

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of *The Art Thief* takes the reader deeper into the psyche of Breitwieser, as he embarks on another audacious heist. This time, the target is the iconic painting of Madeleine, housed in the Royal Château of Blois. Initially, he and Anne-Catherine had dismissed the idea of stealing it, given the heavy security and constant stream of visitors. However, as time passed, the lure of this masterpiece proved too powerful, and they found themselves drawn back. Their journey across France, marked by reckless speeds and heightened tension, reflected their desperation and determination. Breitwieser, driving at high speeds, was intent on completing the heist, while Anne-Catherine, who did not drive, experienced the anxiety of the journey, adding to the complexity of their mission. The risks involved were greater, but so was their resolve to succeed, despite the immense obstacles they faced.

Upon arrival at the château, the atmosphere was chaotic, with guards moving about and tourists taking in the sights. Breitwieser, however, saw an opportunity amidst the noise and bustle, as the guards engaged in their own discussions. The display, showcasing the famous painting, was surrounded by security, yet Breitwieser noticed a brief window of distraction. It was in this moment that he realized he had to act quickly, with no time to meticulously plan his every move. His sharp instincts, honed over years of committing similar crimes, kicked in. He decided to take the chance, understanding that the adrenaline of the moment would give him the speed and stealth necessary to succeed. With the clock ticking, he prepared himself for the heist, fully aware that any wrong move could lead to their capture.

The painting, framed in an intricate double frame, was surprisingly easy to detach, secured only by a few strips of Velcro. Breitwieser swiftly removed the frame, blending the noise of his actions into the general commotion around him. Without hesitation, he tucked the precious painting under his clothing, hiding it awkwardly in his pants. As he

turned his back to the guards, Breitwieser knew this was a critical moment—if the guards noticed, it could spell disaster. Yet, he carried on, walking towards the exit with a rush of exhilaration. For him, the theft of the Madeleine was not just about the art; it was about the challenge, the danger, and the skill it took to pull it off. He likened the act to threading a needle, an analogy reflecting the precision and skill required, a task he had perfected over time. The adrenaline rush, heightened by the weight of his nearly 100th theft, was undeniable.

The theft of the Madeleine was just another day in the life of Breitwieser and Anne-Catherine, who had now made a habit of stealing multiple times a month. Earlier in the day, they had successfully stolen from the Château de Chambord, using the same meticulous methods that had become their trademark. Breitwieser had used his trusty Swiss Army knife to bypass a locked display case, making off with several valuable items, including a rare folding fan and tobacco boxes. Each successful heist added to their growing sense of confidence, making what once seemed like risky endeavors feel almost routine. Their growing audacity in committing thefts from some of the most prestigious locations was only increasing. As they continued their spree across France, Breitwieser's expertise in executing these thefts was becoming more refined. This confidence led them to the Madeleine, and the success of this heist only fueled their desire for more. For Breitwieser, it was no longer about the artwork itself; it was about the thrill and the skill of stealing, something that had now become an obsession. The increasing frequency of these crimes reflected not just their skill but their deepening immersion in a life of crime, one that seemed impossible to escape.