

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of *The Art Thief* opens in the quiet aftermath of an eventful day.

Breitwieser, Anne-Catherine, and his mother return to the safe confines of their attic after attending a Sotheby's auction, where a significant theft has been executed. In the sanctuary of their home, the trio unrolls the auction catalog to examine the stolen piece, Cranach's *Sibylle of Cleves*, marveling at its history, beauty, and the intricacies that define it. Breitwieser, with his deep connection to the world of art, feels an intense wave of euphoria wash over him, momentarily erasing the stresses of their ongoing criminal activities. This moment of calm is fleeting, but it highlights a rare sense of peace amid the chaos they have created for themselves.

For Breitwieser and Anne-Catherine, the attic has become more than just a physical space; it is their private refuge, a place where they can shed the weight of their secretive lives. Breitwieser, a self-proclaimed loner, finds solace in his collection of stolen art, which has replaced all semblances of social life for him. His thoughts often drift to a life of isolation with Anne-Catherine, imagining a future where they are free from the world's expectations, surrounded by their masterpieces. While Anne-Catherine is deeply involved in this world with him, she occasionally seeks out social interactions outside of their criminal life, engaging with friends and co-workers. This tension between the desire for a secluded life and the need for human connection is at the heart of their relationship, highlighting the complexities of living a life of secrecy and crime.

Despite the passion they share for their illicit adventures, Anne-Catherine struggles with the emotional isolation that their secretive existence brings. While she often maintains a degree of normalcy by interacting with others, the weight of their actions and the secrecy surrounding them create an emotional void. This dynamic reflects the profound impact of their criminal lifestyle on their emotional well-being. While Anne-

Catherine remains loyal to Breitwieser, her quiet desire for more connection outside of their world grows, which creates an underlying tension that is felt in their everyday interactions. Breitwieser's refusal to fully acknowledge the isolation he creates for them both leads to moments of emotional friction, as their once passionate connection begins to feel stifled by the very life they've chosen.

Mireille Stengel, Breitwieser's mother, represents a contrast to their secluded lifestyle. Unlike her son and Anne-Catherine, Stengel maintains an extroverted life, hosting guests and participating in social gatherings. However, despite her outward socialization, she remains oblivious to the full extent of her son's criminal activities. She suspends her judgment, unwilling to confront the truth of what Breitwieser has become, which leads to a complicated emotional dynamic between them. For Breitwieser, this willful ignorance from his mother provides a sense of protection, but it also creates an emotional strain, as he begins to understand the depth of the rift between the person his mother believes him to be and the man he truly is.

The holiday season presents a stark juxtaposition to the couple's hidden life. Christmas Day, marked by familial warmth and festive preparation, brings an unsettling contrast to the darkness of their criminal endeavors. Breitwieser films his mother preparing for family festivities, capturing a moment of normalcy that sits uneasily with the illegal world in which he and Anne-Catherine are immersed. In a rare moment of vulnerability, Breitwieser shares his New Year's resolutions, revealing a childlike side of himself that still seeks validation and approval from his family, despite his ongoing criminal pursuits. This childlike quality is juxtaposed with his criminal ambitions, highlighting the complex emotional contradictions that characterize his personality.

Stengel, although aware of her son's involvement in criminal activities, chooses to remain in a state of denial. She continues to turn a blind eye to the extent of his wrongdoings, unwilling to confront the reality of his actions. This internal conflict—caught between maternal love and adherence to the law—creates an emotionally complex relationship. Breitwieser, recognizing this internal struggle, understands that his mother's love for him is stronger than her commitment to the

law, and this protective instinct makes her unwilling to betray him. In this chapter, the themes of family loyalty, secrecy, and love are explored through the lens of their complicated relationships, revealing the emotional turmoil and psychological burden that living a life of crime brings. This emotional tension, particularly between the desire for familial protection and the necessity of moral accountability, shapes their bond and sets the stage for the challenges to come.

