

CROOKBOOK



Marc J. Reilly

A Tinman Special Release

Crookbook

Marc J. Reilly

Published by The Thieves Press



To Peg, whose laughter is music to my ears.

Table of Contents

Books by Marc J. Reilly	4
Introduction	5
Comfort Food	6
Breakfast at Tinman's	11
Philosophic Shopper	14
By Cook or By Crook	20
Carrera de Tacos	25
Casserole Calamity	31
Soup du Jour	36
Thai One On	40
Food Fight	45
Real Crooks Do Eat Quiche	50
Hunger Pangs	54
What A Crock	59
Author's Notes	67
Suggested Reading	68
About the Author	77

Books by Marc J. Reilly

Tinman Series

[Posse of Thieves](#)

[Shady Deal](#)

[Calling the Shots](#)

[Nut Job](#)

[Family Jewels](#)

[Con Job](#)

[Crime Wave](#)

Coming Soon

Dream Job

Standalones

[Switch-Pitcher](#)

[Love on the Lam](#)

[Dumb Luck](#)

Introduction

Some years ago, a friend asked me what skill was the most important to being a writer. I told him it was knowing how to cook. He thought I was making a joke, but I explained that all writers have periods where the money isn't flowing, and to survive these times, you had to know how to fend for yourself.

He finally accepted this truth and asked if I could help him learn. I have never used fixed recipes and tend to cook by instinct, so I wasn't sure how to go about it. Eventually, I wrote a few short stories to illustrate some of my best practices.

My first attempt fell below my expectations, and I realized it was because the stories needed to be based on a solid character for the lessons to be properly conveyed. At the time, I was toying around with the idea of writing a novel about crooks, and decided this opportunity would give me a chance to cut my teeth.

Somewhere in my musings, Tinman and Peach were born, and shortly after, I had twelve short stories combining thievery and cooking. My friend could hardly have been happier than I was. He learned his way around a kitchen, and I had the seed for a comedy/caper series.

These stories have been instrumental over the years in the development of the Tinman Series, so much that several of the novels contain portions of the original tales.

I hope you enjoy them. And if you can't get enough of Tinman and his crew's hilarious escapades, check out the [Tinman Series](#). You won't regret it. The Posse guarantees it. Long live laughter.

[Back to TOC](#)

Comfort Food



As a child, Tinman rarely attended school and never graduated from any institution of learning—higher or lower. So, right now, he felt as if he was the dumb kid in the class who had been sent to the corner to ponder his mental inadequacies.

It's not as if he wasn't intelligent. He was—very. He taught himself words by reading a 1972 edition of the New Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language. He was on his third reading. He further honed his ability as a wordsmith by doing copious crosswords, at least two a day.

He was a self-taught pool hustler extraordinaire and woe betide anyone who dared to face him with a cue stick and bad intentions. The problem was, that the game of pool had fallen on hard times. And with few people willing to dump large amounts of cash on a game, his career had hit rock bottom.

That's when his brother suggested he follow in his footsteps and become a burglar. His criminal education began shortly thereafter. Tek, the youngest member of the Posse, enrolled at the same time.

The first course was *Rudimentary Casing of a Standard Residential Property*. Peach chose two likely locales in wealthy neighborhoods, and his students went to work. For a week, Tinman meticulously studied a house on Bret Harte Ave. He knew the of the occupants' movements, where they shopped, what they did on weekends, and even the dog's name. He was certain he was going to ace the course.

On the night of the final exam, when he, Peach, and Tek prepared to infiltrate the target, based on Tinman's intel, it turns out he cased the wrong house. The correct one was across the way, on Mark Twain Ave. He had inadvertently gotten his authors mixed up.

The heist was called off, and Peach gave Tinman a B on the course. He knew he didn't deserve it, but Peach insisted Twain and Harte could easily be confused as they were born one year apart, and both had magnificent mustachios. It was a stretch, but Tinman was in no position to argue. So he didn't.

Next up was *Basic Lock Picking*. Tinman soon found that *basic* was a relative term. There was so much to learn. And so many picks. Rake picks, hook picks, snake picks, double ball picks, half-round picks, wave brush hook picks, wafer lock picks, diamond picks, and, believe it or not, the list went on. Each was meant for a particular type of lock. Some were used only for one particular model lock. But at the end of the day, it all came down to how to pick.

Tinman was surprised and indignant to find that all those TV programs and movies that show thieves, cops, and private dicks picking a lock using just a pick, were inaccurate and misleading. To pick a lock, any lock, one needs not only a pick but also a tension wrench—which looked like no wrench he had ever seen but was an essential part of the process, and therefore, just one more damn thing to learn. Who would have thought being a crook was so difficult?

Before they got into methods of picking, however, Peach explained the lock components. There were the plug, or key path, the shell which contained the cylinder, the tailpiece, or the back of the plug, and the pin stack or wafers, of which there were bottom and top pins. The top pins, also called drivers, generally had springs above them, and the bottom pins were retained in the lock when the correct key was used. Finally there was the shear line, where all the bottom pins must align for the lock to open. The vocabulary list was enormous and painful, but Tinman persevered.

Methods of picking a lock ranged from pin-by-pin, the most difficult and time-consuming, to the rake method, the quickest, easiest, and yet most advanced. Go figure. There was also the scrubbing method and the bump key method, along with a few that Tinman decided to ignore. He would be satisfied if he could scrape by with a high C.

Despite the intricacies of the methods, Peach insisted the trick lay in the psychological state of mind of the one doing the picking. The lock picker had to believe the lock was already open. Become one with the lock, he kept chanting. Tinman believed him—until he didn't. Then he kept saying that locks were meant to be opened with keys. Which did not go over well with the professor, who promptly took his apartment keys, locked the door, and drove off, leaving Tinman with a diamond pick and tension wrench.

Three nights in a row, he had to blow for a cheap motel room because he could not get past the Kwikset lock that blocked him from his quarters. He became so frustrated he even tried kicking down the door, which resulted in a throbbing foot and a permanently embedded sneaker imprint. Finally, early in the morning of the fourth day, he attacked the lock with a vengeance. He was determined to beat the son of a bitch, or die trying. He survived. So did the lock. The diamond pick—Peach's favorite—was down for the count. Mangled beyond recognition. Tinman got a D on the course and was thankful for it because he knew he didn't deserve it.

He proved equally inept at *Illegal Car Entry* when he snapped a Slim Jim in half while it was still inside the door, then set off the car alarm while attempting to get it back out.

Opening Padlocks 101 was also a disaster. Peach told him the Duckbill Tool was perhaps the simplest burglar tool. Even an idiot could figure it out. It looked like a sickle with a long bill at one end. All one had to do was place the end of the bill between the top of the lock and the shackle. It was then a simple matter to hit the other end of the tool with a sledgehammer, and, in theory, it would force the shackle past the internal "locking dog," essentially breaking the lock in two. Works like a dream, Peach declared. If one doesn't aim wrong and hit one's thumb instead of the end of the tool, noted Tinman. D minus for the course. Double ouch.

By now, Tinman was desperate to redeem himself. He thought he saw an opportunity in *Infiltrating an Occupied Domicile*. Peach forewarned his students that the final exam for this course would be to enter a house containing sleeping people, spend ten minutes exploring the insides, steal some small token as proof of the excursion, and escape undetected.

Tinman knew he would have to practice. His manner of walking was more like marching, and he fought hard to tone it down. Peach told him the secret was to emulate a cat's walk, carefully placing one foot in front of the other and leading with the toes. He snuck around his apartment for a week imagining someone sleeping in his single bed. By the seventh day, he thought he had it down. He even felt like a cat, which was weird because he loathed cats. But he could definitely see where they would be good thieves. He was ready.

Tek was first up. The three drove to an upper-middle-class neighborhood where Peach had chosen the house. Tinman waited in the car while Peach and Tek took off for the assignment. Twenty minutes later, they returned and slid into the car.

"How did it go?" asked Tinman.

"The kid nailed it first time out," said Peach. "Nice job."

"Thanks," said Tek, without a hint of smugness. "Here's the token." He held up a candle. The idea with the token was it should be something of little expense so the homeowners would merely think they'd misplaced it. This way, if the house proved to be a possible target for a genuine heist, the owners would not be on their guard.

They drove a few miles to another neighborhood, not as upscale, the houses having been built many years ago. Tek waited in the car while Peach and Tinman disappeared into the dark.

Peach led Tinman to one of the houses. "Okay, this should be a cinch. The owners are old. Like ancient. Even if they hear you, you'll have no problem getting away before they can get their walkers out of their bedrooms."

"You're taking it easy on me, aren't you?" asked Tinman. "Just because we're brothers, I shouldn't get preferential treatment."

"You're not," said Peach. "There's a dog."

"Oh, I see! Now you're making it harder on me because we are brothers!"

"Not really. It's just that if you're ever going to pass this course, you have to prove yourself more than you have. Now, it shouldn't be that big a deal. The dog is as old as the people. Maybe older, given dog years and all. In fact, I think it's kind of deaf, from what I've seen. Unless you slam a door or shoot off a gun, it won't hear a thing. Let's go."

They slid along the side of the house until they got to a window near the rear. Peach said, "It's all yours. I'll wait in the bushes." Then he slipped to a hedge a few yards away.

Tinman took a deep breath and stared at the window. In class, he had managed to figure out the intricacies of opening a latch from outside. And he had the correct shim! It took him only a minute to get it open, and he beamed behind his ski mask. This was going to be a piece of cake. Then, he would be back in the teacher's favor. Oh boy!

Silently, he slid the window up. He turned to Peach, who gave him the thumbs-up and egged him on.

He placed his hands on the sill and led with his head. Which hit something and bounced off. He peered through the opening. Nothing. He could see straight into a den, lit by a dim table light. He tried again, and again his head boinked back. Now he was freaked out.

He retreated to the bushes and whispered, "There's a problem. I have the window up, but when I start to go in, something invisible keeps stopping me. Like some high-tech force field."

Peach screwed up his face and crept to the window with Tinman right behind. Peach placed his hand through the opening and touched the obstruction. He sighed and said, "Real high-tech. It's that kind of plastic insulation you install with a blow dryer. Don't worry, it won't bite."

Tinman gnashed his teeth. How embarrassing. And in front of the teacher, no less. His face felt hot, and he knew it was red behind the mask.

Peach reached into his satchel for something, but Tinman knew he had to handle this himself. He spied a little twig on the ground and picked it up. Peach pulled out a utility knife and said, "I'll take care of it."

"Never mind," said Tinman, shouldering him to the side. "I got it."

He jabbed with the twig, and Peach cried, "No!" But it was too late. The twig pierced the taut plastic with a loud pop, akin to a gunshot or a door slamming. The barking that erupted was even louder. Lights clicked on in the upper windows, and a walker began clunking down the stairs. Tinman was so shocked he didn't even feel Peach shove him toward the street. He barely remembered running to the car. But as they drove away, the reality hit. And so, here he was, relegated to the backseat, the dumb kid sent to the corner to ponder his mental inadequacies.

They dropped him off without a word from anyone. He plodded up the stairs to his apartment. Inside, he stood staring at nothing for how long he wasn't sure. He knew he had to do something to regain his dignity and belief in himself. To do what he knew he could do well. He thought about shooting pool, but his heart wasn't in it.

He would cook. At low times in his life, he always retreated to the safety of the kitchen. He felt protected there and confident in his abilities. He didn't know what to cook, so he let his body go on autopilot.

Fifteen minutes into prep, he realized he was making his homemade tomato pasta sauce. He also knew it wouldn't be enough to sate him. So he picked something big. Stuffed shells. That would take a sufficient amount of time to heal his shattered ego.

As he chopped the ingredients, he turned on his little TV. He never watched the thing, but he needed voices to drown out the tongue-lashing his brain was unleashing.

An infomercial came on for Capital Golden Home Storage Investments. He didn't realize he was even listening until, like a bolt of lightning, an idea came. He dropped his knife and spun to the TV. As the ad continued, his eyes sparkled. By damn, he had an idea for a caper. And it was foolproof. He wasn't sure how he knew. He just knew. His heart pounded as he suddenly saw a way out of burglar school purgatory.

He ran for his phone and called Peach. As it rang, he knew this was his last chance to prove himself. But he was confident. And he had more than some dumb apple to present to the teacher. He had stuffed shells, one of his brother's favorites. When Peach answered, Tinman dangled the bait, and the teacher was on his way.

An hour later, the shells were dished out, and Tinman presented Peach with a hearty plateful. Tinman ate nothing. Instead, he laid out his plan for the heist, bit by bit, mouthful by mouthful. He knew he was on to something when Peach stopped eating and began earnestly listening.

"And the minimum purchase is ten grand?" asked Peach.

"That's right. And the company provides the equivalent in actual gold bullion."

"And the safe is free with any minimum purchase?"

"Yup. And they give the make and model of the safe on the commercial."

"That's handy."

"I figured it might be."

"Sure. We can have the full set of specs before the jug ever arrives. But how do we pick a target?"

"We get Catfish in on the deal. He sets up the mark just like in a con. Cozies up to a likely chump in one of those yuppie bars downtown and tells the guy what a great deal he just got in on. He gets to keep his gold near him, unlike normal gold transactions. They chummy it up. Catfish makes the hook, then sets up another meet to confirm he went for it. Then we simply case the sucker's house and wait it out."

"Yeah," said Peach, his master thief's brain clicking away. "I'm sure there's a normal delivery time, so we'd have a ballpark."

"That's what I was thinking."

Peach dropped his fork, and that old familiar smile spread over his face. "That's good stuff, brother. I always knew you had it in you. Not the mechanical side, but the brain power for being the planner."

"Thanks. So it's a go?"

"You bet your ass. That's a thing of beauty!"

Tinman's body relaxed. He was saved. "How do you like the shells?"

"They're the bomb! Like always. I give them and your plan solid A pluses!"

Tinman smiled. He was satisfied. Because he knew he deserved them.

[Back to TOC](#)

Breakfast at Tinman's



Tinman thought all meals were important, so he wasn't sure if breakfast ranked any higher than the others. But it certainly was his favorite. He felt it was essential to get the metabolism working as soon as possible, and he had a fixed menu that rarely varied.

Of course, before anything went down the gullet, he spent at least forty-five minutes getting his brain in sync with his body. This process involved a strict exercise regimen, including yoga poses, Tai Chi moves (to align the yin and yang forces—right on!), and a host of more ordinary exercises such as sit-ups and jumping jacks.

When he was a pool hustler, the exercises helped him get centered so his shooting would be fluid and free from mental or physical constraints. When his career died, and he took up heisting with his brother, Peach, he found the daily practice helped to brace himself for the risky business of burglary.

They had recently run into a slow spell, so today, he was joining his adopted uncles, Bones and Catfish, as they plied their trade as pickpockets. The two old guys usually worked as a pair, with Bones being the cannon, the one who lifted the wallets. But when they heard about his and Peach's trouble, they offered to bring them on board as part of their whiz mob.

Tinman was unhappy about it, as he didn't care much for the whiz. But money was short, and he and Peach were considered bang-up stalls, or assistants, in the pickpocket game. As young boys, they learned under Bones' tutelage, and old skills die hard. For today's mob, Tinman would function as the stick man and backstop. His duties required him to stick the mark in a particular frame so the cannon could get an advantageous slant to fork the leather (pick the wallet). Depending on the situation, he might also be required to work the hump. Often, stalls work with their backs to a mark, never touching them but subtly invading their personal space to maneuver them into a usable frame for the cannon.

Tinman was adept at all the moves needed to help the touch go down and was privately glad he was not functioning as the duke man, whose job was to take the handoff of the poke from the cannon and depart from the scene immediately. That would be Peach's job for the day since he was quicker on his feet.

Still, as he went through his exercises, clad only in his boxers, he had to work hard to overcome his grumpiness for having been forced to rise earlier than usual—pre-noon. Catfish, functioning as the steer, had decided the day's work would take place at a music festival over at Bartley Ranch. The events started early, and Bones, the de facto leader of the mob, was a stickler for showing up on time so that a proper analysis of the crush, or crowd, could be realized before actually going on the whiz.

Despite the early start, Tinman would not be hurried. He was a man of firm principles and processes, and to be at his best, he needed to stick to his schedule.

After wrapping up his jumping jacks, he walked to the kitchen area of his studio apartment and began to prepare his breakfast by heating 1-3/4 cups of water to a boil. Meanwhile, he chose a ripe banana and cut off a third. Sitting this chunk aside, he tossed the rest into his blender. Next went aloe vera juice, followed by half as much apple juice, and a splash of cranberry juice. He was very picky about his cranberry juice. Having discovered that most brands on the market contained a miniscule amount of cranberry, with the rest being filler juices, he only bought jars from Trader Joe's, consisting of 100% cranberry puree. He couldn't afford anything else at that store, but he always sprang for the juice.

He opened his freezer and pulled out a Ziploc filled with blackberries. Whenever a store ran a special on expensive fruits, he would stockpile and freeze them for breakfast. In this case, he had bought ten packages of blackberries at .98 cents a pop. He pulled out one berry and tossed it in the blender. On the door of the freezer, he had several bags of raw cranberries, all lined up. He called it his Cranberry Row, in quippy tribute to his favorite author, John Steinbeck. Every Thanksgiving, he snapped up a dozen bags of cranberries and froze them for the year—using one bag a month. He pulled out six berries from this month's allotment and tossed them into the blender along with two ice cubes.

Lastly, he pulled a quart tub of plain yogurt from the fridge and plopped a healthy dollop into the blender. He turned it on low, and the concoction slowly ground up, becoming the morning's elixir.

The water was boiling, so he tossed in a third cup of five-grain cereal, which he bought in bulk at his favorite store, WinCo. He never bought any boxed cereal, recognizing it as perhaps the biggest scam in a grocery store—since much of what one is paying for is the box. With the five-grain cereal, he had the whole process down to a science. By turning the heat to medium-low, he could partake of his three-minute

shower and get dressed, and by the time he was through, the cereal would be ready. He switched off the blender and headed for the bathroom.

Eight minutes later, he reappeared, now dressed like an upstanding citizen in khaki pants and a button-up dress shirt. It was imperative to dress well while on the whiz. People subconsciously expect pickpockets and thieves to dress like lowlifes and do not suspect someone who dresses like themselves.

He walked to the stove, and the hot cereal was perfect, with most of the water absorbed into the grains. He ladled the mix into a bowl. Next, he sliced the third of a banana on top. He retrieved a large, ripe strawberry from a package in the fridge and sliced that up as well. They were currently in season and super cheap. He added a single blackberry in the center for presentation purposes.

Finally, he drizzled molasses over everything and finished off the masterpiece with several artistically placed dabs of yogurt.

With juice and bowl in hand, he settled into his easy chair and prepared for the ritual of eating. During which, even if people were present, no talking or interaction of any kind was allowed. It was a sacred moment between a man, his food, and a crossword.

This was his special time. And he enjoyed lingering over it, savoring the moment of providing sustenance to the body, bringing life-sustaining energy, and awakening the soul to a new day.

Twenty minutes later, he arose and crossed to the sink, washed his dishes, and turned to the room.

“Okay, I’m ready.”

Bones, half-dozing and perched on the single bed alongside Catfish and Peach, opened his eyes and said, “You have a hole in your boxers.”

“Where?”

“I’d rather not say.”

Catfish piped in. “You know, you remind me of one of my wives.”

“She looked like me in my boxers?”

“Sorta. But what I meant is the world could be coming to an end, and she’d be damn sure her makeup was perfect. You know, to look good for the metropolis.”

“Apocalypse,” corrected Tinman, the gang’s wordsmith.

“That too,” agreed Catfish.

Peach said, “Your breakfast sure looked yummy.”

“It was. Did you all eat before you got here?”

The three guys nodded, all of them lying. Bones and Catfish had only had coffee, and Peach had scarfed down some nastiness from a fast food joint, which doesn’t count.

“Good,” said Tinman. “Let’s do this.”

With a jaunty step and ready to take on the day, he strutted out the front door with the others plodding after.

[Back to TOC](#)

Philosophic Shopper



Peach pulled the car into one of the four bays at the car wash on Moana Lane. He reached into the back and grabbed an umbrella. He hopped out, and Tinman, shaking his head, followed.

It was three in the morning, and no one else had decided it was the ideal time to wash their car. Tinman and Peach were not here for that purpose either. The last few weeks had been very rough in the burglary department. Much like an artist, a thief's finances were always in flux. Tinman was complaining that his refrigerator was empty and Peach knew if he was going to keep his brother's good nature, they would have to stock the larder, and soon.

Tinman needed very little to keep him happy. The two essentials were a pool table, which he had, and good food, which he had not. Fortunately, the way he cooked did not require expensive foods, quite the opposite. So they only needed a small score to cover the grocery tab, and Peach had the perfect shtick for rainy days.

He had purposely left Tinman in the dark because he might think this sort of job beneath them. But now that they were here, he'd have no choice but to participate.

Peach popped open the golf umbrella and held it out for Tinman to take. Tinman stared at it.

"It's not raining," he said.

"I know, but I wish it would," said Peach. "We could use it. Come on, take it."

Tinman did, then said, "Why are we here?"

“Let’s just say it’s like a visit to the ATM.” From inside the bay, he studied Moana Street, up and down. No cars. He gestured to Tinman to stay close then stepped outside and veered left. Mounted on the outer brick wall between the four bays were two change machines.

“Keep that umbrella directly over the two of us,” said Peach. “Don’t stick your head out under any circumstances.”

Tinman, curious despite himself, leaned over to look above the umbrella, but Peach elbowed him hard, and he retracted.

“There’s a video camera up there. I don’t waste the time to turn it off,” explained Peach.

“And thus the umbrella,” said Tinman, feeling a little stupid as well as sore in the side where Peach had jabbed him.

“Just hold it steady. This won’t take long.”

Peach reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a round device with a knob on the back. “This is the Pickmaster’s Pickset. It’s for legitimate locksmiths. But you can get knockoffs online. They call them Burglar’s Buddy. Nice to have around in a pinch.”

The pick was round and shaped like the Ace keys, that practically all vending machines use. It was essentially, at this point, a blank key. But that would soon change.

Peach inserted the pick into the round key slot on the first machine. Slowly, he turned it until he could sense a tumbler, then he adjusted the knob on the back, activating the tumbler the same way an actual key would do when inserted. One by one, he located the tumblers and set the various tensions.

In under a minute, the chamber moved, and he swung open the front panel. He reached into his other jacket pocket and pulled out an empty canvas sack.

“Have at it,” he said, handing the sack to Tinman.

“This is low.”

“No. These are quarters, and quarters are money, and money buys food. Now, scoop them in. I’m hoping the next machine uses the same key.”

He moved to the next machine and inserted the pick. He turned it, and it spun open. He opened the front panel and snapped his fingers at Tinman, who was fumbling around with the quarters.

“I can’t scoop them in while I’m holding this damn umbrella!”

Peach sighed and grabbed the umbrella, and Tinman stopped whining. With one hand holding open the sack, the other quickly emptied both machines. As he finished, a few stray quarters hit the ground and rolled a short distance. Tinman started for them, but Peach held him up.

“We’re not that down and out. Leave them for the homeless. It’s the least we can do.”

Tinman stared hungrily at the stray quarters, then grudgingly shrugged. “We need to find a decent heist.”

“We’re working on it. But as you always say, you can’t think right on an empty stomach. Come on, let’s go shopping.”

At this time of night, it was a short drive to WinCo Foods on South Virginia Street. There were only a few cars, mostly driven unsteadily by intoxicated losers from the casinos. On the way, Peach described to Tinman how he could now make a key from the pick set, and they would always be able to hit the car wash if they were short.

Tinman hoped it wouldn't be necessary. He was already wondering how to emotionally handle the moment when he would have to plop a sack of quarters down at the checkout line in payment for the food purchases. He hoped the store would be empty and there wouldn't be anyone behind them in line. Dealing with the irate clerk who would have to count them out would be bad enough.

"How much do you think is in there?" he asked.

"Maybe fifty, sixty bucks. If we'd hit it on a weekend, it would have been better. People love to waste their off days washing their cars."

"It'll be enough for food."

"And beer?" asked Peach hopefully.

"We'll see."

As they climbed out of the car at WinCo's parking lot, an ornery guy in a ratty ski jacket wandered by, muttering angrily to himself. The jingle of the quarters drew his attention, and he eyed the sack greedily.

Tinman blew right past him on the way to the store. A man with a mission. Peach, however, looked the guy up and down, shrugged, and said, "Sorry, pal, we gave at the office."

The bum snarled, and Peach scooted after Tinman, calling out, "Hey! Do you have your list?"

Tinman was already through the front doors as he said, "I don't need a stinking list. Grab a cart."

Since the cupboards were bare at home, this food run would be a nearly complete stocking of his staples. Now, you would think because of his love of food, he would relish the experience. Bzzz. He hated shopping with a passion, and if he could ever get over his skinny legs, he would become a nudist and give up clothes shopping forever. And because he hated the process of buying things so much, he evolved into an excellent shopper. He was lightning fast, capable of blowing into a grocery store and getting a week's worth of food in ten minutes flat.

He learned the key to correct and fast food shopping was to avoid all but a few aisles. Most grocery store layouts were deviously designed to foil you at this strategy, but it was as essential as knowing the ebbs and flows of pricing. And man, did this boy know his victuals. He could spot a five-cent price increase on sweet potatoes from twenty paces. And excepting basic vegetable staples, he never bought anything that wasn't on sale.

As he approached his favorite aisle, the produce section, his pace quickened. Peach struggled to keep up. Tinman snapped his fingers impatiently, and Peach closed the gap, the cart within appropriate reaching distance of The Shopper.

In went, four yellow onions, two avocados (one ripe, one partly), one green bell pepper, also two red and one orange, five serrano peppers, two bulbs of garlic, two zucchinis, a small bag of carrots, a stalk of celery, one medium-size broccoli crown, a handful of green beans, twelve asparagus spears (on super sale – bumper crop, sweet), one head of spinach, six Roma tomatoes (three soft and three firm), a pound of strawberries (on sale), seven bananas (one a day keeps the monkey off your back), two limes and a large lemon, six Yukon potatoes, two sweet potatoes, ten cremini mushrooms, and a block of extra firm tofu.

He hit his stride as he strode into the bulk section. WinCo was the only grocery store in town that still maintained a complete bulk section, and it was one of the many reasons he considered it sacred ground.

He glided through the nut section and got almonds, walnuts, and sesame seeds. In the pasta section, he picked up a large handful of both linguine and angel hair. He also filled a large bag with rainbow pasta. Next aisle over, he weighed out two pounds of thirteen-bean mix. He still had half a sack of jasmine rice at home, so he was good there. Besides, he always bought rice at a little hole-in-the-wall Asian market in Sparks. In the grains section, he got a large bag of five-grain cereal for his breakfast. At the spice bins, he picked up Italian seasoning, curry, cayenne, parmesan cheese and paprika.

Peach was eyeing the bins of assorted candies, chocolates, and other garbage, but Tinman clicked his tongue, and Peach obediently followed. He usually didn't touch lunch meats, so the deli was a blur as he moved into the meat section. This was easy. All he needed were a large pack of chicken thighs and a pack of pork sirloin chops. He barely glanced at the steaks and red meat because it was a rare sale that would make the pricey beef cheap enough for him to buy it.

He did, however, spy an interesting sight at the end of the seafood and fish section, next to the deli. He loved fish, especially cod, tuna, rockfish, and salmon, but he wouldn't eat any of them if they weren't wild-caught, which often ruled them out due to cost. On the occasions he could afford them, he kept his portions small, believing they were delicacies and should be treated accordingly.

In this case, however, he had espied large, wild-caught shrimp for a little over six bucks. Equally shocking was that wild sea scallops were just under ten dollars. His mind's eye wandered through his repertoire. Hmm. One of his specialty dishes came to mind. It may be time to splurge a little. He bopped his hand on the little bell.

"Oh, cool!" Peach squealed. "Are we getting lobster?"

Tinman gave him a stony stare as if to say, "Shopping is serious business, and it is, first and foremost, a solitary activity. I am the Shopper. You are the Cart Pusher." Then he cocked his jaw as if to ask, "Do you understand?"

Peach grinned nervously, still hoping for a treat. There was no response to the first ringy-dingy on the damn bell, but Tinman knew from experience there was definitely someone behind the magic door behind the counter. He rapped impatiently on the bell like a frustrated Salvation Army volunteer with an empty kettle. Eventually, a sleepy, heavysset, guy wearing a cotton beard shield burst through the back door. It was like Santa Claus being interrupted from heart surgery.

"This section is closed!" he bellowed.

"And now it's open," said Tinman flatly, his eyes showing that flickering flame that tended to change people's attitudes. "Now I want eight of these shrimp and two sea scallops. Those two. Not the ones that are turning brown. Got it?"

Dr. Claus certainly did. He could recognize a Serious Shopper and knew it was unlikely they would lose a food fight. He quickly wrapped up the shrimp and scallops, priced it at \$2.37 for the two scallops and \$3.42 for the shrimp, and handed them over. He could not, however, resist a little jab. He muttered under his breath, "Ooh, big spender."

Tinman let it go. He knew better than to argue with morons. His average meal ran between one and three dollars per plate. Three was on the high side. The dish he was concocting for tonight's dinner would only require the amount of shrimp and scallops he

bought. It would only be the two of them, and though he most often cooked dishes that provided leftovers, seafood did not reheat well. Enough said.

Onward, to the dairy section. A dozen eggs and a quart of yogurt was all he needed as he was not fond of straight milk and rarely found a valid use for it. He did, however, remember to grab a pint of half and half for the quiche. He also picked up a block of Swiss cheese and a small wheel of queso fresco cheese. The queso fresco was a bit of a delicacy, but it was very versatile and would work with tacos and the dish he was imagining for the night's dinner.

The beer cooler was nearby, and Peach was oohing and aahing over the exotic choices.

"Where do you think we're at?" asked Peach.

"Thirty-six dollars and change." Tinman's guess was commonly within pennies of his total as he kept a running tally as he shopped.

"That's amazing!" said Peach. "How do you do that?"

"Correct shopping techniques. That's how. Get a case of Natty Light," said Tinman, walking away.

"Natty Light! But, but, but!" It was a lost cause. Tinman was long gone. Peach grabbed a case of Natty Light and followed in his wake.

The only things Tinman needed in the rest of the vast store were three cans of stewed tomatoes, a can of condensed mushroom soup, and a pack of white corn tortillas. Next stop: the checkout line.

Peach came jogging up. "So what are we going to have tonight? You have all this food, but I don't see any meals."

Tinman sighed. "Right now, I have the makings for several dinners, with leftovers for lunches."

Peach studied the contents of the cart and shrugged. They continued to the one line that had a light on overhead. A young woman was leaning over the conveyor belt with her head resting on folded arms. Tinman hoped she wasn't too cute. He hated looking like a fool in front of cute women. He sighed and hoisted up the sack of quarters.

Before he could wake up the cashier, the gnarly bum they had seen outside came hurtling out of the customer service section where the booze was sold. He was clutching two liquor bottles and growling, daring anyone to stop him. An employee appeared from behind and yelled for him to stop.

Tinman was incensed. How dare someone try and steal from his store! Instinctively, he flung the sack of quarters, hoping for a square shot to the head. Instead, it hit the ground ahead of the bum, breaking open and splattering quarters in his path.

He had little time to react before he hit the shiny metal skating rink. Buster Keaton could not have pulled off a better pratfall. He landed hard on his back with the bottles safely thrust into the air. Peach stepped up and plucked them out of his hands. The night manager raced up, and Peach handed them over with a flourish.

"You guys are heroes!" the manager cried.

"Don't mention it," said Peach.

Tinman sighed and said, "Those quarters were supposed to pay for my food. It'll take me a bit to gather them up."

"The food is on the house!" proclaimed the manager. "And my staff will clean those quarters up for you."

He was true to his word. Before the cops could even show up, the quarters were back in the sack, and Tinman and Peach were heading out the front door accompanied by a round of applause from the night shift. The manager wanted to take a picture of them and post it on the “Kudos Board,” but Tinman and Peach politely declined. In their line of work, it was always best to keep a low profile.

Back in the car, Peach turned to Tinman. “Seeing as they paid the tab, we should have gotten the expensive beer.”

“Bitch, bitch. We didn’t know that then.”

“True. So, seriously, what are we going to eat tonight?”

“Spanish Seafood Pasta. You’ll love it.”

“Yum! I love it already,” said Peach. As he drove out of the parking lot, he turned back to Tinman. “Not to doubt your judgment, but are you sure you got enough seafood?”

Tinman sighed and stared out his window. Surrounded by amateurs.

[Back to TOC](#)

By Cook or By Crook



Peach wasn't sure how to go about it. The concept was perfect. His instincts told him so, and they never failed him. He knew the whole thing would be a cinch if he could only figure out how to put it in motion.

In truth, he knew how to get it going, but it would take the unwitting cooperation of his brother. Ay, there's the rub.

He bit his lip as he climbed the stairs to Tinman's apartment. He once again wondered if he should bare all and recruit his brother as a knowing accomplice. After all, he was his partner in crime. Nonetheless, he again dismissed the notion as foolhardy. Tinman was good at playing a part when hustling pool, but other than that, he was not a good actor. And the bottom line was it would take an award-winning performance to win over the chosen audience. He shrugged. One way or another, come hell or high water, he would make it happen. He knocked, then let himself in.

Tinman was in his easy chair doing a crossword puzzle. Peach walked to the single bed and plopped down, resting his head on the headboard. Neither said a word for several moments. Finally, Tinman looked over. "What?"

"Huh?"

"What do you want?"

"What makes you think I want something? Geez. Suspicious mind."

Tinman kept staring at him. They weren't twins for nothing.

"So, what are you up to tonight?" asked Peach.

"What does it look like?"

“Uh-huh. I figured you were bored.”

“I am not bored.”

“So what are you cooking up for dinner?”

“I don’t know. The cupboards are pretty bare.”

This was the cue Peach was looking for. He jumped up from the bed and said, “There’s this new place in town. It’s all the rage. I was thinking you, me, and Tek should check it out.”

“Are you referring to a restaurant?”

Peach grimaced. Here it comes.

“I don’t go to restaurants,” declared Tinman, and he looked back at his crossword.

“It would be my treat.”

Tinman ignored him. He was a bona fide scratch cooker, and it took an act of Congress to force him into a restaurant. The few times he had been coerced into going, he complained the whole time about how the food was prepared, the cost of said food, the slow service, the lack of ambience, and on and on. In short, he was the dinner date from hell.

“Tek sure will be disappointed. I wanted this to be his graduation dinner,” said Peach.

This drew Tinman’s attention. “Tek graduated high school?”

“Gee, I don’t know. Is he still in high school? I was talking about burglary school. He got an A on his final, so I graduated him,” Peach lied. The final test was tonight.

Tinman’s grunt was a mix of envy and scorn. After he faced reality and gave up his career as a pool hustler due to lack of action, he followed his brother’s advice and set about being a burglar. He and Tek, the Posse’s young protégé, entered burglary school at the same time. After Tinman failed miserably at the basic mechanics, he was politely asked to drop out. After that, he concentrated his energies on planning heists while Tek improved his hands-on burglary skills. Tinman was proving to be pretty good as the blueprinter, but the fact he couldn’t even open a simple Kwikset lock still rankled. Meanwhile, the kid was becoming a pro.

“Good for him,” said Tinman, quite insincerely.

“Yeah. He’s got the knack. Of course, you’ve found your niche, too. So all is well,” said Peach, knowing the source of Tinman’s rancor and trying to ease the pain. “Anyway, I think it would be nice of you to celebrate with him, don’t you?”

“No.”

“Come on! Don’t be such a sourpuss. It’s only one dinner. And I told you, people are gaga for this place.”

“People who go to restaurants wouldn’t know good food if it hit them in the face.”

“You’re just a food snob.”

“Thank you. Now leave me alone.”

“No way. If the three of us are going to work as a team, we need to do some team building. And the best way to do that is to break bread together.”

“So this place is a bakery?”

“Ha-ha. Actually it’s an Asian joint—sort of, I guess. They specialize in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai. It’s called Pho Asian Fusion.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“Could I make that up? But seriously, we really want you to. Pretty please?”

Tinman sighed heavily. He hated when people begged him for something. It always managed to crack his iron facade. Especially when it was his brother and Tek. His favorite people on earth. "Fine."

It took Peach a few seconds to register that his ears weren't lying to him. "Really?! That's great! Tell you what, I have a couple errands to run, then I'll pick up Tek, and let's say we have a late dinner, around nineish. That way, we'll beat most of the rush."

The restaurant was located in the new, trendy Riverside District, and frequented by well-heeled hipsters and millennial yuppies. A sign out front announced, Cash Only (the preferred method for cagy restaurateurs to avoid taxes). Despite the late hour, there was a line out the door.

"We're out of here," said Tinman. "No restaurant is worth waiting in line for."

"But I hear they have really quick service," said Peach.

"Not a promising sign. Good food takes time to prepare."

"Come on, Tinman," said Tek. "I'm starving to death."

Tinman reluctantly agreed. After all, he didn't want to be responsible for amicide—good friends are hard to come by.

The three cooled their heels for about fifteen minutes before they were finally able to squeeze inside the front door. While Tinman perused the place with a discerning and cynical eye, Peach glanced at Tek and nodded.

Tek slid behind him for cover, and turned quickly to the control panel of the alarm system mounted on the wall to the left of the front door. He pushed the "Test" button, then returned to his place in line.

Forty-five seconds later, an LED started flashing on the panel, accompanied by a steady beeping. The harried hostess/cashier was immersed in her duties, so Peach tapped her shoulder and said, "Excuse me, darling, something's beeping back here."

The young Asian lady glanced at the panel, and her eyes widened. She gasped and took off in a sprint. Peach watched as she disappeared inside a small office behind the front counter and register. Seconds later, the pissed-off Vietnamese owner emerged and barreled through the throng of waiting customers. Shoving Tinman aside, he dove for the control panel and punched in some digits. Peach took careful note. The beeping stopped with ten seconds to spare. After that, a silent alarm would have been sent to the monitoring company, then the police—not good for business (or the tax dodge).

The owner turned to the crowd with accusatory eyes. He huffed and puffed and tromped toward his office. On the way, he stopped at the register, opened the drawer, and relieved it of all the large bills. Tek peaked inside the office and saw him shove them through a slot on the floor next to his large stainless steel desk.

Tinman, still indignant over his rough treatment, snorted as he said, "Service with a smile, my ass."

Fifteen minutes later, they were seated just off the kitchen entrance and kitty-corner from the register. Mere seconds after settling in, their stony-faced, beady-eyed, non-English-speaking waitress swooped down, demanding their orders. Ready or not, this place is hopping! Eight minutes later, their food was delivered. Tinman was not pleased. And he didn't keep mum about it. Much to his surprise, Peach egged him on.

"I agree with you, brother. It's a travesty."

"You're damned right it is!" growled Tinman. "Just look at the broccoli! They couldn't have taken the time to cut it up into bite-sized pieces? And it's not even fully cooked! Listen! Snap. Not good. Same with the carrots. They should be julienned. And

you can tell the meat has been pre-cooked and tossed in at the end, so it's not infused with the rest of the dish. That's why there's no umami."

"Who's mommy?" asked Peach.

"U-mami! It's one of the five basic tastes after sweet, sour, bitter, and salty. You know."

"If you say so."

"Let me have a bite of yours."

Tek and Peach slid their plates over, and Tinman sampled their dishes. "Okay, here we go again! You wanted spicy, right Tek? So what do they do? They just dump a bunch of extra chili paste in at the end like an afterthought. It's not how it's done! And Peach, I wouldn't even eat that. It's drowning in sauce! Look how sticky it is. There's too much cornstarch, and this dish only requires a hint of sweet black soy sauce. This is unbelievable. Even the smell is wrong."

Tek and Peach leaned into their plates and took a whiff.

"No, no, no. That's not how you smell food."

"It's not?" asked Tek.

"The correct way is called backward smelling. You just let the aroma waft over you, and the smell detectors in the back of the nose pick it up. Then the brain dissects the aroma compounds and truly identifies them, unlike when you smell directly through the nose."

Peach and Tek stared dumbly at him.

"Never mind. It doesn't make any difference with this slop anyway!"

"If you feel so strongly about it, why don't you complain to the chef," suggested Peach.

"Chef! He's a criminal! He should be lynched."

"I agree. Why don't you go tell him so? The kitchen's right behind you."

"I have half a mind to do just that!"

"I call and raise you the other half. So go do it. Otherwise, you won't feel good about yourself in the morning. You know how you get."

Tinman looked to Tek, who shrugged in agreement.

"I'm going to do it!" cried Tinman. "The hell with them!"

"Go get 'em, boy," said Peach. "We'll be waiting right here."

Tinman swung up and out of his chair. Pushing past a waitress, he charged into the kitchen. Peach grinned, winked at Tek, and said, "Wait for my signal."

The eruption sounded throughout the restaurant. Tinman's booming baritone clashing with the indignant chef's high-pitched Vietnamese cursing, created a cacophony, unsettling all present. Many patrons waved frantically for their servers, looking for their bills. The panicked hostess dashed behind the counter and returned with the owner. The two plowed their way into the kitchen and their voices joined the din. Peach nodded at Tek, then rose and hurried in after Tinman.

Several diners, seeing their way to a free meal (face it, everyone has a little larceny in their hearts), dashed for the entrance. Tek slipped through the frazzled crowd, past the front counter, and into the owner's office.

Thirty seconds later, he walked casually out of the office and left the restaurant. At the same moment, the kitchen door burst open, and a cleaver-wielding chef chased Tinman and Peach into the seating area. Tinman was preparing to do further battle when Peach yanked him by the arm and pushed him out the front door.

As they walked up the block to the car, Peach said, "You were right, brother. That place isn't worth the hype. I'll never doubt you again—about restaurants, I mean."

"Thank you," said a vindicated and smug Tinman.

"But what are we going to eat now?" asked Tek.

"Stir fry. My way!" said Tinman, his confidence riding high.

"But I thought you said the cupboards were bare," said Peach.

"You don't need that much to make a good rice dish. All it takes is attention to detail and a loving touch."

He was right. The stir fry made of leftovers from the fridge beat out anything they had sampled at the restaurant. When they finished eating and washing the dishes, Peach slapped Tinman on the back. "You pulled it off. Just like a pro."

"Have I ever failed you in the kitchen?"

"Huh? Oh, right, the food. Yeah, that was great. I was referring to your performance in the restaurant. Tek and I have everything we need. So, now that our bellies are full up, I say we go fill our pockets."

Tinman narrowed his eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Peach grinned. "I've had that place targeted for a month now. Cash only. I figure this being a Saturday their haul must be enormous. And I knew they were storing all that lovely unreported money somewhere. Turns out, it's in a floor safe in the owner's office. But not knowing the model and all, I thought it would be fun to snatch the combination and make it easier on all of us."

Tek continued. "So when you were reaming out the chef, I snuck into the office and planted a magnetic micro-video camera under the lip of the desk directly over the safe."

"Pretty nifty, huh?" said Peach. "It picks up five hours of video. All we have to do is go in, download the footage, and watch the guy punch in the combination. Ba-da-bing-ba-da-boom."

Tek added matter-of-factly, "And before you ask, the front door lock is a Schlage wafer, which I can open blindfolded."

"And the alarm system code is 7-4-9-2, hashtag," said Peach.

Tinman's blank face uttered, "You guys used me as a diversion."

"Sort of, yeah, you could put it that way," said Peach. "And you were beautiful. Academy Award-worthy performance."

"You think so?"

"Oh, yeah!" said Tek

Tinman knew he was being played but was nevertheless pleased with the compliments. Then another notion came to him. "I thought I was supposed to be the planner."

"Well, you are!" cried Peach. "After all, you set the whole thing up. You just didn't know it." He watched his brother closely, wondering if he was peeved over their deception. Turns out he had little to fear.

As the truth wound its way through Tinman's brain, a smile slowly formed. "So now we get to rip off that faux Asian dump for every dollar they bilked tonight, huh?"

"In a nutshell, yeah," said Peach. "Sound good?"

Tinman's smile broke wide. "Delicious."

[Back to TOC](#)

Carrera de Tacos



Tek sat in his car and listened to his stomach growl, apparently as upset as he was. He always seemed to be the getaway driver, and it was starting to piss him off. Everyone knew he had better burglar skills than Tinman, but he never got to be in on the actual heists. Whenever he confronted Peach with his displeasure, he always said he was still too young. What a crock. He was old enough to drive! How old do you have to be to be a thief?

He was nonetheless proud of his skills as a getaway driver and had proven his worth many times when things got dicey. But it was so boring. Nothing to do but stay prepared. Well, he was certainly that. And hungry. He'd forgotten his snack, and the job had been delayed nearly an hour because some employees from the Cloud Nine Dispensary decided to hang out behind the shop after closing hours. Who stays around

their workplace if they don't have to? No one's paying you. Well, maybe they liked their job. Selling legal pot did sound better than flipping burgers or cleaning rooms. Still, it irritated him. Crooks have to work, too, and they can't do their business until everyone leaves them alone.

Boy, was he hungry. Peach and Tinman had taken off nearly thirty minutes ago, and still no sign of them. On the good side, however, no alarms were wailing. Nor did he expect any. After all, he was the one who hatched the plan, and he knew every detail of its execution—making it all the more painful that he couldn't be part of it.

The idea came four months earlier when he read an article about Nevada's legal pot dispensaries not being able to do regular business with banks. It was all tied to the Feds and their inability to catch up with the rest of the country and just legalize the damn stuff across the board. Tek was no pothead, but it seemed to make sense. Who really cares if someone smokes a joint, anyway? It's better than chugging on whiskey. He'd seen his mom do enough of that, which was gross.

Anyway, because the Feds couldn't get their heads out of their asses, the dispensaries were forced to run a cash-only business. In this day and age, where almost every purchase is made with plastic, the notion of a cash-rich establishment was like manna from heaven to a gang of thieves.

Originally, Tek suggested hijacking the manager when he took the money to a private depository across town. Tinman immediately nixed the idea because it would require firepower, and guns were strictly out in all the Posse's endeavors. An edict from Tinman who despised the things, believing they were for sissies and cowards who couldn't protect themselves with only their wits—or fists, if necessary.

The plan evolved when Peach got a job trimming buds at Cloud Nine. The pay was low for such tedious and painstaking work, but it allowed him to see the workings of the business and to case the security systems and safe. Two weeks after starting, he quit. This was no surprise to the manager as the turnover for such slave labor was high. Peach had also used a fake ID when he got the job, so there was no concern about being connected to any future heist. Still, to be safe, they'd waited three months before moving ahead.

Tek checked the time. They should be back by now. It better be soon. Sitting in this alley for too long was not smart. It happened to be called Lovers Lane, and since he was alone, it would certainly be suspicious to any passing cop. According to firm policy laid down by Tinman, he would have to leave if they weren't back in another five minutes. He heard the back door click open, and he smiled and started the car.

As he pulled out of the alley onto 2nd Street, he said, "What the hell took you so long?"

Tinman huffed. "My brother felt the need to pick up a sampling of the wares." He pulled off his ski mask and gloves and shoved them in a black garbage bag.

"Excuse me for living!" cried Peach. "I have a lady friend who loves the stuff. You should see how she gets when she's had a few tokes."

"Pass," said Tinman dryly as he wriggled out of his black coveralls.

"Was it a good haul?" asked Tek.

"Oh, yeah," said Peach. "I got about an eighth of Chocolope, about the same of Super Silver Haze, and nearly a quarter of Purple Urkle!"

"I think he's talking about the loot," said Tinman.

"Huh? Oh! That! Sure thing. Really good haul. Great idea, Tek. You get an extra slice of the pie for coming up with it."

"Don't mention food," said Tek. "I'm starving." He turned several times, wending his way around town while making sure there was no one following. As he approached a Taco Bell, he said, "Quick pit stop. I need to eat."

"No way," said Tinman. "We follow the plan. You know better."

"He's right, Tek," said Peach. "I mean, we haven't even dumped our work clothes. I don't want to get pulled over with this stuff."

"Or with that other stuff stinking up the car," added Tinman.

"No problem there. I got well under an ounce. Not to mention, it's the only legal thing in our possession," said Peach. Tinman sighed and continued peeling off his clothes.

"It'll only take a minute!" cried Tek. There was a heavy silence from the backseat, and he damn well knew what that meant. He turned left on 4th and headed toward Tinman's apartment. As planned, he made a quick detour to the dumpster behind the Lincoln Lounge, where the black garbage bag, now containing Peach and Tinman's work clothes, was quickly deposited.

When they all walked into Tinman's apartment, Peach dropped the satchel of cash on the small card table. "Who wants to count?"

"Not me!" declared Tek. "I need food, and soon! Otherwise, I'm gonna shrivel up and die! I need tacos right now."

"I can handle that," said Tinman. "I happen to have everything I need."

"I can't wait! I'm hitting that Taco Bell. You guys want anything?"

Tinman shook his head sadly. "I'm telling you, I can whip up the best tacos you've ever had and faster than you can get to that slop house and back."

Tek narrowed his eyes. He still begrudged not being allowed in on the actual heist. That, and the fact he really was hungry, caused him to get a little feisty. "You wanna bet?"

Tinman chuckled. The youth of the day were so naïve. "How much?"

"That extra slice Peach promised me for coming up with the idea."

"You don't want to do that," said Peach. "It's a sucker's bet."

"Oh yeah?!"

"Um. Yeah."

Despite the sage advice, Tek blurted out, "Okay, Tinman, you're on. Starting right now!" he dashed out of the apartment, and Tinman looked to Peach.

"I hope he doesn't speed," said Peach.

"Won't matter. I'll get dinner ready, you count."

"Mind if I have a little toke first?"

"They're your brain cells."

"Exactly the point. Did you know that in low doses it can relieve anxiety?"

"You have no anxiety."

"That's true. Oh well. I'll consider it preventative measures. Better safe than sorry. Do you have any papers?"

Tek powershifted into third, and his souped-up Mazdaspeed Protégé shot down 4th St. A patrol car passing in the opposite direction briefly flickered its lights as a warning, and Tek said, "Crud," as he quickly downshifted and reached the speed limit of 25mph. Creeping along, he told himself there was nothing to worry about. The taco joint was

only five or six minutes away. And he knew at this time of night there would be few patrons and no lines. The bet was as good as won.

The approaching traffic light turned red. He groaned and thought about running it, but a glance in his rearview mirror told him the patrol car had decided to keep an eye on him. As it stopped behind, he saw the smartass cop grin and give him a half-salute. Tek slid a little lower in his seat and waited out the light.

Tinman whistled a happy tune as he sliced red and orange pepper, onion, a clove of garlic, and half a serrano pepper. The frozen pork sirloin chop, still in its Ziploc bag, was cheerfully thawing in a pan of hot water with the burner turned on super low.

Without looking at Peach, he said, "So what's the count so far?"

Peach had his mouth plastered to the pull tab opening of a beer can and was sucking in the last smoke of a hit. When he found Tinman did not have rolling papers, he rummaged a can from the recycling bag and made a small depression on the side, where he poked a little hole. At the bottom of the can, he another hole to act as the carburetor. By holding the can horizontally, placing a small amount of pot above the hole in the side depression, and lighting it up while holding a finger over the carburetor, he'd manufactured a functional pipe.

He exhaled with a silly grin and said, "I'm on number three."

"Three what? Three hundred? Thousand? What are we talking?"

Peach furrowed his brows. "Three hits. What are you talking about?"

"The money! You're supposed to be counting."

Peach found this the funniest thing ever, and his belly laughs intermingled with his hacking. When he finally caught his breath, he said, "Who needs money when you've got this stuff?"

Tinman groaned. "What kind did you try?"

"All of them," said Peach, mystified by the question. "Isn't that the point?"

"Oh brother."

"That's me!"

"Will you please start counting!"

Rapid-fire, Peach started counting aloud. When he reached forty-two, Tinman flung a wet dishrag at him, which thwopped him in the face. This elicited more gales of laughter, and Tinman gave up, turning back to his prep. The meat was thawed, and he reached for his sharpest knife. Terrible thoughts came to mind, but he wanted to win the bet, so he buried his murderous inclinations and began slicing the meat razor-thin.

Tek skidded to a stop in the Taco Bell parking lot. The cop had finally lost interest, for which he was thankful. He was also delighted to see only a handful of cars. He was home free.

He raced for the front door and flung it open. At the last moment, he caught sight of a folding, yellow placard on the floor just inside. But the word—Cuidado—printed on it didn't immediately ring a bell which was unfortunate because the floor had just been mopped. He was fine for the first ten feet, skating uncontrollably on his worn sneaker treads. But then a trash can got in the way. Rats.

Tinman's favorite medium sauté pan was properly heated, so he tossed in the peppers, garlic, and onion. As they sizzled, he sized up his three avocados and found the perfect one. He instinctively knew the flesh was just ripe enough. Using a sharp knife, he cut it in half, removed the pit, then quartered it, making it easier to remove the skin. Once removed, he sliced the quarters into smaller slices and arranged them lovingly on

a small plate in little florets. In the center of each bud went a small slice of queso fresco cheese. He checked his peppers and found they were soft, so he added two thinly sliced cremini mushrooms.

Peach had finally gotten around to dumping the loot on Tinman's single bed. Despite his clouded mind, he started with good intentions but quickly became bored. Now, he was caught up with trying his hand at dollar bill origami. Actually, he was working with a fifty-dollar bill, but who's counting? Not he, anyway. Instead, he was envisioning a butterfly. But as he folded and folded some more, it looked increasingly like a mangled fifty-dollar bill that was accidentally run through the washer, then wadded up and left to dry.

Still, he was quite proud of his creation. He held it aloft and made little butterfly sounds (or at least the sounds he imagined butterflies made if they had mouths, which they don't). He flew it over to Tinman, and it flittered and chirped around his head until he swatted it hard, and it went to die in a corner.

"Geez, why'd you do that?" whined Peach, rushing to the fatally injured butterfly.

"Count!" demanded Tinman, lightly placing his pork slices in with his peppers and mushrooms, and then sprinkling them with Spanish paprika.

Peach harrumphed back to the card table and laid the butterfly to rest among its compadres. "Meanie," he mumbled under his breath.

"What do you mean you don't have tacos? This is Taco Bell!" hollered Tek.

"Yo, I did not say we did not have tacos, did I? No. What I said is we do not have your tacos. Huge difference. It's the usage of the words, see? I mean, we have lots of tacos, just not the ones you want. Look at this humungous menu, man. You can't expect us to have everything all the time." The stoned cashier's bloodshot eyes showed no signs of contriteness further enraging Tek.

"Why didn't you tell me that when I ordered?!"

"You seemed like you were in a hurry, bro. I didn't want to slow you down."

"Just give me some tacos! Any tacos!"

"Right on." The cashier plopped a bag in front of him.

"They've been sitting here all along?!"

"Whoa, man, you do not expect us to cook them fresh, do you? Like on-demand! That would really put a crimp in your busy schedule. Am I right? It's fast food, dude. The American way. Get with the program."

Tek was very close to leaping over the counter and committing second-degree manslaughter the American way, but there was the bet he'd made with Tinman to consider. He grabbed the bag and took off in a sprint. Too bad the wet floor hadn't dried yet.

Tinman prepared the corn tortillas by nuking three at a time, sealed in a sandwich bag. It only took fifteen seconds or so until the bag began to fill with air and the tortillas were soft and fluffy. A light grill in another hot pan with a dash of oil and they were ready.

He spooned a healthy amount of his pork and pepper combo into each tortilla, folded them, and prepared two plates with three each. He placed them on the card table, with the avocado and cheese plate in the center, along with some lime slices. He looked over at Peach lying in the bed, tossing handfuls of bills in the air and watching them waft over him like snowflakes,

"Dinner."

Peach leaped from the bed, skipped to the table, and plopped down in his chair, making a fart sound with his mouth as he did. The folded tacos smiled up at him, filled with all sorts of yumminess. His glazed eyes ate them up hungrily. Then he dove in.

Two tacos later, the door swung open, and Tek stumbled in carrying a bag, the bottom stained with grease. His frazzled eyes landed on the table and tacos, and he said “Shit.”

His shoulders drooped. He walked to the cupboard and pulled out a plate. He unloaded his bag, pulling back the soiled paper wrappers around his tacos and placing them on his plate. It was not a pretty sight.

Humbly, he walked to the table and took a seat. Aside from Peach making little chipmunk sounds as he devoured his food, there was no communication. Tek’s tacos dissolved in his hands as he tried to eat, the hopelessly soaked tortillas disintegrating on touch. He tried not to look at Tinman’s creations, but it was impossible. He swore never to be so misguided again.

When everyone was through, he asked, “So how much did I lose?”

“Ask Peach,” suggested Tinman.

“What was the total take, Peach?” asked Tek.

Peach was leaning back in his chair, imagining what happens to food after it disappears down the hatch. His eyes popped open at Tek’s question.

“You’re asking me? How would I know? I just got here.

[Back to TOC](#)

Casserole Calamity



Tinman had been waiting for a week, and it was driving him crazy. At times like this, even pool wasn't enough to distract him. The only thing that worked was cooking. So that's what he was doing.

He and Peach had done all the groundwork for their latest upcoming heist, and there was nothing left to do but wait for the safe to be delivered. Tinman had come up with the angle when watching late-night TV. An advertisement came on from Capital Golden Home Storage Investments. It was geared toward people who wanted to own gold, but unlike most dealers where the purchaser never actually possesses the gold, this company provided real bullion and a home safe with a minimum purchase of \$10,000.

Catfish was recruited to locate a mark, and after hanging around the kind of watering holes that attracted well-to-do businessmen, he roped in a likely candidate. Over drinks, the two got to talking about investments, and Catfish, the consummate conman, played the part of a man who didn't trust the markets with his money. He told the mark about this Capital Gold deal, and soon the sucker was hooked. Catfish gave him the contact information, and the two parted ways, with the mark promising to return to the bar the next day to tell Catfish how it all went.

The next day, the man told Catfish he had jumped on the deal, and the safe and gold were on their way. The plan was put into motion. Tek, the computer whiz of the Posse, located the man's house through tax records. He also found that the chump was a divorcee and lived alone.

Peach and Tinman began regular casing. When the safe was delivered, it would be their cue to move in. Yesterday, during Peach's shift, the safe had been dropped off and a handyman had shown up to install it.

The company foolishly listed the type of safe it was, and Peach had already found the specs and manual online. It turned out the company did provide real gold, but they skimmed on the safe, and Peach assured Tinman he could open it blindfolded, likewise with the house locks and security system.

Now, it was just a matter of waiting for the mark to leave. Tinman's shift had started at five this morning, and he'd been relieved by Peach at three in the afternoon. It was a Saturday, and the man hadn't budged.

Probably playing with his new gold, Tinman mused.

Ever since he'd arrived back at his little apartment, he'd been edgy and bored. Finally, around six, he started cooking. He stayed in his black heisting outfit to be ready if the deal went down that night.

He had a large repertoire of meals he could produce, and given the particular circumstances, he chose one that took a long time to make. He didn't want to do something quick and easy and finish too soon. Then all there would be to do is wait some more. Of course, though the dish took a while to prepare, it came with benefits. He would be set with leftovers for some time to come.

The preparation is what took so long. First, he had to boil five skinless chicken thighs. While they were cooking, he started a large pot of water to cook a combination of rainbow pasta and farfalle. While it was heating up, he grated a few carrots, minced some stalks of celery, and diced a large zucchini. Once the pasta water started boiling, he added four cups of rainbow pasta and five cups of farfalle. While it cooked to al dente, he chopped a large onion into fine pieces and minced half a serrano pepper.

By the time he finished, the chicken was done. He drained it, rinsed it with cold water, and stripped it from the bones. Then, he chopped the meat into medium pieces. Next, he drained the pasta and rinsed it with cold water.

In a large wok, he heated some olive oil and added the onions, serrano and dried Italian seasoning. A few minutes later, in went the carrots, celery, and zucchini. After stir-frying for a couple of minutes, he added a small amount of water to begin the process of leaching the moisture from the vegetables. He covered the wok and stirred occasionally.

For the topping of the casserole, he sliced two roma tomatoes and five cremini mushrooms into thin slices. Finally, he crumbled up a couple heels of 13 grain bread, and sliced some Swiss cheese.

The vegetable combination was now tender and cooking in its own broth. He added the chicken, mixed it in well, then added a can of cream of mushroom soup. Once everything was well combined, he added just a bit more water, but not too much. He found if he added too much, the leftovers were runny when reheated. He wanted it thick but not rigid.

When he was content with the consistency, he added handfuls of pasta to the mix, and stirred. Once the pasta was one with the mixture, he ladled the concoction into a large casserole dish.

To top it off, he sprinkled on the crumbled bread and layered the mushrooms and tomatoes over the surface. Lastly, he sprinkled a little parmesan cheese over the top. He would add the Swiss cheese slices during the last few minutes of cooking after he had removed the tin foil.

Now he had a decision to make. He could either cover it with some foil and stick it in the refrigerator for later baking, or pull the string now. With the oven set at 425, it would take over an hour to fully cook. The question was, would he have the time, or would Peach show up and say the heist was on.

He closed his eyes and tried to sniff out what the future might bring. But he was no seer, and the only thing he smelled was the casserole screaming to be cooked. So he turned the oven on and waited fifteen minutes for it to preheat.

When the little red light went out, he tented the casserole with tinfoil, poked a few vent holes, and slid it in on the middle rack. He was contented and decided to wait out the time doing a crossword.

He was on 53 across, facing a blank, blank, L, blank, M, blank, blank, Y, with a clue reading, "A Jane to avoid?" when Peach burst through the door.

"It's a go! Come on! Hustle!" cried Peach. "No telling when he'll get back!"

Tinman was stuck to his chair.

"What are you doing?!" shouted Peach. "We've got to roll. I've got Tek keeping watch. But I don't know if the guy ran out for smokes or if he's out partying. Why in the hell are you looking at me like that? Hey. What smells so good?"

"My casserole."

"Nice! Haven't had that for a long time. It'll be a great post-heist meal. Now come on!"

"It's in the oven."

"Good place for it. Come on. Hut, hut."

"You don't understand. I have to take it out in a little over an hour, or it'll be ruined. You know how long it takes me to prepare that."

Peach stared at him, not quite comprehending. "So what you're saying is, you'd rather babysit a casserole than fill your pockets with cash. Interesting life choice. Okay, see you later."

Hearing it put that way brought Tinman to his senses. He jumped out of his seat, grabbed his black ski mask and gloves, and headed for the door. "You think we can make it back in time? I can't stop it midway."

"No sweat," said Peach, airily. "Place is only ten minutes away. We'll be back in no time. Yum. That really does smell good."

"For now. Let's go!"

"I should have turned the heat lower," said Tinman, his face drooping.

"Nah. You said when you cook it in lower heat, it takes forever for the center to get cooked, and, by then, the rest turns to mush."

"Better than turning into ashes," said Tinman, ruefully.

Up to a point, everything had gone according to plan. They had parked Peach's car half a mile away from the house and Tek had shuttled them back to the target. He would function as the getaway driver.

The mark had not returned so Peach breezed through the locks and security system, and five minutes after gaining access to the house, they located the safe. True to his word, Peach barely broke a sweat opening it, and they found the stash of gold ingots, approximately worth the promised \$10,000 (commodity markets are so fickle).

They were at the side door preparing to leave when they heard the sirens. Within minutes, the quiet street filled with police cars and utility trucks. Men in orange vests were milling around, and a crew of workers were digging up a section of the road.

"Must be a gas leak," said Peach.

"And we're trapped," said Tinman.

"Looks like Tek bolted."

"They probably made him go. Or he took off the minute he saw the black and whites."

"That's how we trained him."

"Sure, but now what?"

They watched the men in orange vests fan out and begin knocking on doors. The people who answered were obviously told to evacuate, many of them running out of their houses without bothering to get fully dressed.

One of the men headed toward the mark's house, and Peach placed a finger to his lips. Tinman knew if he still had a chance to save his casserole, something had to be done immediately.

At the sound of the doorbell, he pulled off his ski mask and marched toward the door.

"What are you doing?!" cried Peach.

"Saving our dinner!" declared Tinman.

Peach yanked off his ski mask just as Tinman swung open the door. The man in the orange vest barely had time to open his mouth before Tinman, holding the satchel filled with the loot, waved his hand impatiently.

"We are aware of the problem. Our neighbor called to warn us. How long do you think it will be before we can return to our home?"

"Not sure, sir," said the man. "Could be an hour, maybe more."

"Not a problem. We'll just stroll downtown and kill some time in the casinos. Come on, honey."

He looked back and saw Peach looking over his shoulder for "honey." Then he caught on and swung around, tool bag in hand, and said in an affected voice, "Coming darling!"

He sashayed over to the door, hooked his arm around Tinman, and they hustled across the yard to the sidewalk, losing themselves among the evacuees and workers.

"What if one of the neighbors saw us coming out?" asked Peach. "They'll think the guy's gay, and we're his little buddies."

"Let 'em talk. What do we care?"

They found Tek a few blocks away. Both of them piled into the car, and Tinman told him to hightail it back to the apartment.

When they pulled up, little wisps of smoke were seeping out of cracks around the door. Tinman swung it open, and a grey cloud enveloped him. He rushed to the oven, popped open the door, and saw a blackened mass of charbroiled casserole.

Peach looped an arm over his shoulders and said, "Look at it this way, brother, with the dough we made tonight, we can go have a four-star meal."

"I don't go to restaurants."

"I know. I'm just saying if you did, then we could go out to one. We scored big. Surely, that's got to take some of the sting away. After all, they'll be other casseroles."

Tinman nodded sadly and said, "Yeah. But this was one of my best batches ever."

"So next time you'll outdo yourself."

"But now what do we eat?"

"Tek and I'll run out and get some Chinese. Sound good?"

Tinman said, "No. But you go ahead. I'll scrape something together for me."

Peach slapped him on the back and said, "Suit yourself. Back in a jiff."

When he was gone, Tinman plopped down in his seat and picked up his crossword. His eyes scanned to the clue he had been working on. "A Jane to avoid?" He studied the existing letters and empty blocks.

Despite his sour mood, he laughed aloud and filled in the blanks—CALAMITY.

[Back to TOC](#)

Soup du Jour



“I need a lemon.”

Peach paused for a brief moment to take in this totally unexpected and baffling statement by his brother. As he went back to fitting the little key into the cash register drawer he was currently working on he said, “Gosh, I’m so glad you told me. That’s crucial info at a time like this.”

Tinman ignored the smart-ass comment and said, “The beans have been soaking since yesterday. I have to cook them tonight.”

The cash register drawer slid open, and Tinman scooped up the paper money from each slot and stuffed it into a small canvas sack. By the time he finished, Peach was already one aisle over, working on the next-to-last cash register. Tinman muttered to himself as he slid in next to him.

“My recipe calls for a lemon. It’s not the same without it. It’s like leaving out the serrano pepper.”

“What a nightmare,” said Peach, trying hard to keep down a laugh. He knew how seriously his brother took his cooking, but he found it funny he should pick such a time to discuss it. He finished the lock he was working on and dashed to the last cash register.

Tinman shook his head as he collected bills. “You don’t understand. To make a good ham and bean soup, you have to have the exact ingredients, or it’s too bland. I don’t like bland bean soup.”

“Understandable,” said Peach, popping open the last drawer. “Who does?”

The explosion was so loud it felt like the floor shook. Peach looked to Tinman and they knew their time was limited. They were inside a twenty-four hour grocery store that Tinman had cased and found a hole in the security.

He befriended one of the employees and found that every Fourth of July, by tradition, the night manager let the entire staff go out on the loading dock to watch the fireworks display. The front door was temporarily locked, but that did little to stop Peach.

Tinman had also found the brand of cash registers, which were of an older variety and still required a little key to open the drawer. Fortunately, Peach owned a collection of such keys and among them had found the correct one. The store was located in a lower-income area of the city where many of the residents still relied on the almighty dollar. The brothers didn't expect a big haul, but since it was all unmarked cash, they figured it was worth the effort.

They knew the loud boom they just heard signaled the beginning of the fireworks finale. In a few short minutes, they needed to be out the door and on their merry way.

Still, as Tinman sidled up to Peach and grabbed the last of the cash, he said, "This is serious. I really need that lemon."

"So you'll get one tomorrow and cook it then!" said Peach through his ski mask.

"No can do," said Tinman, shaking his head. "The beans will turn to mush when I cook them, and then the whole thing is ruined."

"Then we'll stop on the way home and get one!"

"This is the only twenty-four-hour grocery store around. We'd have to go all the way down South Virginia to WinCo."

"Then that's what we'll do!"

Another boom. A screeching whistle culminated in a giant eruption. Peach looked into Tinman's eyes and silently pleaded with him to drop the damn lemon thing. Tinman stared back, unmoved, as stubborn a chef as ever there was.

"And it really makes that big a difference?" asked Peach desperately

"Delectable or disgusting, yummy or icky, blessed or blah—"

"Alright already! Go get the damn lemon!"

Tinman grinned behind his ski mask. He took off in a jog, weaving through the store on his way to the produce section. As he went, Peach made a mental note not to heist any more grocery stores. The temptation was too great for his brother.

The fireworks finale was in full swing now, with explosions piling on top of each other. He looked around, wondering if there was anything else to steal. Given the time restraints, they had only intended on hitting the registers, but now, with nothing else to do, he figured he might as well poke around. From his estimation, they'd only netted around two thousand so far, and it would be nice if that total could be beefed up.

He spotted a door behind the customer service counter and made a beeline for it. It was unlocked. From the looks of it, it had to be the manager's office. In the corner of the small room, he spied an area rug that seemed out of place. He stepped over and tossed it aside. Underneath was the round door of an in-floor safe.

He'd seen the model before and knew he hadn't brought the right tools to open it, even if he'd had time. But maybe, just maybe. Often managers are too lazy to properly secure safes when they're being used often. Instead of fully spinning the combination dial after closing the safe, they will move the dial a few clicks to the left or right so when they want to open it again they don't have to dial in the whole combination.

Peach stooped and placed a hand on the lever. With his other hand, he slowly moved the dial counterclockwise a click at a time while keeping steady pressure on the handle. Going backwards on the dial he reached the number twelve and the lever swung to the left and he pulled the door open. Inside was a bank deposit bag. He grinned and reached for it.

Tinman was halfway back to the front of the store, lemon in one hand, canvas sack in the other, when he noticed the booming had stopped. He picked up his speed, careened around the frozen food section, and bolted to the front door. No Peach. Had he taken off without him?

Without being sure, he was reluctant to leave. There may be no honor among thieves, but there sure as hell was between brothers. He turned in a circle, frantically searching. Then he saw him trotting out from behind the customer service counter.

"We've got no time to be messing around!" cried Tinman.

"Who's the one messing around for chrissakes? I'm trying to make this thing profitable, and you're dicking around in the citrus section!"

They were nose to nose and snorting. Tinman gave first. "What did you find?"

Peach held up the stuffed bank deposit bag, and Tinman's eyes glinted. Peach smiled, "Did you get a nice one?"

Tinman held up the lemon. "Perfect. Not too hard, not too soft. And plump. This way, you get the sweetness with the most juice. Feel it."

Peach gave the lemon a little squeeze and nodded sagely. "That's one fine lemon, brother. You've got a knack. Maybe on the way home, you'll tell me how you go about making this special soup du jour."

"That's French," said Tinman, impressed.

"Don't look so surprised," said Peach. "I hang around you long enough, and a little culture's bound to rub off."

In the back of the store, the sounds of happy employees returning to their dumb jobs snapped Tinman and Peach to attention. Crouching, they pulled off their ski masks and slipped out the front door.

A couple hours later, the beans and ham were boiling away in a twelve-quart soup pot. Bean soup was a time-consuming process so when he made it he made a vat of it and froze most. A happy freezer is one that's filled with leftovers, was his firm belief.

Both he and Peach had showered and changed clothes. Tinman was at the stove preparing the next phase while Peach was smoothing out the worn bills and stacking the money in neat piles to be tallied.

"So what's next?" asked Peach.

"I'm getting the ham bones out of here. You have to be careful. These suckers get hot."

"Why not let everything cool down?"

Tinman looked at him like a parent to a child who asked why they had to wipe after going number two. "If I let it cool down just to get the bones out, I'd stop the entire cooking process and would have to heat the whole thing again."

"You mean it's not finished?"

Tinman sighed and continued what he was doing. It's tough explaining culinary magic to the uninitiated. He finished adding the remaining ingredients, ending with his precious lemon. He sliced it in half, squeezed the juice into a small bowl and fished out

the seeds. After stirring his soup a little to combine everything, he added the lemon juice.

Satisfied, he rinsed his hands and sat next to Peach at the little card table. His small apartment was starting to fill with a rich, earthy aroma, and Tinman's keen nose sensed the soup was on the right track. "So, how does the take look?"

"Let you know in a little bit. Still trying to straighten this stuff out. Amazing how people abuse their money," said Peach. "How much longer until dinner?"

"Half an hour," said Tinman. "Pretty soon now, the acid from the tomatoes is going to start to react with the beans, and you'll see lots of bubbles on top, and the whole soup will turn orange."

"Good deal. I'm starving. Something about heisting a grocery store got my stomach rumbling."

Thirty minutes later, as predicted, the soup was happily burbling and gurgling away like some witch's brew in a cauldron. Tinman scooped out two bowls and placed them on the card table.

"Okay," said Peach, slapping a tall stack of mixed bills on the table. "This is \$2315." He grabbed his spoon and noisily slurped his soup for quite a while.

Tinman grinned as he watched the deliciousness spread primal joy through his brother's body and soul. He wasn't thrilled with the night's take, but burglars can't be choosers. He grunted and said, "That's not so bad."

"Not so bad! It's wonderful!" blurted Peach. "And it's all because of that lemon."

"Hah! I told you so! Just that little bit of citrus infuses the otherwise bland bean mix and gives it that zing. And you didn't believe me!"

"Huh?" Peach grunted. "Yeah, well, whatever you say. But what I'm talking about is that if you hadn't insisted on getting that lemon, I wouldn't have been stuck with downtime and decided to poke around in that office, open that safe, and find that deposit that happened to contain," he held up the bank bag, "ta-da, a sweet \$2754 more. That brings our grand total for the evening to \$5069. And you say not bad. Hah."

With a vengeance, he plowed back into his soup as Tinman looked on, a bemused smile on his face. He reached for his spoon and said, "Thank goodness for that lemon."

"Uh Huh! Mmm Mmm Good!"

[Back to TOC](#)

Thai One On



“Mee makhuea mai khrab?” asked Tinman.

“Eh?”

Tinman grumbled. He knew he was using the right Thai words and tones because he had been taught how to say it by a Thai person—the same person who was now staring at him like he was speaking Kurdish.

“Makhuea!” declared Tinman forcibly.

“Who?” asked the Thai grocer with a devious smile.

Tinman sighed. He knew he was being messed with. This was a common revenge for people with English as a second language. As payback for the torture of learning such a beast, they lambaste native speakers who attempt to speak a foreign tongue.

Usually, he would have muscled on, forcing the grocer to admit that he was asking the question correctly, but he was in a hurry. It was Tek’s birthday, and he planned to surprise him with a special meal.

“Fine, be that way,” he said. “Thai eggplant. Where the hell did you hide it this time?”

“Oh! Thai eggplant! Why not you say so? Thai people have to have the makhuea! Over here, come, come, come.”

Tinman eyed the little green and white orbs, ranging from the size of a ping pong ball to a golf ball, and noticed there were no brown splotches or discoloring. Perfect. He picked out ten and headed for the counter. He already had the other ingredients, including a can of coconut milk, curry paste, kafir lime leaves, red bell pepper, and Thai basil.

“Why do you always insist on making me feel stupid?” he asked the grocer as he tallied the bill.

“You no very stupid! You cooking Thai food. Very smart. Geng maak!”

“Uh-huh. Just give me my change.”

The grocer, giggling at his sadistic, private joke, handed over the coins, and Tinman marched out.

Back at his apartment, he got his jasmine rice going.

It would only be three for dinner because Bones and Catfish were on the whiz, picking pockets from unsuspecting bowlers who had come to Reno for the National Tournaments.

Therefore, he only planned on making a small batch of his famous Thai green curry. If the makhuea had not been available, he would have switched to yellow chicken curry with potatoes. He was glad, however, to have found the magic ingredient for the green version because he wanted to make as authentic a Thai curry as he could for Tek—who was half-Thai.

Ever since Tek learned to drive the year before, he had been functioning as the wheelman for Peach and Tinman when they were pulling a heist. He had proven to be an eager accomplice and unflappable, and Tinman wanted to show his appreciation on his 17th birthday.

Tek was born with thieves' blood, having acquired it from his unscrupulous Caucasian father, who went to prison for white-collar crimes, and his Thai mother, a hustler from Bangkok, who conned his father into marrying her and bringing her to the States. After Tek's father went to jail, his mother absconded with all his ill-gotten gains and moved to Reno, where she now worked as a stripper at the Wild Orchid Cabaret.

The Posse decided Tek needed direction, so they took it upon themselves to teach him a dishonest trade. He was a ready learner and had quickly been adopted into the small cadre of professional thieves.

Tinman's hope for tonight was to help Tek discover his Thai roots. And he knew there was not a Thai alive who could resist green curry with Thai eggplant.

The rice water was happily bubbling, so he turned it to low and began his other preparations. He stripped the skin and removed the meat from four chicken thighs. After cutting the meat into bite-size pieces, he set it aside.

He was beginning to quarter the Thai eggplants when Tek bopped inside.

“Hey, Tinman! Did you hear about the new Data Initiative Plan the cops have set up?”

“No. But it doesn't sound promising.”

“But it is! Because of recent police abuses, they've set up this online public access site. It gives real-time updates on all police activities, including arrests, ongoing investigations, and even reports on cops under suspicion of being dirty. What a resource for us, no? We'll be able to locate and steer away from hot neighborhoods the cops are watching and in general, keep an eye on what they're up to.”

“You're right. That does sound promising.”

Tek wandered over to the counter and peered at the little green balls now being split open to reveal white interiors with little brown seeds, similar to regular eggplant. “Ugh. What the hell are those?”

Tinman rolled his eyes and kept cutting. “This is your special birthday dinner.”

Tek wrinkled his nose and grimaced. “Aw, man, I thought you would make your famous Calbolis.”

“They're Stromzones, a cross between a Stromboli and a Calzone.”

“I know, but Peach thinks it should be called a Calboli.”

“He’s wrong,” said Tinman flatly as he turned on the heat under his wok. “I’m the cook. I should know.”

“True. But what possessed you to make this slop?”

Tinman plopped the knife on the cutting board and turned to face him. “This is not slop. It’s your heritage. You’re part Thai. You should know about this stuff.”

“Why? My mom never cooks. And I’ve never been to Thailand.”

“What difference does that make? You have Thai blood. You can’t escape it.”

“Maybe not. But I wish I could escape this dinner.”

“Well, you can’t. And you’re going to help. About time you learned to cook.”

“Hey, I can do cereal. And sandwiches!”

“Open this,” said Tinman, handing him a can of coconut milk. “And don’t shake it up.”

Tek opened the can and held it out. Tinman handed him a spoon. “Scoop out half and put it in the wok. Try to only get the thick white stuff on top rather than the thin liquid at the bottom.”

Tek groaned and followed instructions. Tinman handed him a wooden spatula and said, “Stir.”

As Tek stirred, Tinman retrieved a small bucket of green curry paste from the refrigerator and mixed two tablespoons with the coconut milk. “I want you to keep stirring until you see little bubbles of green oil start popping.”

In about five minutes, the promised green bubbles appeared, and Tinman threw in the chicken, including the bones, for added flavor. He also tossed in some red peppers. “Why aren’t you stirring?”

“My arm hurts.”

“Poor baby.”

When the chicken was cooked halfway, Tinman dropped in the quartered eggplants and turned up the heat. When the mix was sizzling, he poured in the rest of the coconut milk and a cup of water.

“Okay, now we wait.”

“Something kind of smells good,” said Tek, grudgingly.

“It’s the jasmine rice.”

“I don’t like rice.”

“Shaddup.”

The door opened, and Peach strode in carrying a small gift-wrapped package. “Heya, heya. Let the party begin.”

“Did you see what he’s going to feed us?!” cried Tek.

“No, but I can smell it. And we are in for a real treat!” said Peach.

“Aw, geez. I’m alone in the world,” groaned Tek.

“We all are, little man. That’s what they call exhibitionalism.”

“Existentialism,” corrected Tinman.

“Same difference. So, Tek, you want your present now or after dinner?”

“Now. I may not survive dinner.”

Tinman shook his head, wondering how the world would survive with the new, homogenized generation in charge. He added the rest of his ingredients and then tested the eggplants to be sure they were softening.

Peach made a big to-do of presenting the birthday package, and Tek greedily ripped it open. “Oh, wow! My very own pick set!”

“In my humble opinion,” said Peach, “the best pick set in the world. It’s the Fall Pick Set made exclusively in England. They’re all handmade from stainless steel, and the tension wrenches are the quill. They designed them to grab the cylinder at both the top and the bottom, so there are no obstructions for the pick. And they spread the torque evenly throughout the cylinder. Better yet, they’re adjustable to fit different size locks.”

Tinman sighed. He and Tek had attended burglary school together under Peach’s tutelage, and only Tek had graduated. Tinman flunked out after he screwed up in various ways, including snapping the teacher’s favorite diamond pick trying to open a cheap Kwikset lock. After that, he became the brains of the mob, primarily responsible for planning the heists.

“This is killer, Peach!” cried Tek. “I want to go out right now and break into a warehouse or something!”

“After dinner, you can play,” ordered Tinman.

“But I’m not hungry!” argued Tek.

“Tough. Now, get the plates ready. We’re almost there.”

Peach and Tek set the table while Tinman did the final touch to the curry by adding a few sprigs of Thai basil. The eggplant had softened completely and was slowly dissolving into the curry, acting as a natural thickener.

When the aroma was perfect—he cooked by scent rather than timing—he put a mound of rice on each person’s plate and ladled the curry into a large bowl, placing it in the center of the small card table.

“Brother, that smells divine! This might be your best batch ever,” said Peach.

“Let’s hope. Wouldn’t want the birthday boy to get sick and die.”

Peach and Tinman dove into the food, each scooping a heaping spoonful of the curry mixture onto the rice. Tek watched, leery, waiting to see how the others fared.

When they didn’t immediately keel over—or throw up—he tentatively put some of the curry onto his plate, mixed it in with a little rice, and took a leap of faith.

The manna slid into his palette, and something miraculous happened. He closed his eyes as the exotic taste and smell overwhelmed his senses, triggering memories of a world he had never known. He was in a rice paddy, with water buffaloes milling around. He took another bite and found himself under a coconut tree, gazing at the crystal blue waters of the Gulf of Thailand. Beads of happy sweat formed under his lip and on his forehead.

He opened his eyes, threw back his head, and cried, “Aroi maak maak!”

Peach and Tinman froze, forks halfway to their mouths. Peach said, “What does that mean?”

Tek said, “I’m not sure. I guess it must mean delicious. Cause that’s what I wanted to say.”

“It didn’t sound like delicious,” said Peach.

“I think you just spoke Thai,” said Tinman.

“But how? I guess I could have heard it from my mom, but she never speaks Thai. This is too weird.”

Tinman smiled, his goal realized. “Not at all. You can’t escape who you are.”

There was a moment of silence as this sank in. Then Tek said, “Whatever. All I know is the rest of this stuff is mine!”

He launched into the curry, devouring it with a vengeance as Peach and Tinman looked on.

“I think he discovered his roots,” said Peach.
“Great,” said Tinman. “But now, what are we going to eat?”

[Back to TOC](#)

Food Fight



Most longtime residents of northern Nevada did not appreciate the recent influx of wealthy Californians fleeing from high taxes and dense living in Silicon Valley and the Bay Area.

Peach and Tinman, however, found it quite advantageous. The new transplants seemed to think Nevada was quaint and free from all the dangers and modern ills The Golden State boasted, and therefore let their guards down. Which was perfect for a couple of professional heisters plying their trade in the Reno/Tahoe area. So much so that the two brothers were experiencing a boom in their chosen industry.

This night's caper happened to be a contract job. Their fence, Jahllo, fingered the target and promised a handsome payday to fill a special order for one of his wealthy clients.

The house was west of Reno in a new, tony development near Lake Stanley and the Lakeridge Golf Course. The few streets comprising the small, circular community had goofy Italian names like Vista Montagna, Piazza Villagio, and Vista Occhio (roughly translating to Eye View?).

Only half of the lots in the development had been built on, and Arthur and Camilla Addington's place, located on Vista Favoloso (no kidding), was the sole home on the gently curved street.

Tinman cased the house for two weeks and followed the couple, figuring out how they spent their lives. In particular, what they did on weekends. Three nights before the day of the heist, Peach planted himself inside a maintenance building some 200 yards

away. He was armed with his newly bought USRP N210. At just under \$2000, the high-tech transceiver featured high-bandwidth, high-dynamic range processing capability. In Burglarese, this simply meant it could monitor the signals emitted from the Addington's security system. Like many of the newer systems installed in homes, it was wireless to make operating more convenient for lazy homeowners. These wireless systems use unencrypted radio frequencies to send signals from the sensors to the control panel. So, every time Arthur or Camilla opened a window or door tagged with a sensor, a command was sent to the control panel, even if the system was not armed.

If a burglar is patient enough, they may get lucky and even pick up the main passcode when one of the owners arms or disarms the system. Lucky for all concerned, Peach was very patient and, during his surveillance, had indeed amassed the complete set of commands and main passcode. Now, it would have been easy enough to wait for the owners to leave and replay the passcode into the control panel and gain access. But Peach enjoyed his new toy so much he decided to have a little fun.

At noon on Saturday, the day before the heist, he sent a command to the control panel, triggering a false alarm. The police showed up. They searched the house to no avail and left. At two, he did it again, with the same results. He set off false alarms three more times, and by early evening, the cops were fed up. They informed the Addingtons their system had a glitch and strongly suggested they call a technician. Arthur rang the company's hotline, finding the closest qualified serviceman was in Sacramento, and seeing the next day was a Sunday, he would not be able to help them until Monday. The polite person on the phone suggested that until then, the Addingtons turn off the system. And they did.

The next morning, Arthur and Camilla attended church. After which they returned home, changed clothing, and hurried off to their next form of worship, golf. Tinman had found they had a standing tee-time every Sunday afternoon, and they never broke it.

Shortly after leaving, Peach and Tinman arrived in a recently "borrowed" work van, with plates—also borrowed—from an entirely different vehicle. They pulled confidently into the circular driveway and parked at the front door. Dressed in official white coveralls and caps, they strode around to the rear of the house. Tinman carried a Neoprene insulated hot/cold tote bag.

Peach waved his hands dramatically over the back door, said, "Open sesame!" then, using the raking method, picked the lock in four seconds flat.

Inside, they soon found the Addingtons—though possessing not a dram of Italian blood—were nonetheless obsessed with all things Italian: artwork, furniture, music, etc. It, therefore, made perfect sense that they chose to live in an Italian-themed housing development. Not to mention, the view was Favoloso!

Peach and Tinman were not interested in a safe and did not take the time to look for one. Their target was wine.

Jahllo, the Arabian horse trader and fence, had been contacted by an unscrupulous wine collector who was recently outbid for some seriously expensive and rare Italian wines. The man who bested him was none other than Arthur Addington, a well-known figure at wine auctions and collector extraordinaire. Jahllo's client was incensed and offered to pay big bucks to relieve Arthur of his new acquisitions and deliver them into his greedy hands. After Jahllo's cut, Peach and Tinman stood to make a healthy haul.

When the assignment first came in, Tinman was skeptical. Who collected wine? Wasn't it for drinking? After he learned the cost of some collectible bottles, he was

aghast. But as Jahllo explained, collecting wine was a pretty cagey hobby. It was one of the best-performing luxury assets with an average annual growth of 25%, topping art, jewelry, and coins. Hmm. On second thought, it's best to leave that bottle corked.

As they moved through the house, Tinman searched in vain for a door leading to a basement. Where else does one have a wine cellar? It came as a surprise to both to find there was no basement. Not only that, but the wine cellar ended up being just off the expansive dining room, in a nook designed especially for it.

They stared in awe. Who wouldn't? It was a Euro Cave Revelation Double L Deluxe Model. Starting at a cool fourteen grand, it was the gold standard in freestanding wine cellars. It featured a revolutionary self-closing, soft-close shelving system to prevent vibrations. For as all oenophiles know, vibration is the enemy of wine.

Temperature stability, the holy grail of wine storage, is achieved by providing a constant 55°, with the humidity never fluctuating from 70%. UV-free lighting further assures that the wine does not age too quickly. Heaven forbid!

The gleaming case stood about six feet high and almost five feet wide, capable of holding 200 bottles. Most of the slots were filled. There was no lock.

Peach swung open the doors and said, "Try not to drop any."

Tinman groaned. He was a beer drinker and couldn't understand all the hoopla regarding wine. The stuff just made him sleepy, and most women wine drinkers became either mean or promiscuous, neither trait particularly alluring. Still, the payday would be a good one. If they could find what they were looking for.

He pulled out a list provided by Jahllo, and they examined it.

"The first one looks easy enough," said Peach.

"I can barely read it!" replied Tinman with a grudge.

"I'm on it. I've been doing a little learning when I was hanging out picking up the security codes. You know, brushing up on wine lingo and Italianio. Check this out. Dove si mangiar il miglitorio gelatio! Pretty good, huh?"

"What does it mean?"

"Hey! One step at a time! Anyway, this first one on the list is our primary target. There should be three bottles in here. It's a 1978 Giacomo Conterno Monfortino Barolo Riserva."

"Christ. Can't they call it something simple, like they do with beer? Give me a Bud. Everybody knows what you're talking about."

"I don't like Budweiser. Gives me the runs."

"It was an example!"

"Oh. I get it. Yeah, I don't know why they don't do that. Maybe the long name makes it more expensive."

"Wouldn't surprise me. Alright, you take that side. We'll work through them one at a time."

Twenty minutes later, the insulated tote bag held nine bottles, all carefully rolled in bubble wrap. They had one more to find to complete the heist.

"Did you know a lot of these wines come from a specific kind of grape?" asked Peach.

"I don't care," replied Tinman gruffly.

"That's too bad because it's true. And this special type of grape is called Nebbiolo."

"Big deal."

"I'll bet you want to know what that means."

"No, I don't"

"Secretly, you do. So I'll tell you. It means fog. So I was wondering if maybe that came from how you feel after you drink it."

"Most likely. Will you please keep looking. The last one is a 1945 Biondi Santi Brunello di Montalcino."

"Wow, you really mauled that," noted Peach expertly. "But, yeah, this is a biggie. Jahllo told me one of these suckers can go for over six grand."

Tinman's hand froze with a bottle partly slid out from its cradle. "You're kidding."

"Who's gonna kid about something as ridiculous as that?"

"True." Tinman glanced at the label, saw it was not the one they were looking for, and slid it back into place. He moved down the line.

Peach said, "All this talk about Italy makes me feel like eating Italian tonight. Maybe we should have your famous calboli."

There was no reply, but Peach knew his brother was irritated. He grinned, eager to reignite the age-old argument. "Yeah, nothing like a couple of piping hot calbolis after a hard day stealing stuff." A pronounced exhale from Tinman told him the explosion was nigh.

"You know damn well it's called a stromzone."

"Eh, it's like the old potato, tomato thing. You say it one way, and I say—"

"It is not the same thing! The difference is I am the cook. And I made up the name because it is a cross between a stromboli and a calzone."

"Right. Thus, calboli."

Tinman turned from the wine cellar, fists clenched at his sides. "I don't expect you to understand this, but it's a question of phonesthetics."

"Naturally," said Peach, facing off with him, the wine now forgotten.

Tinman smirked. "You don't even know what it means."

"Prove it."

"Certain words are more aesthetically pleasing to the ear."

"Right! I mean, listen to the sweet sound. Calboli."

Tinman shook with rage. "That is not sweet! It's discordant! And that is why my dish is called stromzone. You see? It rolls off the tongue and produces a harmonious sound capturing the essence of the food."

"I disagree. Calboli is better."

Tinman's face turned beet red with ire. "It's not up to you."

"I eat it too."

"But you don't make it!"

"I help sometimes! I like to knead the dough. It helps relieve my anxiety."

Tinman gaped. "You have anxiety?!"

"Not really. But it sounded good."

Tinman, demanding an end to this silliness, stomped his foot hard on the floor.

"Careful!" said Peach, pointing to the tote bag. "Vibrations."

Tinman growled fiercely, and Peach decided it was time to get back to business. They both turned to the wine cellar and, five minutes later, located the final bottle.

On their way to the back door, Peach said, "So, can we have what we were talking about for tonight's dinner?"

Tinman murmured, "I don't have all the ingredients."

"Do you have the flour and yeast?"

“Of course! And I have some olive oil, red and orange peppers, and ripe tomatoes, but that’s it. So drop it.”

“I’ll bet Camilla stocks a good fridge. Let’s see if she’s got the rest of the stuff.”

Tinman started to argue, but Peach veered off to the kitchen. When Tinman stepped in, he was already poking around in the refrigerator. “Okay, so what else do we need? Mozzarella, right? Here we go.” He tossed a bag of shredded cheese on the counter.

“Next?”

“They won’t have it all!”

“They’re Italian groupies. Come on, spill it.”

Tinman sighed. “An assortment of meats. Like deli meats.”

“Okay, we have some sliced Italian roast beef, and, let’s see, something here looks like ham.” He held out a bag. Against his will, Tinman examined it.

“This is prosciutto.”

“Is that good? I mean, will it work?” Tinman mumbled under his breath. Peach said, “Was that a uh-huh or uh-uh?”

“Yes! It’ll work!”

“Oh, good. Get a bag, will you.”

“Huh?”

“A bag to put this stuff in. Bottom drawer to the left of the sink.”

“And how do you know that’s where the bags will be?”

Peach looked at him dumbfounded. “Because that’s where people put their bags.”

Tinman sneered, went to the sink, pulled open the drawer, and stared at a bundle of grocery store bags. He sighed, pulled one out, and returned to the fridge, where he loaded the food. “This still won’t cut it. So there, smart guy. I need—”

“Ricotta!” cried Peach. “Only half a container, though. Is that enough?”

Tinman growled and yanked the container from his hand.

“That should do it, no?” asked Peach. But Tinman had disappeared, heading for the back door.

As they pulled the van away from the house, Peach couldn’t resist. “We should compromise and call it a strombolzone. See how that rolls right off the tongue? Music to my ears.”

[Back to TOC](#)

Real Crooks Do Eat Quiche



"And this is exactly how you found it, ma'am?" asked Detective Kehoe.

"Yes. It was open just like that," said the richly attired dowager. "But nothing is missing."

"Funny they would leave all that jewelry," said Detective Romero.

"Let me guess," said Kehoe. "Ma'am, these pieces are duplicates, aren't they? And you keep the real stuff in a safety deposit box."

"How did you know that?" asked the woman.

The detective looked at his partner and grinned. "We've got some real pros here."

"Did anyone know you were going away?" asked Romero.

"Just the help," said the rich lady.

"And how many people is that?"

"Only eight! And they are all loyal servants. They've been with me for years. You can't suspect them."

"I don't, ma'am," said Romero. "Just curious. Do any of them have keys?"

"Certainly not! You think I'm foolish enough to trust the riffraff off the streets?"

Romero sighed and bit his tongue.

“Anything else missing?” asked Kehoe.

“I don’t think so, but as soon as I arrived home and saw the open safe, I called you immediately.”

“Uh-huh. Was there anything out of place in the house?”

“Everything was out of place! Someone was living here! Aren’t you listening?”

“How do you know someone was staying here, ma’am?” asked Romero.

“Well, it’s obvious! Follow me. I hope your shoes are clean. This has been traumatic enough.”

The two detectives checked their shoes, held them up as proof, then dutifully followed the Grand Dame through the massive abode. It quickly became apparent the old adage was correct. Some people have way too much money.

She led them into a steamy, tiled room dominated by a hot tub the size of a small swimming pool. The water was bubbling and churning like the witch’s cauldron in Macbeth. One wall was plate glass looking out at the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

“You see?” cried the woman. “It’s on! They were bathing in my hot tub! Dear Number Five would have a fit.”

“Number five?” asked Romero.

“Husband. What else?”

“Uh-huh. Are you still married?”

“Certainly not. Five is quite enough. I’m an independently secure woman now. So what’s the point?”

“Right,” said Romero. “Hey, partner, towels are still damp.”

“Anything else, ma’am?” asked Kehoe.

“Well, the Bentley has been driven. I’m quite sure of it.”

“And why is that?”

“It was not positioned in the garage exactly the way I demand of my driver.”

“I hate that,” said Romero, unable to resist.

“Are you being impertinent?”

“Not at all, ma’am. Anything else out of position?”

“I don’t know. My inspections only went this far.”

“Well, let’s have a look at the rest of the house.”

In the cavernous dining room, on the table that could seat twenty, a single printed piece of paper caught the eye of the detectives. They both scanned it and Kehoe said, “This is your itinerary for your recent trip.”

“Yes,” said the woman. “I was looking it over the morning before I left for Milan to see the latest fashions.”

“Fashions.”

“Wardrobes.”

“Ah. And you left your itinerary here.”

“What need of it did I have once I embarked?”

The detectives looked at each other, both guessing the truth. With a subtle eye gesture, Romero was chosen to be the one to spill.

“My guess is these thieves started casing your place soon after you left on your trip. They probably broke in late at night, discovered this itinerary, and realized you weren’t coming home for a while. So they decided to have a little vacation of their own.”

“This is not a hotel, officer!”

“Detective. And I understand that, ma’am. But they obviously didn’t get the message. Let’s finish our tour. See if they found anything to make the job worthwhile.”

“That’s a very base way to put it!”

Romero had had enough and was ready to let the old biddy have it, but Kehoe plowed on. “Please, ma’am, we’re just doing our job.”

With a disdainful shrug and a heavy sigh, she continued leading them through the estate. In the monstrous kitchen, her face scrunched up when she saw two plates and some other utensils on the drying rack next to the sink.

“Something wrong, ma’am?” asked Kehoe.

“Those dishes shouldn’t be there. They were not there when I left. And the kitchen maid would never be allowed to leave them like that.”

The detectives started snooping around, looking in drawers and shelves. Kehoe opened the refrigerator and spied half a quiche in a tin pan, sitting on one of the shelves.

“Did you have quiche the morning you left for your trip?”

“Of course not. My breakfasts never vary. Poached egg with dry toast and peach jam. And I dine in bed.”

She followed his stare and gasped. “What is that doing in here?”

“You tell me.”

“I never instructed the chef to make a quiche. And even if I had, I most definitely did not have any of it. Do you believe the help is stealing food from me behind my back?”

“No, ma’am, I don’t. Do you know if you had the ingredients for quiche in your refrigerator?”

“How on earth would I know? The chef takes care of all of that. I wouldn’t even know what is required for such a thing. That’s not my responsibility, detective. Is it?”

“I imagine not, ma’am. May we see the rest of the house?”

The Matron tapped her foot impatiently, then took off to the Great Room. As she entered, she screamed and nearly swooned. “It’s gone!”

“And what would that be?” asked Romero.

“My handbag! It always sits right there on that pedestal!”

“You keep your handbag on a pedestal?”

“Of course! It’s where it belongs, you see?”

“Not really. Did you have a wallet in it?” asked Romero. “Or anything of value?”

The woman looked at him like he had rabies. “Certainly not! It’s a Hermes!”

The detectives were clueless.

“A Hermes Handbag detectives. Specifically a Birkin Bag. I own two. I took one to Milan, and the other should be on that pedestal.”

“Can you describe it?” asked Kehoe.

The woman was practically in tears but too proud to let them fall in front of these horrid men. “It is made of ostrich hide dyed in a delicate juane d’or hue, with matching leather-colored lock and key lanyard, and adorned with a plaid bow.”

“And how much did you pay for this purse?” asked Kehoe.

“A little over forty-thousand. But that’s not the point. The waiting list to buy one of these is nearly six years long. Oh dear, I don’t feel at all well.”

“Me either,” said Romero, holding down the bile building in his gut. “So, you spent forty-thousand dollars on this handbag. But there was nothing valuable in it?”

“You fool!” screeched the woman. “That bag is a work of art, not to mention a very valuable investment. Over the last thirty-five years, these bags have had an annual

increase in value of over fourteen percent! With a total increase of nearly five hundred percent.”

“Oh my god, I think I’m going to be sick.”

Kehoe propped up his partner and said to the woman, “Ma’am, we’re going to need you to come down to the station with us and fill out a report.”

“Is that necessary?”

“If you want to make an insurance claim, it is.”

That lit a fire under the old babe’s ass. She shook her head rapidly and said on her way out of the room, “I have to change out of these. I’m certain I will be way overdressed for your humble workplace. It will only take a half hour or so.”

As she left the room, Romero mimed like he was shooting her in the back. Kehoe patted the air, urging him to let it go. Romero said, “I’m almost rooting for the guys that took that stupid bag.”

“Agreed. I suppose we could bring in the crew to dust for prints. But we both know we’re not going to find squat.”

“Man, my stomach really does feel funny. I shouldn’t have skipped lunch.”

“Let’s have some of that quiche.”

It was a sound idea, so they plodded back to the kitchen. They pulled out the remaining spinach quiche, cut it in two, plopped it on the plates the thieves had used, and zapped them in the microwave. A couple of minutes later, they sat across from each other at the small kitchen table and dug in.

“Oh wow, I’ve never had quiche like this,” said Romero. “So light and fluffy.”

“But deceptively filling,” said Kehoe

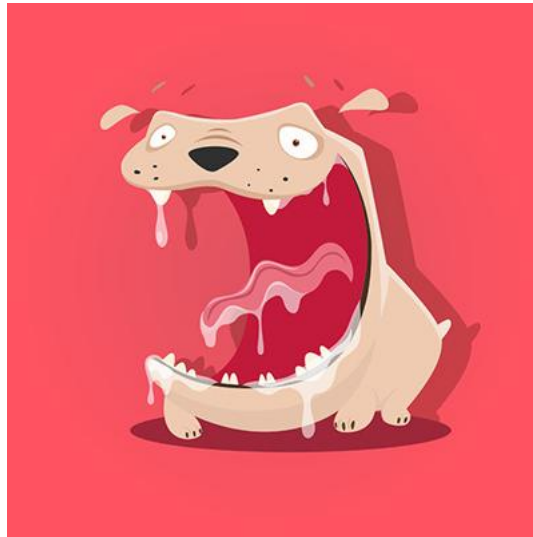
They munched and made yummy sounds, then scraped their plates clean. They looked at each other with happy glows.

“You know,” said Romero. “I never knew real crooks ate quiche.”

“Well, these two sure do. And one of them is a helluva good cook.”

[Back to TOC](#)

Hunger Pangs



A disgruntled employee fingered the job. Peach first met him at Floyd's Fireside Chat, one of his favorite drinking establishments. A month earlier, the tipster was fired from his warehouse job over some minor infraction. Now, he had it in for the owner and wanted to make him pay. Peach intimated that he knew some fellas who might be able to help him out and take care of the dirty work—for 75% of the take. Normally, the "ear" or guy who fingered a job but was not in on it only made 10 to 20%. But Peach, ever the softy, upped it to 25. Still, from what the man told him, the haul should make the job well worth the time.

Apparently, the owner of the warehouse was a shady guy himself. In particular, every other Saturday night he operated an illegal cage fighting competition inside his warehouse. The high-stakes wagering was fierce and the undeclared money that rolled in was stored in the owner's office until Monday when he could safely move it to some undisclosed location.

After Peach gathered all the information he could get from his tipster, he further studied the layout. The warehouse possessed unusually good security, with a system that would take quite some time to beat. One Saturday night, Peach staked out the place and found that the participants in the competition, male and female, and the gamblers who bet on them arrived at 11 pm sharp. The owner then armed the security system and posted a guard at the entrance. The event lasted until 4 am. Then everyone left but the owner and the guard. At the time of the mass departure, the security system was turned off for fifteen minutes and then rearmed. The owner remained in the building

(sometimes with a newly acquainted lady friend) until early Sunday morning, usually leaving around 7 am, after which the system was rearmed. The guard lingered for an hour, then left at 8 am.

Peach discussed his findings with Tinman, who came up with a plausible plan, and a date was set for the heist.

On the chosen Saturday night, Tinman and Peach catnapped until 2 am, then rose and headed for the target. The warehouse was one of many lined up off Longley Lane, near the airport. They parked in the lot of a building two blocks away and kept to the shadows as they hurried to the warehouse. Both carried small satchels.

Dressed in black from head to toe, they sidled along the building until reaching the roof access ladder welded to the side of the structure. It was an easy climb to the top, where they found a padlocked gate. Peach came prepared and quickly picked the lock. On the roof, they scooted to an emergency hatch. It, too, was padlocked, and though Peach picked this as well, they knew the hatch was tagged with a sensor, so they sat down to wait.

At 4 am, Tinman slithered to the edge of the roof, overlooking the main entrance. When the door opened and people started filing out, he signaled to Peach, who silently pulled back the hatch and waved his brother over.

A narrow grid led away from the hatch entrance, and the two carefully picked their way across it balanced some eighty feet above the warehouse floor. The grid ended at another ladder embedded into a far wall. They watched the owner walk through the warehouse with his arm around a beefy-looking woman covered in tattoos.

“He likes ‘em rough,” whispered Peach. Tinman rolled his eyes.

The owner and the cage fighter climbed a short set of steps to his office, perched above the warehouse. It had windows on all sides so he could monitor the activities of his workforce, but after he and the woman stepped inside, the curtains were drawn.

Given their cue, Tinman and Peach climbed down the ladder and reached the floor. Large metal containers stacked eight to nine high filled the warehouse. Between the jumble lay a labyrinth of narrow passages wide enough to allow a fork lift. They found a nook far from the office and settled in.

Their exertions and the odd schedule had left them sleepy. Within moments, they both dozed off.

Until now, Brock had led a pretty cushy life. When he was growing up, he wasn't required to work and spent much of the time lazing around the house and yard. But two weeks ago, the hammer dropped, and he suddenly found himself part of the workforce for the owner. It was a drag because his job required him to be alone for long periods. Each night, after everyone had left, he was forced to plod aimlessly around this big building looking—for what?

There was never anyone here! Even if there was, what was he supposed to do about it? What a pointless job. And now, the biggest insult of all! He was stuck in here, and it wasn't even night. There were no windows in this stupid place, but he knew it was day. His stomach told him so.

He'd eaten well the day before and slept straight through all the fighting in the night. After the people had left, he'd woken once to see the owner and some woman getting it on in the office. But then he'd fallen asleep again. Later, the owner woke him, rudely dragged him down the steps from the office, and shoved him across the

warehouse floor on his way out the front door. The woman who was with him thought that was quite funny. Brock did not.

An hour after they left, his stomach started acting up. His internal clock told him it was time to eat. He trotted up the steps to the office and found the door was closed. The idiot owner had forgotten to leave his lunch outside! Great. He had never gone a day without eating, and the thought put him in a foul mood. Well, if he was going to be treated in such an inhumane manner, then he sure as hell wasn't going to do any work. He flopped down on the small landing at the top of the stairs and closed his eyes.

It was the rumbling in his stomach that finally woke Peach. He checked his watch and saw it was nearly noon. They were already three hours behind schedule, but he wasn't worried. They had the whole day to do what they needed to do. He nudged Tinman, who stirred and opened his eyes.

Peach held out his watch, and Tinman groaned. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"I was sleeping, too."

"Well, let's get going."

"Hold on. I'm starving."

"I warned you about that. Didn't you bring anything, like I told you?"

"Sure. That's what I'm saying. Let's eat first."

Tinman nodded and unsnapped his satchel. "What do you have?"

"I picked up a sub at 7-11."

Tinman looked at him and shook his head sadly. "Disgusting."

"Hey! It's food."

"That's a matter of opinion."

"So, what did you bring?"

Tinman pulled out a large sandwich wrapped in a Ziploc. With a malicious look, he pulled it out and waved it under his nose, savoring the smell.

"That's not fair," said Peach, beginning to salivate like one of Pavlov's dogs. "That's one of your famous Ahi tuna sandwiches, isn't it?" Tinman made yummy sounds, and Peach asked, "Did you bring one for me?"

"You didn't ask me to."

Peach grumbled, peeling the cellophane off his sub.

Brock's nose twitched, stirring him from a dream where he was devouring a large steak dripping in blood. His eyes remained closed as his unusually keen sense of smell determined if the scent was real or imagined. An image of a fish came to mind: tuna, definitely tuna. And something else he couldn't place, but it smelled tasty. His tongue lolled, and he suddenly knew. This was no dream. Somewhere near was food. Good food. His empty stomach was in an uproar. His eyes popped open. And that's when he heard the voices.

His ears perked, locating the approximate location. Slowly, he descended the stairs and started into the maze, like a giant lab rat searching for the hidden block of cheese. Creeping stealthily, he closed in on the voices. At a corner, he peeked one eye around and saw two men leaning against a container, food in hand. He tensed his body like a catapult, then shot forward and tore down the passage.

When Peach and Tinman saw the Bullmastiff charging toward them, they both assumed they were soon to become dog food. So it was no surprise when Cujo slid to a

stop inches from them and swung its head from one to the other, its eyes locked on the food they held, drool dripping from its gigantic jowls.

"Hey, puppy," squeaked Peach.

Brock was in no mood for conversation and merely growled low in his throat, eyes glowing, focusing on the delicious morsels soon to be his.

"I think he's just hungry," said Peach from the side of his mouth.

"Then feed him!" blurted Tinman. The dog, obviously impatient with the slowness of humans, let out a stern bark, and both brothers flinched and yelped back.

Peach quickly tossed his sub out, and the hellhound lunged for it. As the pasty bread and tasteless processed meat hit his palate, he spit the whole glob out and swung his giant head to face Tinman.

Brock was a fussy eater, and these humans were pawing the garbage off on him. Unacceptable. He leaned his muscular shoulders forward and sniffed at the overstuffed sandwich in the trembling man's hands.

"Looks like he wants yours," said Peach. "Smart dog."

"Yeah," said Tinman with a quivering voice. He tore off a small corner of the sandwich and flicked it at the dog. It disappeared before it hit the floor, and the gleaming eyes demanded more.

"Okay, so that's the ticket," said Peach. "He likes the tuna. So let's get going."

"Right," agreed Tinman, flicking another piece at the dog. "Straight out the front door."

"No way," said Peach, ever so carefully rising to his feet. "We finish the job. Just give him little bits at a time." He took off with nary a side glance from the dog, who wasn't leaving the purveyor of such fine foods.

"What if I run out of sandwich?" cried Tinman.

"Then it'll serve you right for not making me one," answered Peach, disappearing around a corner.

Very slowly, Tinman got to his feet, all the while the dog making damn sure there would be no escape. Then, like the witch luring Hansel and Gretel, Tinman proceeded through the maze of containers, dropping small chunks of his sandwich behind, which were immediately snapped up by the ravenous carnivore.

By the time he reached the stairs leading to the office, Peach was already inside. "Looks like the owner left the poor thing's food locked inside here. There's a whole bowl of dog food. Bring him up."

One terrifying stair at a time, Tinman climbed, with the mad-dog nipping at his heels, demanding more deliciousness. When they reached the top, the bowl of food was sitting outside. Tinman toed it toward the beast and it sniffed suspiciously.

Brock had always loved his regular dried chunks of god knows what. But now, for some reason, they paled to the nectar that was coming from the stranger's hand. He nosed the bowl away, looked up, and let out a thunderous roar.

Tinman leapt. Peach turned from the floor safe and chuckled. "Better stick with the sandwich. This old clunker will only take a minute."

It took two. And by then, Tinman was down to the last corner of his sandwich. Sweat poured under his ski mask. He hoped the dog couldn't sense his fear.

Brock was fed up. He wanted that last bit of sandwich and would take no guff. He growled low and gave his most fearsome look. The man looked nervous. Good. That was his intention. Now, fork it over. Ruff.

Peach slipped past the stare-down and called out over his shoulder. “We’re good to go. Get him inside the office, shut the door, and I’ll meet you at the front entrance.”

Tinman half-rose from his crouch, and the dog snarled. “It’s okay. I’m going to give you this. Just step in here, you mangy cur.”

Brock took no offense to the slur. Where food was concerned, a little insult was inconsequential. He followed the man into the office, where he quickly tossed the remainder of the sandwich into a corner and scurried out, slamming the door behind him. Brock could care less. He circled the little piece of food like it was prey. He leapt upon it and gulped it down. He was in heaven. He wondered why his owner never fed him like the nice stranger. Maybe it was time to teach the jerk a lesson the next time he showed up. He eased onto his belly and shut his eyes. He quickly faded into a deep sleep with dreams of fishes dancing atop the ocean waves.

Peach disabled the alarm system by the time Tinman reached the main exit. They slipped outside and hustled along the building until they were in the adjoining parking lot. Once safe from the warehouse’s video cameras, they removed their ski masks, and—doing their best to look casual—double-timed their way to the car.

As they drove away, Peach said, “Geez, I’m hungry. What’s for lunch?”

Tinman was still panting and partially in shock, so the lack of response was understandable.

“Say! It’s Sunday!” said Peach. “How about your famous Sunday Sandwich!”

Through the fog of lingering terror, Tinman heard, and a vision formed of said sandwich. It had never looked so good. He nodded, and Peach clapped his hands joyously. Who wouldn’t? After all, nobody makes a sandwich like Tinman.

[Back to TOC](#)

What A Crock



“What do you mean you can’t open it?” asked Tinman, even though the question was unfair, and he damn well knew it.

Making certain he knew it, Peach said, “I didn’t say that, and you know it. What I said is I can’t open it with the tools I have.”

“On you? Or does that include all the tools you possess?”

Peach leaned back from the safe and stared up at him. “Okay, I’ll make it crystal clear. This is a Sargent and Greenleaf 8400 series locking system. Otherwise known as the Manipulation Proof Lock. And they mean it. I’ve never heard of this being opened by a human using normal manipulation techniques.”

“You mean by touch. The way you feel the tumblers and know when each gate is opened. The method which you claim to be a master at.”

“Don’t get cute. This baby has a possible million combinations. It can be programmed to have two six-digit ones, where both are required, or it can be one long twelve-digit combination.”

“So you’re admitting defeat? After you said there was no safe you couldn’t crack.”

Peach felt like kicking his brother in the shins. “I didn’t say that. Did I? No. So stop putting words in my mouth.”

“Okay. So how does one get into this safe?”

“Well, if we had one of those SAIC portable package inspection X-ray machines, the kind shipping companies use if they think there’s a bomb in a package, we could place it behind the safe as I turn the dial, and in theory, we would be able to watch the gates and know when I’ve hit a right number.”

“So let’s get one of those.”

“Are you crazy?! Having that kind of radiation spilling over us at that distance for the amount of time it would take would fry us both. Not to mention rule out any possibility of future fatherhood.”

“No problem there on my end.”

“Me either, but I value my brain cells, and they’re the first that would go snap, crackle, pop.”

“So why even bring up such a stupid idea?!”

“Because you asked how we could get in! And that’s one possibility. You didn’t ask for ways to do it that were safe!”

Tinman sighed heavily and regained his composure. “Okay, is there a way to do it that won’t cause permanent brain damage or other physical trauma?”

“That’s better. And yes, there is.”

Tinman waited, then politely asked, “Would you mind elaborating, please?”

“Certainly. The Robot Dialer I own would probably work, but it could take a couple of days.”

“Days! Are you pissing me off on purpose?”

“Perish the thought. I was just mentioning it in passing. What would be a lot quicker is the Mas-Hamilton soft drill.”

“But you don’t have it with you.”

“Not exactly.”

“So let’s go get it.”

“That won’t work either.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t own one. And they stopped making them a while back. I never ran into this lock before, so I never had the need before, so I never got one before they went out of production.”

Tinman chewed on his tongue for a minute to keep down the wrath. Then he said, “So why did you bring it up if there’s no way to get one?”

“Did I say that? What I said was I don’t have one. But I know where to get one. Maybe.”

When they stepped out from the rear of the building holding the law office of Atticus Weiner, Esq., Court Street was empty as it should be. It was the reason they’d picked this time to pull the caper. After all, it was an early Sunday morning, which also happened to be Christmas Day. A light snow fell as they hustled casually up the street where they left the car. Usually, Tek would be driving getaway. But this was a different

set-up. They had no time constraints, knowing Atticus would never dare frequent his office on a holiday or for several days following. As an attorney, one must retain a certain amount of decorum.

The job had been fingered by the disgruntled ex-wife who Peach met while she was slumming in the local bars shortly after the completion of her messy divorce. She was rightfully teed off because Atticus knew his business—especially when marrying a lady half his age. He'd locked her into an ironclad prenup, and the poor gal had received not a whit from the divorce. Sure, technically, it had been partly her fault. Wives were expected not to get too cozy with their yoga instructors. But still, he could've given her something, seeing he had been getting a little too cozy with the maid for years.

Either way, during their intimate, liquor-soaked conversation, Peach discovered that Atticus, as well as being a philanderer, was an avid philatelist. And according to his scorned ex, he kept his valuable collection of stamps locked in his office safe. Several months after the chance meeting, Peach and Tinman went into action.

A call to their fence, Jahllo, confirmed he did indeed have several customers who would be interested in purchasing teeny pieces of paper for lots of money. If, of course, they were really good teeny pieces of paper—meaning rare. The deal looked juicy. If only they could get in the damn safe.

They slid into the car, and Peach fired it up to get the heat going. Tinman was feeling testy. He assumed this job would be quick, and he had other things to do. Tonight was the annual Christmas party/poker game at Dez's place, the matriarch of the Posse. As usual, he was expected to provide the main course for dinner. He had a spectacular menu planned, but it would take time to prepare.

"So, where do we get this drill?" he asked.

Peach waved him off as he sent a text on his phone. A minute later, a reply beeped. Peach checked it, put the car in gear, and said, "Next stop, Susanville."

"Susanville! That's an hour and a half each way! Longer in this weather! Why there?"

"Only licensed locksmiths could ever buy this particular drill."

"Well, there are plenty of locksmiths around here. Let's just borrow one from one of them."

Peach looked at him funny. "You ever try to break into a locksmith's? They're in the business, brother. They know all the tricks. Not worth the headache."

"Won't this place in Susanville be just as difficult?"

Peach pulled away from the curb. "Not so much wince we won't have to break into it. The owner is retired. I met him in prison, which is, of course, why he had to retire. He figured his skills were underappreciated by the straights and went independent. But he got cocky. So he had to give that up, too. I mean, after he got busted. See?"

"No."

"Well, he still dabbles a little. Not directly. He runs what you could call a lending library for guys like us. You follow?"

"No!"

"Okay. Different example. AutoZone. Like when you were trying to fix that damn turn signal that wouldn't shut off. And you needed a steering wheel puller. And they lent you one for the job."

"I remember. And I was surprised it was free. So this guy is a philanthropist for crooks?"

“You got wax in your ears? What I said is it’s like AutoZone. But not exactly.”

Tinman raised an eyebrow. “How not exactly?”

“Fifteen percent of the estimated haul up front.”

“For a drill?! That’s usury! He’s a shyster!”

“Sort of. Well, yeah. In a manner of speaking. You gotta take a leak before I hit the highway?”

They were passing Panther Valley on Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Highway before Tinman spoke. Then he said, “What am I going to do about food for the party?”

“We’ll just pick up one of those pre-made feasts at WalMart. You know, the one with the pre-cooked chicken. I think it comes with mashed potatoes, too!”

Tinman looked at him askance. “That’s not funny.” He was serious about his catering duties. There was silence until they passed the turnoff to the Sierra Safari Zoo. He was wondering what the lions, tigers, and bears—oh my— were having for Christmas dinner when a solution came to him. He pulled out his disposable phone and started dialing.

Catfish answered. Tinman made his plea, and the old grifter’s reply was, “Can’t help you, kid. Bones and I are just heading out to work the whiz on a Christmas extravaganza they’re holding down at Idlewild Park. Promises to have a lot of fat pokes, what with all the Christmas money under the tree. See you tonight.” Click.

Damn, thought Tinman. He knew he couldn’t call Tek because he was spending the obligatory one day a year with his deadbeat mom, who happened to be Thai and purportedly Buddhist, but Thais love all holidays, especially Christmas, so he was stuck.

Who else was there? Ironically, he had his epiphany at Hallelujah Junction. He flipped open his phone and dialed Rudy. He was the general of a small army of can collectors, which he had dubbed the CCS, or Can Collecting Syndicate. As ruler of the dumpsters in Reno, any collector who wanted to work his turf had to pay a tariff.

They first met when Tinman moved into the defunct motel he’d sort of inherited. He immediately admired Rudy’s initiative, and they worked out an agreeable arrangement whereby Rudy would not be homeless. They’d been close associates ever since.

“Rudy, I need a favor.”

“Aw, geez, Tinman. Today? This is like can heaven with all the parties. No telling how many pounds I can get on my own. Not to mention my gang.”

“What’s the going rate on aluminum?”

“Don’t make me sick. They’re killing me. It’s like thirty-eight cents a pound. It’s always like this in winter. Still, a guy’s gotta make a living.”

“You do me this favor, and I’ll pay you three times the going rate of what you figure you could collect.”

“No kidding?! Who are you, Santy Claus?”

“No, desperate. Here’s what I need you to do.”

After Tinman relayed his instructions, there was a long pause. “Rudy? You still there?”

“Uh, yeah, Tinman. But, it just dawned on me that this is for Dez’s party tonight, no?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, I’m not much of a cook, you know. I usually just pick up food wherever I find it.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s easy. You’ll do great. Just let yourself into my apartment with the emergency key. The pot I’m talking about is on the shelf above the sink. The one with a cord coming out of it. After you get everything prepared like I told you, just put the lid on it, turn it to low, and—”

Rudy looked at his phone. The connection was cut off. His eyes widened. What was he supposed to do after turning it on low? He dialed Tinman, but the call wouldn’t go through. He was on his own. He owed Tinman a lot, and he knew he had to do right by him. He shook his head, and left his room.

“Damn,” said Tinman. “We were cut off. I hope he got all that. He sounded nervous.”

“He’s got big shoes to fill. But he’ll be alright.”

It took another hour to get to Susanville, and the snow showed no signs of letting up. The town’s primary industries used to be logging and mining. Now, the source of income and population was its two state prisons, meaning more prisoners lived in Susanville than residents. It was not a place in which Tinman or Peach cared to spend much time.

Peach’s acquaintance lived on a side street off the main drag. His abode consisted of a disheveled double-wide mobile home with a large built-on shed. They parked and walked to the front door. It swung open before they reached it.

“Chick! My man!” cried Peach.

Chick was chocolate complected, medium height, with a wiry build. Tinman wondered why all the locksmiths he’d ever seen were of slight build. He guessed maybe the big, beefy guys didn’t need to bother with picking locks, they just kicked in the doors.

“Yo, Peach,” said Chick. “Not cool to bring strangers. You know better.”

“Stranger? Oh, him. He’s my brother. No sweat. He’s working with me now.”

Chick held out a hand, palm out, stopping them in their tracks. He eyeballed Tinman and said, “He looks like you.”

“We’re twins,” said Peach.

Chick spread his lips, revealing gleaming pearly whites, and said, “That’s funny.”

“Yeah, we get a real kick out of it,” said Peach good-naturedly. “So, we’re looking for a Mas drill. We’re still on the job.”

Chick’s smile disappeared as he stepped to the snow-covered ground and walked to his shed. The door of the shabby building was incongruously protected with a high-tech electronic lock which he blocked from view as he keyed in the code. Inside, the place was filled with tools, most unrecognizable to Tinman, but Peach was in heaven.

“Wow, an old Unitech computer pick. I never did lay my hands on one of these.”

“Don’t do it now,” said Chick. “You want the Mas drill, and that is what you get to touch.”

“Sure, Chick, sure. Anything you say.”

Chick removed a large metal case from a high shelf and opened it. It was not like any drill Tinman had ever seen. In fact, it didn’t look like a drill at all. It was more like some robotic contraption with a forward-gripping device.

“What’s the system?” asked Chick.

“Sargent and Greenleaf 8400,” said Peach, eyeing the machine with love.

“That’s good. It’s already programmed for that. I take it you don’t need a tutorial.”

“Nope,” said Peach confidently. “What do you say we make it a flat rate. Five C’s?”

Chick's teeth glistened as he smiled wickedly, not falling for the ruse. "Very funny. What's the haul?"

Peach grimaced. "Tough to say. Supposed to be rare stamps. But it's a contract job through Jahlllo. So we only get a cut. And you know that stingy bastard."

"I'm stingier. We'll figure your end for ten large. You know my percentage."

"Fifteen hundred is a little steep."

"Steep!" cried Tinman. "It's robbery!"

"That's our business," said Chick, still with that confounded smile.

"To be precise, it's burglary, but who's counting," said Peach. "Okay, Chick, I guess we'll bite. We'll settle up when the job is iced."

"Now."

Peach sighed, dug in his pocket and started peeling off hundreds. When he reached fifteen, he handed the stack over. Throughout the transaction, Tinman swung his jaw back and forth in frustration, wanting to make a fuss, and not sure how to go about it.

Chick pocketed the money and handed over the case. "That buys you a quarter day's rental. Six hours if you're not good with math. See you soon."

Tinman went, "Hah! Very funny. Right, Chick. We'll see you tomorrow."

Chick looked at Peach with a cocked eyebrow. "Am I not speaking clearly?"

"You're fine," said Peach. "It's him. He's been doing it to me all day. Must be weather-related. Anyway, see you later, Chick. And thanks a million."

As they drove out of town, Tinman couldn't contain himself any longer. "Why did you tell him we'd be back today? It's Christmas, and it's snowing!"

"Bitch, bitch, bitch. That's all you're doing today. Look, this guy is a valuable resource. You never know when you're going to need him. In this case, we couldn't do this job without his drill. We'll come out alright in the end. Besides, all the snow has really cut down on the traffic. And all the drive time gives us a chance to talk."

No other words were spoken until they parked the car back on Court Street. "Grab the case," said Peach. "And be careful. The sidewalks are slippery, and who knows what Chick would charge us if we broke the damn thing."

Tinman grumbled, grabbed the heavy case, and very carefully slid out of the car.

Rudy had long ago followed all the instructions, down to the precise way Tinman wanted the vegetables cut and the exact amount of seasoning. After everything was assembled, he turned the pot to low, and then he didn't know what to do. He didn't want to screw up, and he didn't want to call Tinman, figuring he might be on a job. So he pulled up a chair next to the kitchen counter and waited. Three hours later, he was still watching the pot. He wondered if he should stir, but Tinman had not mentioned it. He thought about adding some more water, but the instructions most specifically stated one-third cup and never to remove the lid. Rudy bit his lip and decided the safest thing to do was wait some more.

It took about thirty minutes for Peach to set up the soft drill in front of the safe. When he was finished, the clamp part of the tool was attached to the dial. In the rear, was a mounted motor with a lot of wires and circuits, flashing various colors.

"What is this thing?" asked Tinman. "I thought we were going to drill through the safe!"

"I can understand the confusion, seeing it's called a drill. But actually what this thing does is similar to the Robot Dialer, by trying certain combinations. But it's more like a human because it uses a very sensitive accelerometer to detect the position of the gates. It's like on some safes where I can just feel the movements of the gates by touch. So it works much quicker than a Robot Dialer, which just keeps trying every possible combination without taking into account the positioning of the gates. It's like artificial intelligence. See?"

"No," said Tinman, feeling the lack of his real intelligence. "I'm sorry I asked."

Peach flipped a switch, and the drill began turning the dial rapidly to certain points where it would push in, pop back, and retry. Tinman was forced to admit the tool was impressive. If the haul was as good as they hoped, he might not even begrudge Chick the soaking.

The precision movement of the machine was mesmerizing, so it came as a shock when it suddenly stopped, and Peach cried, "Jackpot! I was right. Twelve-digit combination. What a beast. But this puppy cracked it in thirty-seven minutes. Not bad. Now, let's see what goodies we have."

He unclamped the drill, turned the handle, and swung open the door. After a quick perusal, he said, "Looky here! Aside from the stamps, we have an added bonus. Appears old Atticus keeps five large in mad money which happens to more than cover our expenses for the drill. See, brother, you just have to keep the faith."

Tinman grinned. The day's first. How he wished he could be more like his brother. "Let's get out of here. We have a party to get to."

"First, Susanville."

Tinman moaned, but there was no further complaint. Chick was now his new best buddy.

When the door to the apartment flung open, Rudy was dozing. He awoke with a start and nearly toppled to the ground. He felt hands grasping him, and soon the ship was righted. "Tinman! You're home! Holy geez. Gosh, we got disconnected, and I didn't know what to do next, and I so really wanted to do a good job and all. I mean, Dez and the Posse are all expecting a good Christmas dinner, and I'm supposed to pull it off. Holy geez. What's that smell? Is it burning?!"

"Easy, Rudy. That wonderful aroma tells me you did just fine. I couldn't have done better myself. It's a perfect crockpot stew."

"Is that what this is called?"

"That's right. But please don't tell me you've been sitting here staring at it all day."

Rudy blushed. "Some of the time I slept."

Tinman lifted him to his feet and reached out his hand. Rudy shook it and found a wad of cash palmed into his. He looked at it, his eyes bugging. "No way I coulda collected five C's in a day, Tinman. This is too much."

"A good cook is never underpaid, Rudy. Remember that."

At the party, before the poker game started, everyone sat down to eat. The silence pleased Tinman to no end. He knew what it meant, unlike Rudy, who could barely savor the food for fear everyone was being polite, not wanting to ream him out.

After everyone was finished and were patting their guts, and picking their teeth, and generally relishing the moment, Dez said, "Oh my god Tinman, that was delectable. You must have spent all day slaving in the kitchen."

Tinman shook his head and said, "I was tied up. This is the chef."

He waved a hand at Rudy who sank into his chair, until the applause and accolades, and calls for "Maestro," lifted him up, proudly bowing and grinning for the appreciative audience. Who knew cooking could be so rewarding.

Author's Notes

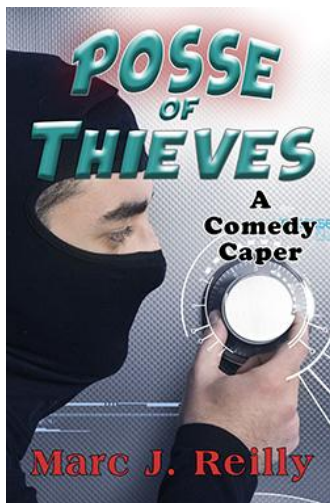
I hope you got some laughs from these stories. It has been my pleasure to be your storyteller for a short time. I hope we meet up again. Until then, keep grinning. Life is too damn short not to get a kick out of it.



Suggested Reading

The debut book of the Tinman Series is

Posse of Thieves:



Twin brothers and partners in crime, Peach and Tinman, were teenagers when they pulled their first caper. It happened at the Reno Historical Society, and they had a blast, except they didn't score much. At least that's what they thought at the time. Thirty-five years later, they discover that the old baskets they stole are national treasures and are worth a mountain of cash. What a crying shame they gave them away as gifts back then.

It's a sore point neither can live with. Fortunately, the baskets have resurfaced and are back in the same museum. What's a self-respecting crook to do? Steal them again, that's what, and nothing will stand in their way!

Sadly, everything gets in their way, including maniacal guards, impregnable security systems, and an epic run of bad luck. But is that enough to stop our antiheroes from getting back what is unrightfully their ill-gotten gains?! Um, maybe?

Tune in now to find out how entertaining it gets when this lovable duo tackles impossible heists with hilarious results.

Posse of Thieves is the first installment of the popular comedy/caper Tinman Series. If you crave fast action, madcap adventure, and daring heists, don't pass up this comedic gem by Marc J. Reilly

Get your [free copy on Amazon](#) today, and bring some laughter into your life.

The second book in the Tinman Series is

Shady Deal:



Twin brothers and partners in crime, Tinman and Peach, uncover a skeleton in their family closet. Unfortunately, the skeleton is still alive and kicking and looking to pull off a spectacular heist with help from his long lost “family.”

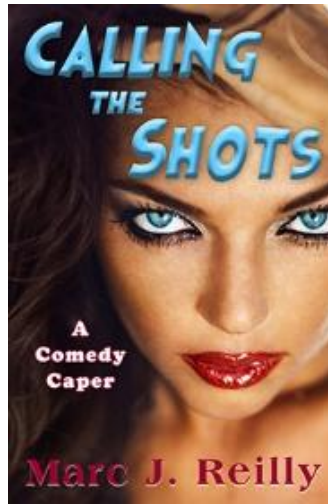
Sounds great until they find out the FBI is looking to put their relative back into the closet—or slammer, to be more apt. Even worse, the heist involves a rare coin collection that’s stored in a fortress-like mansion on Lake Tahoe. And the current owner is a whack job who’s prepared to wage war with anyone who comes near.

Can things get any more ludicrous? You betcha. Chaos ensues, absurdity abounds and the laughs roll on as the Tinman comedy caper saga continues.

[Buy it now](#) and bring some laughter into your life.

The third Tinman Series book

Calling the Shots:



Tinman, budding heister and ex-hustler, gets the shock of his life when a sassy young girl shows up at his doorstep, claiming to be his daughter, and demanding he teach her how to hustle pool. Unwilling to comply, and not sure how to be the daddy she never had, he decides the best thing for all concerned is to return his offspring from whence she came—back to her deadbeat mom.

Along the way, they stumble into Sedona, AZ, playground of the rich and famous, and fingers start to itch at the sight of all the available moolah floating around. After crossing paths with an egomaniacal pop star, a new caper is hatched, and with help from a band of geriatric eco-saboteurs, and a mysterious mountain man, the Posse embarks on its zaniest and most spectacular heist ever—with riotous results (including Tinman finally discovering the true meaning of fatherhood).

[Grab a copy now](#) and improve your good humor.

The fourth book in the series is

Nut Job.



So what's the best thing to steal these days? Gems, electronics, luxury goods? Nah. Smart thieves know the hottest commodity on the market is nuts—specifically pistachios, but almonds run a close second. Surprised? Tinman sure is. But not enough to stop him from trying to heist a cool forty thousand pounds' worth.

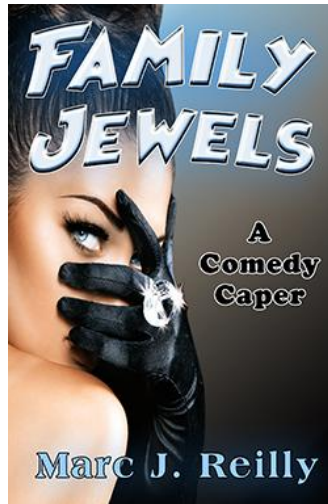
Sound nutty? Sure, but that's the point. If he wants his lifelong dream of owning a pool hall to come true, he has to take silly risks. Case in point, he has unwittingly pitted himself against a ruthless Armenian crime syndicate that claims all the country's nuts as their own. Also, he's squarely in the sights of the Nut Theft Task Force, an elite squad of law enforcers. And just for kicks, the Mexican Mafia gets into the mix. But, hey, nobody said chasing a dream was easy—or safe.

Separated from his family of fellow crooks and alone in a strange forbidding land (California), can Tinman survive an epic onslaught of rotten luck, still make off with a mountain of crunchy loot, and finally fulfill his childhood dream?

To find out how wildly entertaining it gets, [pick up your copy today.](#)

The fifth book in the series is

Family Jewels.



Tinman and his twin brother, Peach, are in a terrible jam, per usual. Their fence has them over a barrel, and their livelihood as professional burglars is in jeopardy. To remove the curse and bring order to their criminal universe, they must locate and steal an array of rare antiques. With no other options, the brothers set out on a Homeric crusade, traveling to the outer reaches of the West.

Like moths drawn to a flame, all roads inexplicably lead to the town of Pueblo, where they discover a little old lady sitting on a goldmine of antiques—including most of the pieces on their list. The only hitch is her children are planning on robbing all her collectibles.

To stop them, Tinman must call upon the rest of the Posse, and in an old-fashioned Wild West showdown, a family of crooked straights faces off against a family of honest crooks where only the true of heart will survive.

[Buy a copy now](#) and start laughing!

The sixth book in the series is

[Con Job:](#)



Catfish, the oldest member of the Posse, thinks he has a date with the Grim Reaper and wants to make one last score to top off his sixty-year career as a world-class con artist. But to play the Big Con, he needs help.

Tek, the youngest member of the gang of thieves, struggles to find his criminal path. Though a gifted computer hacker, budding burglar, and part-time pickpocket, he still can't find his niche.

With different aims but a kindred spirit, Catfish and Tek join forces to fleece a greedy pot dispensary owner out of a quarter million dollars. The caper requires all the age-old tricks of the grift, along with help from Tinman, Peach, and the rest of the Posse. But they'll still need a wink from Lady Luck to pull off the scam of a lifetime.

The stakes are high, and time is pressing. Can the old flimflam man and the young crook pull off the perfect con before Catfish kicks the proverbial bucket?

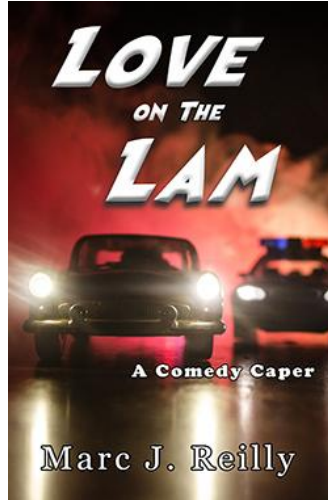
Plot twists, hairpin turns, cheap thrills, and laughter await those who venture into the *Con Job*.

[Buy it on Amazon.](#)

Standalone Books

[Love on the Lam:](#)

A comedy caper for romantics



The new Bonnie and Clyde? Hardly. These two nutcases are terrible thieves, and their first meeting is definitely not love at first sight—which is understandable, given they're both trying to rob the same bank with no clue how to go about it.

When the heist goes sour, they reluctantly form a dubious partnership where neither is who they claim to be and set off on a zany cross-country crime spree.

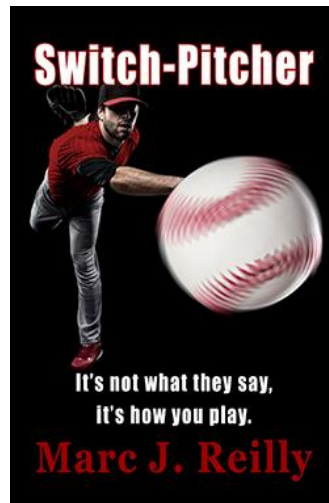
With the entire country rooting them on and the law closing in, only one thing can save them from themselves—true love.

Need an attitude adjustment? This book will do the trick.

[Get your copy today!](#)

Switch-Pitcher:

The ultimate underdog



“To achieve the dream, you must defy the odds.”

Arizona country boy Gil Hayes faces off with MLB in a fierce battle of wills. Born with two golden arms, he sets his sights on being the world’s greatest ambidextrous pitcher. But he’s up against the most powerful of adversaries—tradition.

Snubbed by the Majors, he embarks on a worldwide odyssey from the International Leagues to the Independents, honing his stuff until he is a lethal weapon.

When disaster strikes, it takes a hero to continue the good fight. But it requires a new MLB rule to make Gil the ace in the hole every team must have.

An uplifting story of a young baseball pitcher’s journey to the big leagues—using both arms. An inspirational tale for anyone who dares to buck the odds and follow their dream.

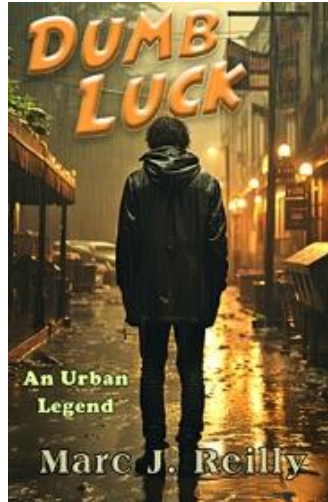
Action, intrigue, and an underdog worth cheering for, you’ll love this explosive novel by Marc J. Reilly.

[Pick up a copy now](#) and get ready to Play Ball!

NEW RELEASE!

Dumb Luck:

From homeless to hero.



An orphan runs away from her homeless camp to search for a treasure trove hidden in the Garden of the Gods. A real-world adventure filled with action, danger, humor, and hope. From homeless to hero, *Dumb Luck* celebrates the ultimate underdog, and her life-changing journey reveals a new world where old dreams die and a legend is born. changing journey reveals a new world where old dreams die and a legend is born.

As a toddler, Trudy was abandoned in a dumpster and grew up living off the streets and her wits. In her early teens, she gets an unexpected visit from her hero—the wanderer who rescued her from the trash years earlier. He’s a loner and gambler with no interest in being a nursemaid. But fate intercedes when a freak accident provides clues to the whereabouts of a buried fortune.

Trudy’s dream is to find a home, not wealth. But seizing the opportunity to escape her dead-end life, she uses the lure of easy money to recruit her savior and two other homeless men to accompany her on a cross-country bicycle trip to the promised land of Colorado. Their devil-may-care adventure, however, quickly becomes a desperate fight for survival against ruthless criminals hell-bent on getting the loot for themselves.

[For sale on Amazon.](#)

For free short stories and more information on all of my books:
www.crookbooks.site.

About the Author

Marc J. Reilly spent forty years working in all aspects of film and theater. As a freelance writer and ghostwriter, he has written several stage plays, screenplays, and books. His goal is to make the world a funnier place to live.



[Back to TOC](#)

Copyright 2020 Marc J. Reilly

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Cover Illustrations by Christos Georghiou at 123rf.com

Chapter Illustrations from 123rf.com by story: **Comfort Food**-1507kot; **Breakfast at Tinman's**-Rafael Torres Castaño; **Philosophic Shopper**-Studiostoks; **By Cook or By Crook**-Studiostoks; **Carrera de Tacos**-Igor Skrypka; **Casserole Calamity**-Studiostoks; **Soup du Jour**-Chudomir Tsankov; **Thai One On**-Marina Braovic Hajdarovic; **Food Fight**-Brett Lamb; **Hunger Pangs**-Maxicam; **What a Crock**-Julien Tromeur; **Real Crooks Do Eat Quiche**-metrs

All stories based on the characters from the *Tinman Series*.