursting into laughter. “Gentlemen,” turning dramatically to his audience, “we appear to have stumbled into an advanced seminar in German studies! The concept of hedging,” he read aloud, “is derived from the Old High German *hegga*. To hedge means to enclose. In other words, a portfolio is protected – as if surrounded by a hedge to keep out the risk of losses. Picture a forward transaction, i.e. a trade that only takes place in the future. However, the buyer and seller determine the price in the present day to protect against falling prices (seller) or rising prices (buyer). This price is fixed, it is enclosed, as if surrounded by a hedge... blah blah blah, and so on.” Henning crumpled up

the paper and threw it at the young woman's head. "We'll talk later!" he hissed in her direction. A. crouched to gather the wad from the floor and made it disappear into her bag. For the rest of the meeting, she sat rigid and upright, her eyes glued to the tabletop as if she didn't dare lift her head. Only once did she furtively glance in Tancredi's direction. He noticed, and in the split second that their eyes met, he thought he saw everything there was to know about this girl. He saw her rage and the effort it took her to stay in her seat. He saw her shame and self-hatred. Most of all, he saw the force of her will, which she was submitting to at that very moment to not let anything show. There was a determination to control herself that you just had to give a little time. *Dedicato a tutti quelli che stanno aspettando!* He could wait. And he knew talent when he saw it, because it was obvious how good A. would be at letting others overlook her one day.

He called Jeremy that very evening. Trust was the beginning of everything, he had seen all of what she wanted to hide from him, and she had realized that he had seen through her, so from now on, she would no longer have to pretend with him.

Jeremy had not been at the meeting because apparently he was spending his time in Geneva these days, taking care of a major deal with his Gonet clients. Which made it even more enjoyable for Tancredi to tell him over the phone that starting now, his portfolio with the Germans would be managed by the young lady ("what was her name again, A.?") instead of van Heusten.

He had known Jeremy for years by that point – from the shooting range in *Albisgütli*, up above the financial institutions, where Jeremy cultivated contacts with clients who owned hunting licenses, money, and forested land. Tancredi considered him to be a greyhound, a man without principles, but Jeremy had never once turned him down. This time as well all he could do was accept that Tancredi was making the decisions. Jeremy wanted to know if he could still ask a question. What did Tancredi expect from A.? Or, putting it more concretely: what had she promised him? "Nothing really," Tancredi said. "The young lady didn't say much. But she seemed to have a good feel for the needs of a client." On the other end of the line, he heard Jeremy gulp.

Tancredi thought there was nothing wrong with letting the greyhound believe that A. had made him lose his mind.

Two years later, he put A.'s loyalty to the test for the first time. He asked her to open an account for a friend who he said was abroad at the moment. Tancredi explained that the man was currently unavailable for professional reasons, which is why he had given him power of attorney to invest money for him in Zurich. Would A. be able to be of assistance in this matter? Of course she would! Tancredi only had to tell her a sum of money and she would take care of it. A. did not ask any unnecessary questions. She did the paperwork. Tancredi's word seemed to be enough for her, she did not request any additional documents, let alone proof of existence of the man whose trustworthiness she was vouching for with her signature, despite Tancredi having invented him just then.

It had, admittedly, been a simple task and a transparent maneuver. A. had presumably seen right through it, which made it all the more appealing: she was a gambler and was having fun. Tancredi enjoyed working with her, and when she asked him if his "friend" was satisfied with her service, Tancredi assured her he was "extremely satisfied!" because he was genuinely relieved not to have to part ways with A.

Of course her ability to flout auditing and reporting duties was nothing special in this field. A. did not have to go to Zurich to perfect her skills. The principle of being paid for offering clients protection also happened in the hinterland, and even at home in Lower Saxony, in a branch in Hanover-Vahrenwald, she could have established direct contact with our partners from Colombia who opened twelve accounts worth millions there and apparently felt so safe that nothing spoke against listing Medellín as their home address when opening the accounts.

When a tip from abroad indicated that the cartel's profits were being hidden away deep in provincial Germany, the branch manager claimed he had only acted in keeping with customer wishes and also in his bank's interest, where the gentlemen from Colombia were making "deposits quite interesting from a business perspective."

After all, the business justifies the means. Even the law could not prevent it, and who would know this better than us – or the “German South American Bank,” where money from Colombia had also appeared. A board member explained: “We close down accounts immediately if we get the sense that the client doesn’t have integrity.”

Early on, A. had learned to keep these kinds of emotions at bay when suspicions or doubts arose – and this was also the reason why Tancredi absolutely wanted to have her.

Legend had it that women did not think rationally. They were easily swayed by their emotions, acted impulsively, made mistakes due to passion, they were unable to think strategically or keep to themselves what had been entrusted to them. And that is why, as legend had it, for us women were neither business nor negotiation partners. In our organization, people believed, they only played a role as wives, mothers or daughters, lovers at best. They raised the children, cultivated traditions, and kept the family together. Women were self-sacrificing, serving others, but not their own interests. Women did not go into battle, women did not become criminals. And above all, according to tradition, the Crimine would never accept involving women in our business.

The legend’s shadow was long. But in the meantime we were way ahead of most other sectors. In the early nineties, when the state was gaining control at the tip of Italy’s boot and more and more of our men had to disappear for a while to quiet zones like the Rhineland, or serve a prison sentence, the family only had women left. In this way, thing became confused all over the world. In Hell’s Kitchen, where the wives took over, just like in Ruanda, where the women ran the show after the genocide because there were no men left. It had always been this way in wartime: the men went off into battle and the women had to work on the economic front.

No one will claim that we took to it with enthusiasm – being ordered around by women. But the Crimine had soon recognized that this makeshift arrangement had its advantages: women stayed under the radar. The legend’s shadow clouded the perspective of the investigating authorities,

and now, when women controlled a territory, kept our books, or established business relationships, they usually did so unobstructed and without arousing suspicion. Go ahead and underestimate them, regard us as a male alliance with unbreakable codices and our own language that eschewed feminine grammatical forms. And now A. would also be transformed into a word that did not exist in our language. She would become a middle woman, our godmother, because something that was excluded even by language itself due to it being in contradiction to all likelihood, would remain beyond imagination.

In short: A. was perfect for bringing phantoms to life for us. Because no one looked more legitimate than A., this blonde woman from southern Lower Saxony, who had worked for the Germans in Zurich and set up her own business as a financial consultant following differences within her team and in the wake of the Asian crisis. A. with the face of an angel, which she wore like her namesake, the legendary Angela R. who even after she had been arrested insisted she had not only carried parcels from one part of the country to another but had also been calling the shots all along.

Faccia d'Angelo, Angel Face. In the case of A., even the details were spot on. Only her legs were slightly too short and too plump, as is said proverbially of liars. But she had, after all, learned to move through the world on heels, and we completely believed in her ability to come up with an inextricable plot, an epic web of relationships with an international cast of characters, in order to turn our money legal. A. would find straw men and cast them as company owners who were nothing but a name in the commercial register. In return, she would pay commissions as fictitious salaries or consultancy fees, she would invent services not provided and pay dividends to shareholders from fictitious profits produced by the sale of worthless goods. There was no limit to the imagination when it came to planting money in our ledgers and then sending it on its way – to a network of branches and trading partners, offshore accounts and local offices, all around the globe, until no traces of its origins remained and even the exegetes at the regulatory authorities could not track down its first occurrence.

We would leave the details to A., and once the money had been sufficiently anonymized, it could be funneled into a foundation or a trust fund of a holding company, for instance, from which A. would reinvest it, now in completely legal businesses. She could invest the money in restaurants, buy into hotels or the energy industry, finance private universities or support the arts, acquire a media company – whatever she thought made sense for creating an honorable façade and anchoring us in areas whose structures were not very well developed.

We offered her attractive tasks and also provided a safe work environment, with her no longer having to work under the eyes of the financial regulatory authorities. A. would work as our independent financial advisor. As previously, it would be at her own risk, but now the money would go into her own pocket. She would be responsible for staffing , and have good opportunities for advancement, would lead her own team, work in emerging markets in her special field, her risk premiums would be substantial, and should prosecutors ever ask what she was actually up to, it would be easy for her to play the victim, someone who had allowed herself to be deceived by us in good faith. Women were more frequently acquitted – if it ever came to trial. And what was wrong with investing our money as long as it had been properly taxed and she wouldn't find out where it had come from?

A. would not gain any insights into our core businesses. At the same time, she would be under the organization's protection. They were serious about their codices and did not just drop their people when things got complicated. Our first compliance rule: those who act loyally shall be promised loyalty. With us, the only people who landed in the swamp were traitors. Not people who had trespassed on our behalf.