



**THE  
LIFE  
AND  
TIMES  
OF  
THE  
STOPWATCH  
GANG**  
JOSH DEAN

# The Life and Times of the Stopwatch Gang

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# One

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Stephen Reid shifted in his seat to avoid the sunlight slanting through the windows of the bar at Vancouver's Sylvia Hotel. He sipped espresso and laid out the methodology behind a successful bank heist. "It's not rocket science," he said. "You don't have to be Stephen Hawking."

Reid's face is softer now than it was some 40 years ago, when his mug shot appeared on front pages across Canada. He has the same mustache, the same thick hair, both now gray, but the scars across his right cheek have faded. He ordered a Cobb salad, no avocado; Canada's most notorious living bank robber is 64 and watching his weight.

Throughout the late '70s and into the very early '80s, Reid and his partners, Paddy Mitchell and Lionel Wright, robbed dozens of banks, stole millions of dollars, and broke out of numerous prisons, fascinating the media while frustrating authorities in Canada and the United States. They lived in the public imagination as modern-day folk heroes: the Stopwatch Gang, a name given to them by the FBI because Reid sometimes wore an oversize stopwatch around his neck to time their ruthlessly efficient heists, often committed while wearing Halloween masks. "I can't say I admire what they did, because it's illegal," one FBI agent who pursued the gang for years told me. "But I understood it. You have respect for the good ones, and the good ones treat you with respect."

The reason so many robbers fail, Reid told me when I met him in Canada last December, is that they're desperate people who've done little if any planning. On the other hand, if you're careful and you do your homework, he said, a system's flaws will reveal themselves. "Something always breaks loose."

It seemed to pain him a little to say this. When we met, Reid was living at a halfway house, the final stage of an 18-year sentence that started in a maximum-security prison—the longest by far of his many stints behind bars. Reid was always the brash one in the gang, the fearless street tough, but he's quiet now, contemplative. The halfway house is in Victoria, the provincial capital, a two-hour ferry ride away. He had signed out on a day pass to travel to Vancouver to work on a play he wrote, called *Heroin Elvis*, that a young director he'd met hoped to stage in the near future. Reid wasn't sure if he told his parole office that he was also meeting a journalist. "They don't like me to do media," he said "but I guess it's the antiestablishment streak in me."

He pushed his salad aside and popped a piece of Nicorette. "I haven't had a cigarette in two years," he said, his final vice cast aside. His voice was soft, barely audible at times, especially when discussing his gang's heyday. "Honestly, these stories bore me," he said. What he wanted to talk about instead was how it all went to hell.

# Two

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Stephen Reid grew up with nine siblings in Massey, Ontario, a rural town of 1,200 at the junction of the Spanish and Aux Sables Rivers. According to Reid, his father was a “hard-working, hard-drinking northern Ontario man” who did the best he could to provide for his family. Money was tight, but Reid has warm memories of snaring rabbits, swimming in the rivers, and playing in the forests around town. “I was well loved, well scrubbed, and well fed,” he said. He was a good student and a promising hockey player.

Then he fell into drugs, and his life took a dark turn. At 13, Reid ran away for the first time, to Vancouver, some 2,000 miles west. He vanished into the city’s gritty East End, homeless and broke. Whatever money he had, he spent on heroin.

Reid eventually returned home and reenrolled in high school, only to flee again. At 15, he wound up in jail for the first time, after selling a dime bag of hash to a female cop. A year later, he was arrested again for drug possession and spent Christmas Eve in solitary confinement, “the hole,” at Oakalla Prison, in Burnaby. “I began crying and promised God if he let me out I would never, never, ever again go near drugs or do anything illegal,” Reid said. “He didn’t release me.”

On the streets of London, Ontario, Reid discovered methamphetamine, and at 17, “wired to the yin-yang on a \$500-a-day habit,” he bought a gun and robbed his first bank. It was the very definition of a desperate job, but he got away, and over the next three years he robbed several more banks to pay for his drug habit. Eventually he was arrested after someone tipped off the cops. “I was loose with my tongue and always had big rolls of money,” he said.

This time, Reid was sentenced to ten years at Kingston Penitentiary, a prison even scarier than Oakalla. When the sheriffs delivered him into the yard and unlocked his chains, a steel I-beam that secured the pen’s towering gate fell into place with a deafening clang. “The echoes in that chamber have stayed with me my entire life,” he said.

Two years into his term, the 23-year-old Reid slipped away from a counselor while eating lunch one day pass. “It wasn’t hard,” he said. “I just went to the bathroom and climbed out the window.”

He fled to Ottawa and was hiding out in a basement apartment when a prison buddy suggested he meet Paddy Mitchell, whom Reid later described as “the unofficial mayor of the local underworld.”

Mitchell, a swaggering figure with “Pat Boone hair” and wide-collar shirts, ran a thriving robbery operation while maintaining a front as an aluminum-siding salesman. Reid liked him immediately. “I wasn’t in awe, but I was taken with him,” Reid said. When they met, Reid complimented Mitchell on his “beautiful suede jacket,” and a day later his new friend showed up at the Ottawa apartment with the same jacket in Reid’s size.

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Mitchell was one of seven children in a working-class Catholic family and grew up on Preston Street in a rough section of Ottawa's Little Italy. As his older brother Pinky, a champion Golden Gloves boxer, liked to say, "The further you went down Preston Street, the tougher it got. We lived in the last house in the basement." Paddy was attracted to petty crime as a kid and developed a reputation as a fighter. At 14, he was convicted of assault for his role in a brawl that led to the accidental death of another kid. He was confined to a juvenile-detention facility until he turned 18, and when he got out, Mitchell picked up where he'd left off, working with his older brother Bobby and "a loosely knit band of thieves."

In 1961, Mitchell fell in love with a woman who worked for the Canadian government. They got married two months before his 20th birthday and, less than a year later, had a son, whom they named Kevin. Mitchell spent the better part of ten years driving a delivery truck for the Pure Spring soda company, which is how he met Lionel Wright, a short, skinny introvert, just shy of 30, with fake teeth, jug ears, and a receding hairline.

In his self-published autobiography, handwritten years later while he sat in a prison cell, Mitchell wrote that meeting Lionel Wright was "where I made that left turn instead of a right and my life has never been the same."

Wright lived at home with his mother. He didn't drink or smoke and spent most nights watching television or reading about ancient history. He was a man of routines who excelled at clerical work and wore the same outfit every day: dark pants, white shirt, black shoes, blue vinyl jacket.

He liked pornography and bought his magazines from a smoke shop on Mitchell's delivery route. The two got to talking and over time struck up a friendship. Mitchell saw Wright regularly until the fall of 1971, when he was fired from the trucking job for joining (and eventually leading) a drivers' strike.

A few months after Mitchell lost his job, Wright called him at home, out of the blue. He wanted to know if Mitchell still enjoyed Seagram's VO rye whiskey. It was an odd reason to call, but Wright was an odd character who paid close attention to details, and he'd remembered Mitchell mentioning his love of Seagram's. Wright worked as a night clerk at a trucking company, and he said he had two cases of the stuff that wouldn't be missed.

When Mitchell went to the warehouse to pick up the whiskey, he saw a vast, unsecured space, connected to a yard that contained hundreds of trailers filled with cigarettes and candy and clothing and paper products, everything you could imagine being sold. Mitchell could take whatever he wanted, Wright explained; he would simply alter the paperwork to make it look like someone else's mistake.

Over the next few years, Wright stole anything and everything from the warehouse, and Mitchell sold the goods on the black market. To cover his tracks and deceive his wife, Mitchell got the aluminum-siding gig, but he never sold any siding. He'd get up, put on a suit and tie, and drive into the city to find a buyer for whatever it was that Wright had stolen.

The thefts escalated from boxes to entire trailer loads. Ultimately, the company came to suspect that Wright was part of the ongoing robberies and fired him. "We went in search of other enterprises,

Mitchell wrote. "I could never go back to a regular 9 to 5 job. I had expensive habits now."

It was around this time that Mitchell was invited to the basement apartment where Reid was hiding out. He quickly liked the intelligent, muscular 23-year-old with "nerves of steel" and a set of scars that had been slashed into his right cheek with a straight razor in a Toronto street fight.

For the next year, Reid, Mitchell, and Wright preyed on Ottawa's delivery networks, making more and more money to feed their respective appetites for racehorses (Mitchell), drugs (Reid), and prostitutes (Wright). It was not unusual for the gang to split \$20,000 to \$30,000 for a single day's work. "Nothing in town was safe from us," Mitchell later wrote.

# Three

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A few minutes before midnight on April 14, 1974, the phone rang in a warehouse used for special cargo at the Ottawa International Airport. It had been an uneventful shift for the guard on duty, 24-year-old David Braham, who had been called in to watch over five boxes stacked inside a locked cage within the warehouse.

The boxes, sealed with red wax, were on their way from the Red Lake Gold Mines in western Ontario to the Royal Canadian Mint. Four of them contained single bars of solid gold about the size of loaves of bread; the fifth held two smaller bars made up from remnants scraped out of the smelters. The total weight was more than 5,100 ounces.

When Braham answered the phone, an angry voice on the other end demanded, "Has my man arrived there yet?" The caller told Braham that he'd sent a worker over to the freight shed to pick up some urgently needed deicing fluid. Without it, flights would be delayed.

Braham said that he hadn't seen anyone, eliciting a stream of profanity from the man on the other end, who made it clear that his delinquent employee was about to cause serious problems.

Just then there was a knock at the door, and Braham opened it for a guy in a blue Air Canada parka, with thick blond hair and a set of scars on his cheek. Your boss is looking for you, he told the man, and he's really pissed.

Stephen Reid walked to the phone and picked it up, pretending to be nervous. "I'm sorry, I got he up," he said. He hung up and turned to Braham, pulling a revolver from his waistband. "This is a robbery. If you don't do everything I tell you, I'll have to kill you," he said.

Reid handcuffed Braham to the outside of the cage with the guard's own cuffs and asked him which key opened the lock on the cage. On a wall behind him, a sign read: AIR CARGO IS YOUR JOB. PROTECT IT. CARGO SECURITY DEPENDS ON YOU.

Braham answered that he didn't have the key; it was stored in the main terminal. Reid cursed, grabbed an empty cardboard box, and placed it over Braham's head. He walked across the room into an adjacent workshop and returned with some tools.

Alternating between a hacksaw and a heavy wrench, Reid banged and sawed at the lock until it fell off. He stacked the boxes onto a cart and wheeled them out to the loading dock, where Lionel Wright was waiting to help load them into a car. The whole thing took nearly 20 minutes, and Braham sat there, locked to the cage with a box on his head, for another half-hour until a cleaning crew arrived. Police immediately scrambled to set up a roadblock, but by then the men were long gone.

By morning the theft was national news. The *Ottawa Citizen* reported: "Airport bandits escape with \$165,000 in gold," using the insured value of the shipment and not its actual worth, which turned out to be more than \$750,000 in 1974 dollars. It was the largest gold theft in Canadian history.

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The score had begun with an encounter at a pool hall where Mitchell and Reid liked to spend their afternoons, an alternative to getting drunk in bars. There they met an Air Canada baggage handler named Gary Coutanche, who was selling expensive calculators that he'd stolen from his day job. Mitchell saw an opportunity and befriended the petty thief, and his instincts paid off when Coutanche told him that every month a shipment of gold came through the airport en route to the national mint. Mitchell offered him \$100,000 in exchange for a tip the next time a load came through.

Coutanche spent conspicuously after the robbery, buying a Harley-Davidson motorcycle and a giant diamond ring that he wore on his pinky. Ottawa police had suspected an inside job, and when they went looking for the culprit, he wasn't hard to find.

In exchange for his freedom, Coutanche agreed to roll over. It helped that Paddy Mitchell had only paid him a portion of the \$100,000. Mitchell had promised to pay Coutanche after the gold was fenced, but Coutanche kept calling to ask about the money, and that made Mitchell mad. According to Mitchell's book, he handed over \$10,000 of his own money, in exchange for a promise that Coutanche "wouldn't do anything with it to attract attention."

Detectives had long considered Mitchell to be a person of interest—though he'd never been convicted of anything, his involvement in crime was an open secret in Ottawa—but they needed more than Coutanche's word to arrest him. They bided their time for nearly a year, until February 1975, when Coutanche told authorities that Mitchell had asked him to let a suitcase slip through customs. When the police intercepted the bag, it was stuffed with cocaine.

On March 3, Ottawa police arrested Mitchell and Wright for drug smuggling. Each got 17 years, with Mitchell receiving an extra three for possession of the stolen gold, after he'd been caught on a wiretap arranging to sell five of the six bars.

Reid wasn't involved in the cocaine smuggling. He had left Ottawa shortly after the gold robbery heading first to Miami with a girlfriend, then to Arizona. When he ran out of money, he returned to Canada and ended up in Kingston, Ontario, where he started using heroin and meth again and talked too loosely about his role in the gold heist. After someone tipped off the police, Reid was arrested; he would receive ten years for armed robbery on top of the time he still owed from his original term.

Pending assignment to a prison, the three men were sent to Ottawa's regional detention center. "Escapes out of that place were imminent," Reid said. "It was just a box," surrounded by a fence and ringed with woods. "It could be had."

In October 1976, Wright happened to be walking in the prison yard when a man emerged from the woods and approached the fence carrying a large bag. He pulled out a gun, ordered the lone guard on watch to drop his weapon, and threw the bag over the fence. A group of inmates descended upon it, grabbed the wire cutters inside, and cut an opening in the fence.

Seeing an opportunity he couldn't let pass, Wright followed the escapees through the hole, across some fields, into the woods, and out to a road, where all the felons, including Wright, jumped into a getaway car.

It wasn't until the car was on the move that one of the other convicts noticed the strange face in

the backseat. He promptly kicked the tagalong out of the car. A day later, the other escapees were all arrested. Wright, meanwhile, made his way to Dundee, Florida, where an Ottawan rounder who ran a place called the Shamrock Motel offered him a job and a place to stay. Newspaper stories about Wright's escape picked up on his longtime nickname, the Ghost. "Lionel could be somewhere all night and people wouldn't notice," Reid says. "He was always just part of the wallpaper."

# Four

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Mitchell and Reid were sent to Millhaven Institution, Canada's most secure prison. Millhaven was an especially violent place—on their first day inside, an inmate was bludgeoned to death in the yard with a metal pipe—and the two men immediately began plotting their escape. They jogged five miles a day and did dozens of pull-ups to build strength for climbing fences, preparing themselves for whatever plan they would ultimately put in place.

Inmates routinely attempted escape from Millhaven, and Reid and Mitchell joined several unsuccessful plots. They were part of a group that planned to scale the fence after dark, thinking that the area was unguarded at night. But that guard tower was manned after all, and a stick-up guy from Quebec was shot dead on the fence when he decided to go for it anyway. Their most ambitious attempt took months to prepare. Reid and Mitchell and a group of other prisoners broke into an old shack in the yard, where they began to dig a tunnel using pilfered garden spades and their bare hands. It was slow going, made slower because they had to bring the soil out in bags hidden under their jackets and disperse it around the yard.

The tunnel got within a dozen yards of the fence when a brutal heat wave descended upon Ontario. One afternoon the blacktop on the yard's tennis court began to buckle, as if a giant gopher were burrowing underneath, and then a long line of ground collapsed, revealing the entire tunnel they'd been digging for months.

Reid decided that their only way out was through good behavior. If he and Mitchell became model prisoners, they would be transferred to a less secure facility, where an escape would be easier. Reid decided to take up hairstyling, figuring that if he showed interest in a potential post-prison career, the warden might eventually send him elsewhere to get further training. The plan actually worked, and in the fall of 1978, Reid was sent to Joyceville, a medium-security prison in Kingston, for additional instruction in hairstyling.

Due to his “exemplary behavior and participation in social programs,” as one warden wrote, Mitchell arrived six months later. He found Reid thriving, the star of the prison hockey team and one of the favored inmates of the warden. Reid knew he'd get the chance to run first, and he promised Mitchell he'd come back for him. On August 15, 1979, Reid got his opening when the warden allowed him to take a day trip in the company of a single guard to a hair salon in downtown Kingston.

After spending the morning at the salon, the two stopped for Chinese. Reid ordered, excused himself to use the bathroom and—for the second time in his life—climbed out a restaurant window to freedom. He ran five blocks across town to a Holiday Inn, where he had arranged to meet his getaway driver.

Reid reached the parking lot, then stopped to gather himself so that he wouldn't walk into the hotel panting and sweaty. He'd been gone nearly ten minutes, and he knew the guard would have alerted others that he'd escaped.

As he approached the hotel entrance, Reid noticed a large white banner that read: Welcome

Ontario detectives! The Holiday Inn where he had arranged to meet his getaway driver was hosting a police convention. “This is the stuff you can’t make up,” he told me.

He entered a lobby filled with men in ill-fitting khakis and off-the-rack suits, any one of whom could have worked his cases or at least seen his face in a police report or newspaper story. Reid headed for the table where his driver was having coffee. They sat for a minute, then rose calmly and walked out to the car, certain with every step that someone would stop them before they could pull out of the lot.

Reid made his way back to Ottawa, found a cheap gun—“a beat-up .32 with a missing handle”—and “went to work” robbing banks to raise money so he could spring Mitchell.

# Five

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Back at Joyceville, Mitchell began to worry that Reid was never coming for him. Maybe he'd decided it was too risky, or he'd been arrested again, or maybe he'd fallen back down the hole of his heroin addiction. But on November 15, 1979, three months after Reid's escape through the window of the Chinese restaurant, Mitchell's brother Bobby came to visit with a message. "Today's the day," he whispered.

After dinner that night, Mitchell went for a five-mile run around the yard, as he often did, returned to his cell, and chugged a glass of water in which he'd been steeping a thick wad of tobacco. He knew that the acrid-tasting tea was likely to induce a kind of false cardiac arrest, but he had no idea how much to drink or how sick it would make him. In his final moments of lucidity, Mitchell had one last thought: You stupid bastard! You've killed yourself!

A few months before Reid's escape, he and Mitchell had observed a sick inmate being transported out of the prison to a local hospital in the company of a single guard. This, they realized, was the weak link in the system, and Reid told Mitchell that if and when he successfully escaped, Mitchell needed to come up with a plan to get himself into an ambulance bound for the hospital.

"But you have to realize what this means," Reid remembered saying. "You're the one with the wife and kids. I'll come for you, but that's it—our life from that point on will be on the run."

The two discussed and rejected various ideas for self-induced hospitalization. Mitchell needed to injure himself seriously enough to require care that couldn't be provided at the prison, but not so seriously that Reid wouldn't be able to fix him up later. That ruled out broken legs and arms, as well as accidents with the woodshop table saw, which would be too serious to treat. Eventually, they heard a story about an inmate whose nicotine overdose convinced prison staff that he was having a heart attack. Cigarettes were easy to come by, and they figured the condition would resolve itself over time.

Prior to his brother's visit, Mitchell had been setting up the play for weeks, complaining about chest pains and visiting the prison nurse several times. Now, having finished the entire glass of nicotine water, he walked into the prison's common area and collapsed into a trash can. He'd later recall that he began "flopping around in the swill like a fish out of water," heart pounding and sweat dripping from his pores.

When a nurse determined that Mitchell was in distress, he was handcuffed to a gurney, put in leg irons, and loaded into an ambulance accompanied by two paramedics and two unarmed security guards. He was sick and hallucinating; later he described howling wolves and a man on a white horse and imagined himself "drifting through snow white clouds."

As the ambulance approached the hospital, the driver noticed a sign outside the ER stating that the main entrance was under repair and directing arrivals to a side door. Instead, he backed into a dimly lit drive and stopped next to a black van, where two men in green scrubs and surgical masks were waiting. One of the EMTs had begun relaying the patient's vitals when he saw something that made him stop. The taller of the two men in scrubs was pointing a silver revolver directly at the prison

guards.

“Just do as you’re told, or I’ll blow your fucking head off!” Stephen Reid barked. He ordered one guard to remove Mitchell’s handcuffs, and then used them to cuff both guards to the inside of the ambulance. Reid slung his delirious friend over his shoulder and carried him to the idling van.

Reid had been avoiding Kingston since his escape, but he had hired someone to rent a basement apartment where he could take Mitchell, thinking it was wiser to stay close than to risk making a run out of town. He had given specific instructions about what he needed in this apartment: filet mignon, lobster tails, Seagram’s VO, and a case of Mouton Cadet wine, in addition to basic groceries and medical supplies.

The van’s driver, an old accomplice from Ottawa—Wright had offered to help, but Reid told him to stay put in Florida—followed a predetermined route from the hospital to the apartment building. By the time they arrived, Mitchell was nearly unconscious, unable to speak and drooling as Reid yelled into his face, asking how much poison he’d taken.

He’s going to die, Reid remembered thinking. And if that happened, he would be stuck in the small apartment with his friend’s corpse. He glanced at the hacksaw he’d brought to remove Mitchell’s leg irons and thought that, if it came to that, he could cut up the body and smuggle it out in trash bags.

Reid didn’t know what to do, but he felt like he needed to get something, anything, into Mitchell’s stomach. He laid Mitchell on the floor, grabbed a bottle of wine, forced the cork down into the bottle and poured wine into his friend’s mouth.

Reid sat back and stared at Mitchell’s body, his heart pounding so hard that he worried he might have a heart attack of his own. Then he heard a gurgle and a kind of choke, and Paddy Mitchell went from dead prone to bolt upright and vomited a ball of viscous black material onto the floor.

Within a few minutes, Mitchell was nearly himself. Reid used bolt cutters to remove the leg irons and the two friends spent the night eating and drinking and listening to the police scanner as cops across the province set up roadblocks and chased leads in search of the famous Paddy Mitchell, widely assumed to be in the company of a former accomplice who had also recently escaped from custody.

When a reporter asked the spokesperson for Canadian Penitentiary Services why two famous criminal collaborators, one of whom had a history of escape, had been housed together at Joyceville, the spokesman explained that prison officials believed they could be watched more closely that way.

After a week, it seemed safe to venture outside the apartment. Reid put his new skills to work. He dyed Mitchell’s hair and gave him a perm, and then the two made their way to Montreal and, using fake IDs, boarded a train for Burlington, Vermont.

From Burlington, they flew to New York City and then on to Florida, where they reunited with Wright at the Shamrock Motel in Dundee. For three years, Wright had been working there and living in a small room behind the front desk. “He would have been a clerk forever, I think, if we hadn’t shown up,” Reid said.

Florida was paradise after the penitentiary, especially for Mitchell. The gang established their base in a nice home with a yard and a garage in St. Petersburg near the beach.

At first, Reid gave Mitchell space. He was excused from the early jobs—mostly quick smash-and-grab bank robberies, in which Reid would hold the room at bay while Wright and any one of several rotating accomplices leaped the counter to empty out drawers—so that Mitchell could readjust to life on the outside. He often spent his afternoons fishing under a bridge. But after a month, it was time for the entire gang to go to work.

They settled on a department store in downtown Tampa called Robinson's, and called a meeting at the kitchen table of the rental house to discuss the particulars. Mitchell, a natural planner, started sketching out the job. He had been inside the store several times, and now he drew it from memory, putting Reid and Wright into position.

Reid looked over the sketch and asked, "Where are you, Paddy?" Mitchell stammered. He'd never done one of these jobs before, he said. "I found him, broke him out, brought him to Florida, and let him have his party," Reid recalled; this was a "come-to-Jesus moment." They were going to be a gang of equals.

When Mitchell pleaded that he'd never used a gun, Reid handed him one and said, "I'm going to show you how."

While scouting the store, Reid and Mitchell had noticed that the employees in the second-floor cashiers' office prepared early for the weekly arrival of the Brink's guard. They would gather the bags of money from the vault and place them in a nearby office. When a designated cashier saw the guard coming down the hall, she'd retrieve the bags and, once he'd presented a yellow verification slip, hand over the money.

Wright found a jacket and pants at a uniform-supply shop and altered them to look enough like a Brink's uniform that Reid could move freely through the store and up to the counter without arousing suspicion. He was, however, missing the final piece—the yellow verification slip—which meant that at the moment of handoff, Reid would have to pull his gun.

Mitchell's job was to loiter among the shoppers until Reid's bluff switched to "a strong-arm play" at which point Mitchell would reveal himself. "I want to make sure that as soon as I get the bag, you have all those people on the floor so I can get out," Reid told Mitchell. "That way I don't have to watch for somebody coming behind me."

They went over the plan in the car and again in the elevator, then parted ways on the second floor. Reid approached the cashier and pulled his gun, and she handed over the bags in shock. Seconds later, though, her fear changed to anger. She began to scream at him and tried to snatch back one of the bags. It was time to move. Reid whirled, expecting to see a room full of terrified people on the floor, but instead he saw a crowd of confused shoppers and Mitchell behind them, wide-eyed and fumbling at his waist. He'd tucked the gun—the first one he'd ever carried on a robbery—into his waistband,

and when he'd tried to pull it out the trigger caught on the band of his underwear. "It was like a comedy sketch," Reid recalled. "He gave himself a wedgie."

In the elevator, Mitchell began pushing buttons, frantic to get out. Reid smacked his hand out of the way. "Get behind me," he remembers telling Mitchell. "I have a gun and a Brink's uniform. No one is going to think anything about it." Reid walked fast, through the women's department and out the back door to the car, where Wright saw Mitchell's panic and took it to mean that his friends had just shot their way out of the place.

"I never took Paddy in again," Reid said. From that point on, Mitchell would be the driver.

In the coming months, the gang shifted their focus to banks, and after several robberies they developed a routine. They would drive to a town at least a half-hour away, check into a motel, and research potential targets. Once they picked a bank, Wright would handle logistics, mapping escape routes, timing stoplights, studying intersections and traffic bottlenecks. If a garbage truck often caused delays on a particular road, Wright would know about it.

Meanwhile, Reid and Mitchell would open accounts and stop in frequently to make deposits and withdrawals. They would chat with tellers and note where the guards stood, when the manager took his break, whether there were times when the vault door was left open. They would rent safe-deposit boxes to gain entry to the vault. By asking a teller to change \$1,000 worth of twenties into hundreds, they would learn if large bills were kept in individual drawers or if the tellers had to go elsewhere to retrieve them. Once they'd gathered their intelligence, the gang would leave town and go home for a while so that their faces wouldn't be on recent surveillance footage, since one of the first things the FBI does after a bank robbery is pull the tape.

A few days before a robbery, Reid or Mitchell would steal a car, then swap out the plates with a set stolen from a similar model. They'd rent a hideout apartment, ideally with underground parking. Wright would pick up supplies—fake identification, guns, and disguises, which always included masks to cover their entire heads—and drive the escape routes in search of additional advantages, such as alleys, side exits from parking lots, or entries behind shopping centers that might be overlooked.

Once the robbery was over and the men were safe in the car, Mitchell would follow a predetermined route to the nearest freeway, then exit quickly and head to a remote parking lot—or, ideally, an underground garage—where a second car would be waiting. There they would unscrew the getaway car's stolen plates, strip off their clothes, and split up: Mitchell, who liked to wear jogging gear under his disguise, would go for a run. Reid would drive the second car, the money, and the disguises back to the hideout. As for Wright—"Lionel usually took the bus," Reid said.



# Seven

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Eventually, Florida got too hot, and the gang decided to head west. They chose a beachfront apartment complex in San Diego and rented two apartments there, as well as a third place across town to be used as a stash house for guns and radios and Kevlar vests, which they'd begun to wear as a hedge against the more serious firepower now being carried by armored-car guards.

California was a land of sprawl, which meant a land rich in bank branches. It was easy to venture north from San Diego. They hit a series of banks on a road trip through L.A., and later traveled up to the Bay Area.

But San Diego alone was a gold mine. Despite a general rule that it was bad to steal in their own backyard, the gang found the city's environs just too fertile. In one seven-week spree, they took \$21,270 from a Wells Fargo, \$24,661.50 from a Solar Credit Union, \$19,225 from a First Bank, and \$8,210 from a Bank of America. When a witness reported that one of the men wore a large stopwatch around his neck, and appeared to be checking it over the course of the robbery, the FBI began referring to them as the Stopwatch Gang.

The bureau names serial robbers as part of a larger strategy: to get media attention and bring out tips from a public now on the lookout for identifying characteristics. "It generates more interest, and of course the agents love it," said Norman Zigrossi, who ran the FBI's San Diego bureau at the time. The Stopwatch Gang became a priority for Zigrossi, and he began to address the robberies publicly. A reward was offered for the gang's capture—a rarity in those days, he said.

Soon, the stress of so many heists in such a short time, combined with the intensity of the FBI's investigation, began to take its toll, especially on Mitchell, who finally told his partners that he needed a break.

The gang parted ways after the Bay Area heists. Mitchell went north, through California into Oregon and Washington, where he met a waitress and holed up in a cabin near Mount St. Helens. Once he was gone, Reid and Wright hopped on Interstate 80 and headed east. They drove over the Sierra Nevada range into Nevada and made their way down through the deserts of the Southwest until they landed in Sedona, Arizona, an eccentric little mountain town carved out of red rock canyons.

# Eight

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Reid and Wright loved Sedona. They rented a cedar and glass cabin along a stream in an area called Oak Creek Canyon and mixed well with the locals, telling everyone they were California transplants who owned a company that supplied lighting and equipment for rock concerts. Reid, aka Timothy Pfeiffer, was the company's president. Wright, who'd made the business cards, was Stephen Kirkland, director of logistics.

Work didn't stop in Mitchell's absence. Reid merely called in an old friend and, along with Wright, hit two banks in Phoenix and another in Little Rock, Arkansas. He also continued to scout potential sites and had ten or so easy jobs ready to go by the time Mitchell returned in the fall of 198

For all the success they were having knocking off bank after bank, the three men had begun to worry that their luck might run out. They needed to do a big job, the kind of thing that would set them up for a while until they could figure out a more stable (if still illegal) line of work. What they needed was a branch where the weekend take was a substantial sum. Reid knew exactly the one he wanted to hit—a Bank of America branch at 912 Garnet Avenue, back in San Diego. They'd actually hit this bank once already, in a former location a few blocks away, but Reid liked it even better where it sat now.

It was a large and busy branch, and almost perfectly situated to meet their needs. Every Tuesday, Loomis guards arrived to carry out the bank's excess cash—and by the size of the pickups Reid had observed, it was a lot of money.

While Reid studied the comings and goings of the Loomis guards, Wright focused on logistics. Using a fake Arizona license, he rented a dark blue Ford LTD at the San Diego airport. They outfitted the car with stolen tags, and then Mitchell slapped a huge red racing stripe down the side of it. The gang always read their own press coverage, and they'd picked up on something important: Witnesses tended to remember the most obvious details. So, to distract them from retaining anything that could be useful to police, the gang began to add outlandish flourishes to their cars and disguises. During several robberies, Reid had a banana sticking out of his pocket, and without fail witnesses recalled the detail. ("We could just as well have been the Banana Gang," he said.)

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On the morning of September 23, Mitchell waited in the Ford outside a side entrance while Reid and Wright prepared to go inside. This robbery required them to blend in with the customers. Reid chose a royal blue three-piece suit, a fake beard, and large eyeglasses, plus a poufy black wig, while Wright

wore a light gray suit with matching tie and a thick blond wig and goatee, giving him the appearance, Reid recalled, “of an anorexic Colonel Sanders.” Both applied heavy foundation to darken their faces and attached clear bandages to their thumbs and first two fingers to avoid leaving fingerprints.

The two men arrived separately, within about a minute of one another, and assumed their positions to wait for the truck’s arrival. Wright went to the counter used to fill out deposit slips; Reid, Uzi in his briefcase, sat at a couch where customers awaited appointments with financial planners.

Five minutes went by and Reid squirmed in his seat, wondering what had happened to the armored truck. He’d watched the Loomis guards arrive at the branch at almost exactly the same time four weeks in a row, but today the truck was late. Five minutes became ten, and Wright began to sweat as he filled out and then crumpled slip after slip. He wiped his forehead and saw a smear of make-up on his hand.

Reid was also sweating, and the moisture caused the bandages on his fingers to come loose. At the 15-minute mark, Wright anxiously looked to Reid for the signal to abort, but Reid stayed put.

Finally, 28 minutes behind schedule, a red Loomis truck pulled up at the front entrance. The driver stayed in the cab while Harlen Lee Hudson, a six-foot, 220-pound guard with nine years on the job, walked into the bank wearing aviator sunglasses that he never removed. He flirted with tellers as he commenced his rounds, making two trips from the vault to the truck with bags of cash that sagged from their weight.

Reid figured these were full of coins, so he gave Wright the signal to stay put. They hadn’t waited a half-hour to steal a thousand dollars in quarters. On Hudson’s third trip, he emerged with a different looking load on his cart. This was the cash.

Hudson was halfway to the door, just past the lobby couch, when Reid rose and poked the barrel of a .357 Magnum into the guard’s gut.

He gave him his standard line: “This is a robbery. Don’t be a hero or I’ll kill you.” The bandit’s voice, Hudson would later tell agents, was calm and professional. He was “almost polite.” Wright came up from behind and reached into Hudson’s holster, pulling out the guard’s pistol and tucking it into his belt. Reid told Hudson and everyone in the room to lie down as he and Wright each picked up two bags so stuffed with bricks of cash that they had become rectangular. Then they walked calmly out of the bank, unaware that a surveillance camera, activated when a clerk triggered the silent alarm, was snapping photos at five-second intervals.

By day’s end, those surveillance photos accompanied news stories about three men who committed the largest bank robbery in the history of San Diego, walking out in broad daylight with \$283,000 in cash.

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The next day, Mitchell and Reid left for Sedona, while Wright stayed behind to dispose of the disguises and other possible evidence. He was supposed to burn everything but instead decided to drop it in a dumpster that the crew had used before. Usually, Wright would wait nearby to make sure a garbage truck emptied the dumpster, but this time he got spooked by a cop eating lunch in the lot and took off.

Later that afternoon, an elderly couple on the hunt for aluminum cans looked in the dumpster and noticed a green bag with a wig sticking out, then opened the bag to find several wigs and beards, a bottle of CoverGirl makeup, two license plates, an empty pack of Winston Lights, and several Bank of America bags.

Nothing in the bag led police directly to a suspect, but they were able to lift a partial thumbprint from one of the cash bags. Also potentially useful: paperwork for a car rental, along with a copy of the fake license used to rent it, which had a very clear photo of a skinny man with jug ears and receding hair.

With the money from the Bank of America job, the gang began to imagine a new way of life. Mitchell and Reid made plans to have any distinguishing marks removed and looked into the possibility of plastic surgery to further disguise their appearances. They were ready to retire from bank robbing, but they also knew that the money they had wouldn't last forever.

One possible future that seemed promising was marijuana smuggling. Reid had earned a pilot's license in Sedona, and he'd recently bought a plane, a silver Mooney 201, in cash. They began to research locations in Central America, looking in particular at Belize, with the idea that they could use the plane to slip in low across the border.

A few weeks after the robbery, Reid got word through some intermediaries that a friend was looking for him. Donny Hollingsworth—aka Big John—had had a successful career as a halfback for the Ottawa Rough Riders in the Canadian Football League before retiring into an even more successful life of crime. In Ottawa, he drove a Rolls Royce and was the envy of many young criminals, Stephen Reid included. Mitchell never entirely trusted the man, but he wasn't so suspicious that he refused to work with him. In fact, Hollingsworth had helped them fence the stolen gold from the airport job. He and Reid remained friendly, and when they all met up again in California, Hollingsworth proved useful, helping Reid acquire guns and other supplies for the gang's various robberies.

Now Hollingsworth was in trouble. He'd gotten involved in a large crystal meth operation run out of a cabin 90 miles northeast of San Diego, which was raided after a man died while sampling their latest batch. A concerned citizen saw Hollingsworth dump the body from his car on the side of a road. Police located the car and the cabin, and Hollingsworth attempted to escape by leaping through a plate-glass window. He was apprehended and needed \$80,000 to help cover his bail.

Hollingsworth promised to pay the loan back in 60 days with interest, and Reid decided to help out an old friend in trouble. It felt like the right thing to do, and also good karma, since he might need to call in a favor of his own someday.

# Nine

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Reid liked to spend his days flying his new plane out over the mesas and canyons around Sedona. Afterward, he'd often stop for chips and margaritas at Maria's, a Mexican restaurant near the airport, and that's where he was one afternoon in October of 1980 when three men in trench coats walked in. Those look like cops, he thought. What are they doing here? When nothing happened, Reid decided he was just paranoid. He went home and forgot about them.

His initial instinct was right, though. The three men were FBI agents, sent to Sedona to track the Stopwatch Gang while waiting for arrest warrants to be issued. The agent in charge of intercepting America's most-wanted bank robbers was Steve Chenoweth, head of the small Flagstaff field office. During his time in Arizona, Chenoweth had worked mostly on violent crimes, with a focus on bank-robbery investigations. That was a busy beat in Arizona; Chenoweth recalled that the state averaged more than 250 bank robberies a year.

Chenoweth was cautious while he waited for the order to move on the Stopwatch Gang. Every cable he'd seen ended with two ominous stamps: armed and dangerous and escape risk. He knew where Reid and Wright were staying in Oak Creek Canyon, but the terrain was steep and rugged, and there was only a single point of entry. It was nearly impossible to go in undetected.

Chenoweth knew that the subjects, especially Reid, were popular in their community, so to prevent them from being tipped off, he told only a single sheriff's deputy what was going on. That decision turned out to be wise when he later learned that one of Reid's closest friends was another deputy he'd met at a local bar.

The bureau had been tracking the men but couldn't confirm their identities, until a confidential informant revealed their names. This allowed the FBI to request their prints from the Canadian authorities, which matched the evidence agents had collected, including the partial print from the trash bag. On October 30, a judge issued arrest warrants for Stephen Reid, Patrick Mitchell, and Lionel Wright on charges of bank robbery and conspiracy.

Reid was pulled over on the morning of October 31 while driving his Camaro to the airport to go flying, and Wright was arrested at the house "without incident"—except for the fact that he was naked in bed when agents kicked in his door. Reid, an FBI report noted, "admitted his identity," while Wright, in keeping with character, "would not admit his identity." (Wright "is the only one of the three who never said a word to anyone about his activities," Chenoweth told me.)

Both men were taken to San Diego and placed in the Metropolitan Correctional Center, a federal facility downtown. In light of the subjects' history of escape, the judge set bail at \$1.5 million. "The subjects are escapees from Canada with extraditable warrants against them ... allegedly good for 30 bank robberies on the west coast," the charging document said.

On November 1, newspapers across Canada announced the arrest of Stephen Douglas Reid and Lionel Wright, as well as the unknown whereabouts of their famous partner. "Patrick 'Paddy' Mitchell ... the duo's partner in crimes and prison breaks which span more than a decade, managed to elude

the manhunt,” reported the *Ottawa Citizen*.

The following April, Reid and Wright—who both pleaded guilty—were sentenced in Federal Court to 20 years in prison for the armed robbery of the Bank of America. The U.S. Attorney applauded the sentence, describing the pair as “extremely competent, dangerous bank robbers, who will continue to be so.”

The identity of the government’s informant was never revealed during the trial. After sentencing, Reid and Wright’s attorneys worked out a plea deal that involved returning some of the stolen money. When the arrangement collapsed, the men learned that the entire case hinged on Big John Hollingsworth.

Following his arrest at the meth-lab, Hollingsworth told his attorney to offer the DEA a deal. If prosecutors would reduce his bond and consider a reduction in charges, his attorney said, Hollingsworth “would be able to identify and cause the apprehension of the individuals involved” in the Bank of America robbery. According to Mitchell’s FBI case file, Hollingsworth added some bluster. “They are described as real professionals with the ability of being killers,” his attorney told the FBI. “They usually wear flak jackets and carry automatic weapons.”

Hollingsworth provided numerous details to prove the legitimacy of his claims. He knew, for instance, that the perpetrators had purchased wigs and beards at a movie-supply store in the San Fernando Valley and that the two main players were an “older more paternal type” and one who was “large of stature and a Wyatt Earp type personality.” Furthermore, Hollingsworth offered, these same men had recently robbed a large jewelry store—a job, he neglected to say, that he himself had set up—and were behind “other bank robberies” in San Diego.

“I know exactly who they are,” Hollingsworth told the agents. “And I know where they are.”

Reid was furious about Hollingsworth’s deception, and he pointed something out to the court that put his entire case in a new light. The first person he called after his arrest was Hollingsworth, seeking a quick return on his recent favor. It was Hollingsworth, the man whose sealed testimony helped build the prosecution’s case, who hired Reid’s lawyer for him. And it was Hollingsworth, known in court only as Mr. X, who acted as Reid’s secret intermediary in the attempted return of the stolen money—money that went missing during the transfer.

The judge appointed Reid and Wright a new lawyer, who reached an agreement with prosecutors to reduce their sentences by half.

The Hollingsworth affair was something of an embarrassment for the FBI and the court. According to Reid, Hollingsworth’s immunity pertained only to his meth arrest, so when the money from the transfer disappeared, the prosecution ordered Reid and Wright to testify in a grand-jury hearing on some of Hollingsworth’s other criminal activities. They refused, even though they likely could have traded information for leniency; Hollingsworth was a free man. Instead, they were held in contempt and ordered to serve an additional 11 months on top of their sentences. “Two wrongs don’t make a right,” Reid told me. “I know straight people see not testifying as dumb,” he said, but there was a code of honor, he suggested, and that went beyond his hatred of the man who’d turned them in.

Reid and Wright could have appealed their sentences but chose not to. “We didn’t have the money,” Reid said. And so his strategy was simple: serve his time, stay clean, then “go home in a prisoner-exchange treaty and escape again.”

Not surprisingly, Reid and Wright were kept apart. Wright was sent to Leavenworth, a maximum-security prison in Kansas, while Reid, considered to be an extreme escape risk, got some unusual treatment. Shortly after his sentence, he was put on what he calls a “ghost chain.” For 11 months, Reid was bused around the country, from jail to jail, often every few days, with no notice of where he was going or how long his stay would be. One night he’d sleep in a county lockup in McAlester, Oklahoma; the next he’d be off to Lacuna, Texas.

The point was to make him disappear, to make his whereabouts impossible to track. After nearly a year, he landed at the federal penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, the highest-security facility in the system. Marion was built to house the 500 most dangerous criminals in the prison system, and the initial population was made up mostly of transfers from Alcatraz. It is not a place for reform. Prisoners there aren’t allowed to work and spend much of their time in solitary confinement.

Reid knew there was no chance of escape from Marion, so he worked diligently on earning a transfer back to Canada. He wrote letters and lobbied the consulate, calling in every possible favor from his old connections in Ottawa. Finally, on May 6, 1983, after two years at Marion, Reid was sent back home, to Millhaven, where he joined Wright, who had also been granted a transfer.

Back at Millhaven, Reid once again developed a reputation as both an inmate and an administration favorite. He ran the sports commission, which organized the prison hockey and baseball teams, as well as the illegal sports-gambling ring. He was a major player in the smuggling and distribution of hash, and he mediated disputes between guards and prisoners. “I was kinda known as the mayor of Millhaven,” he said.

In 1984, Millhaven was an even more violent place than it had been in 1977, when the grim conditions caused Reid and Mitchell to begin plotting their escapes. One winter, after a rash of stabbings, including the murder of the goalie of his prison hockey team, Reid’s spirit broke. He became angry and depressed. He quit all his prison jobs and scams and began to write, tearing through pages of a yellow legal pad in longhand. “At first it was just words on paper, then disjointed sentence expressions of anger, bitterness, loss of hope, page after page, the pencil pushing right through the paper with the force of those words coming out of me,” Reid later wrote. “Then a story began to emerge.”

In a few months, he finished a draft of a novel about a gang of bank robbers led by Bobby, a character very much like Stephen Reid, and his sidekick Denny, a thinly veiled version of Lionel Wright. In an adjacent cell, Wright typed the pages as Reid wrote them, never commenting on the story itself. Toward the end of the book, Bobby kills Denny. After he handed the pages to Wright, Reid said, he sat and listened as the tapping of the keys slowed and then stopped. Minutes later, Wright appeared at his cell door. He was crestfallen, Reid said.

Reid didn’t know what to do with the manuscript. Around this time, a criminology professor from the University of Waterloo named Fred Desroches asked Reid to be interviewed for a book on



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