

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of *The Art Thief* continues to build the tension surrounding the criminal exploits of Breitwieser and Anne-Catherine. As their string of thefts grows longer, their actions begin to draw the attention of the local press. Though the authorities still lack the hard evidence needed to arrest them, the media begins to openly connect the couple to the recent art crimes. This growing media frenzy raises their stress levels, particularly as the press misrepresents Breitwieser, describing him as much older than he is, which causes him a strange mix of amusement and anxiety. Despite this mounting pressure, he continues with his thefts, using the media's obsession with him as fuel to carry out more daring heists. In a further display of his audacity, Breitwieser deliberately leaves behind empty frames as a signature move, turning his thefts into personal challenges rather than just illicit acts, creating a game-like atmosphere with the authorities.

As the pressure from the media intensifies, the couple begins to think through the possible methods that law enforcement might use to track stolen art. One common tactic used by authorities is the sale of stolen art through dishonest dealers at prices much lower than the pieces' actual worth, enabling the thieves to quickly convert the items into cash while avoiding immediate detection. Another method involves a practice known as "art-napping," where stolen works are held for ransom and returned to their owners or museums after a ransom is paid, often facilitated by intermediaries or criminal brokers. These ransom schemes are deeply embedded in the history of art crime and offer a practical, albeit illegal, means of obtaining a significant payout while threatening to ruin the reputations of art collectors or museums. Additionally, some stolen works enter the underground market, where they are traded as valuable commodities among criminals, making their recovery even more difficult for law enforcement. These criminal practices reflect the multifaceted nature of art theft and

demonstrate the serious challenges faced by authorities who aim to recover stolen treasures while navigating the complexities of international crime networks.

The chapter also brings attention to the infamous theft of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* in 1994, during the Winter Olympics, highlighting the vulnerabilities in art security.

This case emphasizes the lengths to which art thieves will go to target valuable works of art, as well as the difficulties faced by investigators in tracking down these priceless pieces. Charley Hill, a renowned art detective, shares his insights into the undercover operations involved in recovering *The Scream*, providing an insider's look at the often high-stakes, dangerous nature of art crime investigations. Hill's recounting paints a picture of the dramatic and theatrical elements involved in undercover art crime recovery, offering a stark contrast to the portrayals of art thieves in mainstream media. The real-life world of art theft is far from the glamorous, risk-free heists often depicted in films. In fact, the operations are fraught with danger, secrecy, and constant risks that demand a level of professionalism and bravery that few in the public eye are truly aware of.

The narrative makes an important distinction between the fictional representations of art thieves and the reality of their actions. Many real-life art thieves, like Breitwieser, are not sophisticated art collectors with deep knowledge of the works they steal; instead, they view their criminal activities more as a compulsion or a challenge, rather than a means to appreciate art. The contrast is particularly evident with characters like Alexandre Von der Mühl, who injects a bit of humor into the otherwise serious world of art crime investigations by pointing out the absurdities of the fictional portrayals.

Thieves like Breitwieser, driven more by the thrill of the theft than any interest in the artwork itself, are more concerned with the act of stealing and the rush it provides. He continues to believe that his cunning and ability to avoid capture will keep him free, even as he commits further crimes in countries like France and Germany. Despite their growing criminal network, law enforcement struggles to connect the dots, giving Breitwieser a false sense of security. This sense of invincibility pushes him further into a dangerous cycle of crime, where each successful heist only increases his drive to continue his illegal activities. The chapter thus portrays not only the excitement of the

thefts but also the dark and compulsive nature of Breitwieser's obsession with art and his increasing detachment from the consequences of his actions.

