

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of *The Art Thief* takes us into the early days of March 1995, where Breitwieser and Anne-Catherine, fresh from the success of their recent crossbow theft, embark on a skiing vacation in the Swiss Alps. Their trip is funded by Breitwieser's grandparents, but the getaway is far from a typical vacation. Instead, it serves as a cover for their ongoing criminal activities, as they plan to make a detour to Gruyères Castle, a historic Swiss fortress turned museum. Upon arrival, they casually purchase their tickets and enter the castle, a strategic move to avoid raising any suspicion. While appearing as simple tourists, Breitwieser uses this visit as an opportunity to assess the castle's artworks with the intent to steal, signaling the start of another heist.

As an art enthusiast, Breitwieser has always been deeply drawn to museums and art collections, cultivating a habit of collecting museum brochures and immersing himself in art literature whenever he can. His love for art goes beyond the surface; he often recalls various artworks from childhood museum visits, further feeding his passion. However, Breitwieser's approach to museum visits is less about thorough planning and more driven by spontaneity. His fascination with art pushes him to act on impulse, especially when an artwork sparks his interest, making each visit feel like an opportunity to find the perfect piece for his collection. This sense of adventure drives him to take risks, even if many of his attempts are thwarted by museum security or unremarkable artwork. Yet, it is this unpredictability and the rush that comes with it that keeps Breitwieser coming back for more.

During their time at Gruyères Castle, Breitwieser's attention is drawn to a captivating oil portrait of an elderly woman by the renowned artist Christian Wilhelm Ernst Dietrich. The portrait's extraordinary detail and emotional resonance trigger an overwhelming feeling of connection, an experience that Breitwieser recognizes as akin

to Stendhal syndrome. This psychological phenomenon, where the viewer is overwhelmed by the beauty of art, is something that Breitwieser has studied and identified within himself. It serves as a reminder of the deep, almost spiritual connection he feels toward art, a connection that many dismiss due to his criminal behavior. Although critics may label him as a mere thief, Breitwieser views himself as someone who truly appreciates the emotional power of art, which he believes most people overlook.

The psychological assessment from Michel Schmidt further highlights the complexity of Breitwieser's character. While Schmidt considers him a menace to society, he acknowledges that Breitwieser's actions are not driven by a compulsive need to steal, but rather by his deep emotional connection to the artworks he collects. Breitwieser's justification for his crimes stems from his belief that he is entitled to these pieces due to his personal understanding of their significance. He sees himself not as a thief, but as someone who appreciates the art in ways that others cannot. This mindset fuels his continued thefts, and as his obsession grows, so does his drive to take even more valuable pieces, believing that they are rightfully his to possess.

The pivotal moment in this chapter comes when Breitwieser sets his sights on the Dietrich portrait. Recognizing the lax security around the artwork, he shares a knowing glance with Anne-Catherine, signaling his intent to steal. With careful precision, he uses a car key and his Swiss Army knife to remove the portrait from its frame, concealing it beneath his jacket as they make their exit. The thrill of the heist fills Breitwieser with adrenaline, yet the couple remains composed, swiftly leaving the castle with their prize. As they head back to their car, Breitwieser feels a mixture of triumph and exhilaration, knowing that they have successfully carried out their first joint art theft. The portrait, now hidden in a suitcase, marks a new chapter in their lives as they set off to continue their vacation, unaware of the long-lasting consequences this crime will have on their relationship and their future endeavors.

This heist represents more than just a stolen painting; it solidifies the bond between Breitwieser and Anne-Catherine, who now share a secret that strengthens their

connection. They are no longer just a couple, but partners in crime, drawn together by their shared thrill for stealing art. As they drive off to their skiing destination, their sense of accomplishment fuels their excitement, but beneath it all, they both know that this act will have profound repercussions. For Breitwieser, the portrait is just another piece in his growing collection, but for Anne-Catherine, it signifies a deeper commitment to the life they've chosen to lead. Together, they continue to navigate the fine line between exhilaration and danger, increasingly entangled in the world of art theft.

