

Chapter 38

In Chapter 38 of *The Art Thief*, the narrative takes a deep dive into the troubled life of Stéphane Breitwieser, now 44 years old, following his final prison sentence. Despite being freed, his life remains deeply entangled in the consequences of his past. With a criminal record that looms large and a bank account holding only five euros, Breitwieser finds himself trapped in financial instability. His mother provides the necessary support, covering his rent and sometimes offering food, while Stengel, his partner, also shoulders much of the household responsibilities. However, the shadows of past grief linger, as Stengel is also processing the recent death of her own mother. This sets a scene of dual sorrow, where both characters are left to navigate personal loss while struggling to rebuild what little they can from the wreckage of their previous lives.

Despite his emotional and financial struggles, Breitwieser longs for solitude and a fresh start. He dreams of escaping to nature, where he can find peace through simple pleasures like hiking, far away from the turmoil of his past life. He has a modest apartment where he keeps a reproduction of *Sibylle of Cleves*, his favorite artwork, which serves as a constant reminder of the original piece that was tragically destroyed in a fire years ago. His connection to the art world is minimal now, with his primary focus being the search for his lost stolen pieces. These paintings, roughly 80 in total, were taken during his thieving spree, but they have remained elusive ever since a disastrous event that destroyed many of them. Despite his obsession with finding these pieces, Breitwieser is acutely aware of the secrecy his mother holds regarding their location, which only adds to his sense of frustration and longing.

The following year finds Breitwieser increasingly stagnant, feeling as though he is stuck in a life he cannot escape. Despite his previous desire to leave his past behind, he eventually returns to his old ways. This time, his thefts target local museums in

Alsace, where items are swiftly stolen and sold online through various aliases to keep his identity hidden. However, his renewed criminal activities don't go unnoticed. In February 2019, law enforcement catches wind of his actions, leading to a police raid that threatens to undo whatever fragile life he has been attempting to build. The law has grown stricter, with harsher penalties now in place for art theft. Breitwieser realizes that his future is slipping away, and the prospect of freedom seems less likely with each passing day. As if to underline this reality, he visits a Catalan exhibition, where a recreated version of *Adam and Eve* takes him down memory lane. This piece, which he had once stolen, now stands as a painful reminder of his past. Driven by a deep sense of nostalgia, Breitwieser disguises himself and makes the journey to Antwerp to revisit the Rubens House. The visit floods him with emotions, as he stands before the artwork he once took, now distant from the person he was then. The scene is intensely emotional as tears begin to roll down his cheeks, and Breitwieser is struck by a crushing realization—his dreams of a life surrounded by beauty and art are now shattered, leaving only a hollow echo of what could have been. In a final act of defiance, Breitwieser steals a booklet depicting *Adam and Eve*, his last connection to his past exploits. This final theft encapsulates the internal conflict raging within him, a thief who once thrived in the art world now reduced to mere remnants of his former self. His complex emotional journey between desires for beauty, art, and the despair of his own failures highlights the tragic consequences of his obsession and the profound isolation he now faces.