

# Chapter 31

Chapter 31 of *The Art Thief* takes a deep dive into the aftermath of Breitwieser's arrest, focusing primarily on the reactions of his mother, Stengel, and the drastic measures she takes regarding the stolen artworks. The chapter begins in November 2001 when Stengel, after discovering the full extent of her son's criminal activities, reacts in a chaotic and emotional way. During this period, Anne-Catherine, who was present during Breitwieser's arrest at the Wagner Museum, tries to distance herself from the entire ordeal, remaining out of the reach of the authorities. In May 2002, Anne-Catherine is questioned by the police and maintains her innocence regarding any direct involvement in the disappearance of the art, offering only a brief account of her actions with regard to the attic clean-out. At the same time, Stengel, during her own police questioning, admits to acting alone when dealing with the stolen artwork and expresses deep remorse for the actions taken during what she describes as a "crisis."

As the narrative progresses, Breitwieser reflects on the eight years he spent stealing art, a period in which he committed more than 200 thefts. The stolen items, which were kept in his mother's attic, now represent not just a legal problem but a psychological burden, one that weighs heavily on him. Confined to prison and unable to communicate freely with his mother, he seeks details about the fate of the artwork, hoping for some clarity. Through indirect channels, he learns that Anne-Catherine informed Stengel about his arrest, prompting Stengel to go to the attic for the first time in years. Upon seeing the vast quantity of art in her possession, Stengel becomes overwhelmed by the fear of the legal consequences she could face for harboring these stolen items. This fear, compounded by guilt and confusion, leads her to make rash decisions in an attempt to cover up the situation.

In an impulsive and frantic act, Stengel engages in a "destructive frenzy," during which she disposes of the artwork in a bid to destroy the evidence and erase her

involvement. Packing the stolen pieces, she drives them to a remote area by the Rhône-Rhine Canal during the night, where she discards the majority of the items into the water. Among the discarded pieces are valuable works, including a 150-pound statue of the Virgin Mary. As the objects sink into the canal, Stengel justifies her actions by stating that the art holds no emotional value to her anymore. Later, she claims to have carried out the disposal alone, a claim that Breitwieser finds hard to believe given the scale of the actions taken. The situation takes an even darker turn when police divers find additional stolen artworks on the property of Jean-Pierre Fritsch, Stengel's new partner, implying that he may have been complicit in the disposal of the art.



The chapter delves deeper into the emotional complexity of Stengel's actions. While there's an evident attempt to protect her son from further legal trouble, it becomes increasingly clear that Stengel's actions were motivated by more than just concern for him. There is an undeniable element of anger and resentment toward her son, as well as a desire to punish him for the pain and chaos his crimes have caused her. The final act of the chapter is a dramatic one—Stengel, in a fit of grief and rage, burns the remaining artwork, fully destroying the last of the stolen collection. This act of destruction symbolizes her internal struggle, as she simultaneously tries to sever all ties with her son's criminal past while confronting the emotions of guilt, grief, and betrayal. It also highlights the complex and contradictory nature of her maternal instincts, as she seeks to protect her son while simultaneously rejecting the life he led.