

Chapter 31

In Chapter 31 of "The Art Thief," the narrative revolves around the aftermath of Breitwieser's arrest following his mother, Stengel's, chaotic response to discovering his art thefts. Anne-Catherine, who witnesses the arrest at the Wagner Museum in November 2001, has since avoided capture, but her connection with the events unfolds slowly. In a May 2002 interrogation, she denies involvement in the art's disappearance, maintaining a brief account of the attic's clean-out. Simultaneously, Stengel faces police questioning where she admits to acting independently without her son's knowledge, expressing guilt over her actions during this "crisis."

Breitwieser grapples with the implications of his eight years of thievery, which resulted in over two hundred heists and hundreds of artworks stored in an attic—a monumental collection that now represents his mental burden. After some time, he seeks clear details from his mother, but privacy is limited due to his jail surroundings. He learns that Anne-Catherine rushed to inform Stengel about his arrest, prompting her to climb the attic stairs for the first time in years. Stengel is overwhelmed by the enormity of the stolen art and fears the consequences of harboring these items could lead to her imprisonment.

Reacting out of desperation, Stengel exhibits a "destructive frenzy" where she disposes of the art, giving in to anger and fear of legal repercussions. She packs the items into bags and drives to a secluded area of the Rhône-Rhine Canal at night to dispose of them. She tosses many stolen items into the water, asserting that they mean nothing to her. As more of the art is discarded, including large pieces like a 150-pound Virgin Mary statue, she later claims she managed this feat alone—a statement doubted by Breitwieser.

The narrative indicates possible complicity from Jean-Pierre Fritsch, Stengel's new partner, as police divers eventually locate more stolen art on his property. Throughout the chapter, it becomes apparent that Stengel's actions are twofold: while she arguably seeks to protect her son, she also acknowledges wanting to inflict pain on him for the distress his actions caused her. In a dramatic turn, she ultimately destroys what remains of the art collection by setting it ablaze, a final act laden with significance, revealing both her violent grief and complex maternal instinct.