



THE GREAT ESCAPEE

During his reign as America's most prolific conman Steven Russell posed as a judge, FBI agent, and CEO and escaped from jail an incredible five times. Alex Hannaford visited the jail where he's serving a 144-year sentence

Words by Alex Hannaford
Photographs by xxxxxxxx

STEVEN RUSSELL loved to study people. To watch their every move, remember habits and observe individual quirks. It came in handy in prison, particularly one day in December 1996 — a Friday 13th — the day he planned to escape. Again.

Russell had bought a handful of green Magic Marker pens from the commissary at the Estelle Unit, an imposing maximum security prison about 10 miles north of the Texas town of Huntsville. He didn't tell anyone what he planned to do — Russell knew that in prison the less people knew what you were doing, the better.

He dropped a white prison-issue shirt in the sink and emptied the magic marker refills into the water until a cloud of green ink swirled round the bowl. It took him



hours of meticulous shaking and blowing to dry the shirt the next day, but the ruse had worked: it now looked almost identical to the medical scrubs the visiting doctors wore. On the night of 12 December, he slept with it under his mattress. Over the past few weeks, Russell, a 6ft-tall man just a year shy of 40, had observed the woman guarding the entrance to the unit where inmates ate their breakfast, the one who spent her time gossiping on the phone.

The next morning he slipped into the toilet and changed into his green shirt. And then he simply walked out — past the guard at the entrance, her ear as usual glued to the phone, through the main doors, across the prison courtyard and out through the security gates. The armed officer standing in the guard tower called out, “Damn doc, those look like prison whites you’re wearing.”

“Well, don’t shoot,” he laughed.

As Russell disappeared out of sight, he turned round and stuck his middle finger up at the concrete building that had contained him for the last four months.

THROUGHOUT HIS INCREDIBLE career as a conman, Steven Russell would escape from jail five times in as many years. By the time of his last recapture in 1999, he had become the most prolific prison escapee in US history. But he had never used violence, each time he would make his attempt on a Friday 13th, and, each time, his love for one man — Phillip Morris, the blond, delicately featured son of a preacher from Arkansas — would be his undoing.

In February, *I Love You Phillip Morris*, the story of his incredible life, hits UK cinemas. A clip of its stars, Jim Carrey (as the effervescent Russell) and Ewan McGregor (as Morris) kissing is already all over YouTube.

Russell’s story is almost unbelievable. He eluded capture by operating under 14 different aliases, faking Aids, forging his own death certificate and using anything he could lay his hands on: a magic marker, a pay phone, a walkie-talkie, even a pair of women’s stretch pants. Twice he walked out of prison and into jobs where he became the CEO of the company; he pretended to be a judge to reduce his bail and arrange his own early release from jail, and impersonated an FBI agent to report himself no longer wanted.

Today, he’s locked up in a 10ft by 7ft concrete cell in a maximum security segregation ward of the Michael Unit, a grey prison building a couple of hours southeast of Dallas where he’s serving a 144-year



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sentence. His food and mail are pushed through a large letterbox style slot in the cell door, and the only time he leaves is to take his daily shower. According to the guards he never bothers with recreation.

At the prison gate there is little love for the man who made an ass of the US penal system. “You here to see that guy that did that shit?” the guard asks contemptuously before waving my car through. Inside the jail, Russell is handcuffed as he’s let into the tiny interview cell. He looks older, more overweight than in the few pictures that exist of him. His hair is shaved to the

scalp and he’s wearing thick black glasses. Only when he’s inside is he allowed to put his cuffed wrists through the slot and have them removed. He smiles and laughs throughout our interview, and he’ll fog up the bulletproof Perspex that separates us on more than one occasion as he animatedly relays his astonishing story. Despite this, there’s a palpable air of sadness about him.

One or two of the newer guards seem to like Russell. But they are all paranoid about getting too close. He’s a confidence trickster and they know that’s how he’s managed to escape so many times. “It won’t happen on my watch,” the man guarding him today says. Perhaps that’s what they all said.

STEVEN JAY RUSSELL was born in North Carolina in 1957. His parents, David and Georgia, were devoutly religious. But when he was nine years old he discovered they’d adopted him. He found this hard to take and began getting into trouble at school, he also became obsessed with setting fires. At the age of 12 he was sent to a boys’ home for therapy. He discovered two things while he was there: that he had an IQ of 163 (well above average) and that he enjoyed having homosexual experiences. He left the boys’ home on 13 May 1971 — a Friday. From then on, Friday 13th would be his lucky day.

After graduation, he became a police officer — something he later said taught him all he needed for a life of crime — and in 1976 he married the police chief’s secretary, Debbie Davis. Their daughter, Stephanie, was born two years later. But this law-abiding family man was about to embrace the lifestyle he had so far kept hidden from his family. In 1985, nine years after they had wed, Russell told Davis he was gay and the couple agreed to separate.

Forseeing a decline in funds, he faked a “slip and fall” accident, claiming \$45,000 on the insurance; he also made thousands of dollars selling fake Rolex watches, but it was his decision to apply for a drivers’ licence and passport in the name of another Steven Russell — to help with his criminal activities — that would lead to his arrest and indictment by a grand jury for fraud. Amazingly, Russell was released on bail.

The following year, he met James “Jimmy” Kemple and it wasn’t long before the pair moved into an apartment together in Palm Beach. They loved going to the cinema, eating out at expensive restaurants and going to concerts. But Kemple had Aids, which in the early Nineties was often

untreatable, and he’d been given only a couple of years to live.

Inside the Harris County Jail, serving his six-month sentence for fraud, Russell was missing Kemple and began looking for an escape route. “I started watching how the guards operated,” he says. “Every three hours the officers would go outside to take a smoking break, and when they did, I’d go off exploring.” He discovered a room where female inmates would give up their civilian clothes before being processed. “I found these red sweat pants and set them aside,” he says. He also stole a tie-dyed t-shirt and walkie talkie.

On Friday 13 May 1993, Russell put his plan into action. While the guards were on their break he put on the red tracksuit bottoms and t-shirt and took the lift down to the 10th floor — a secure area where inmates were forbidden. “There were guards there, but I just walked through, took the other elevator to the first floor and walked out the front door,” Russell says. “I had a radio to give me a sense of authority and nobody asked me for identification.”

Russell had just walked out of one of the busiest and most secure jails in Texas. But his mistake was heading back to Kemple, and he was arrested less than a week later in the car park of Miami airport as the pair were about to fly to Mexico. Incredibly, the judge ordered bail of just \$20,000, which Russell was easily able to pay. Together with Kemple, Russell flew to Mexico City where he called the Harris County Sheriff, telling him he was now in the Dominican Republic. “I hope you don’t blame my escape on those guards who were out there taking a smoke break,” he said. “You could fix the problem if you allowed smoking back in the jail.”

“Fuck you,” came the reply.

Concerned about the lack of decent health care for Kemple, they decided to move back to the US, but were caught and charged with fraud after another insurance scam went wrong.

“The last time I saw Jimmy, he was in a holding cell in front of me,” Russell says. “They let him go home and they kept me for that six-month sentence. We spoke every day after that, but he was getting weaker. He went back to West Palm Beach and died with his dog lying in bed beside him.”

“I really liked Steven at first, but he conned Jimmy,” Kemple’s mother Helen says during a brief phone conversation with Esquire. “He lied like a rug. He told one lie after another, and he deserves to be where he is 100 per cent because he’ll do it all again. He should be in prison forever.”



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The reality was that Russell was still in prison and needed to get out. With the help of a fellow inmate, a doctor, he began learning about Aids. The doctor wrote a letter on smuggled medical stationery saying Russell would succumb to the final stages of the illness within a few months. Using a prison typewriter, Russell altered his lab reports to support this. Inexplicably the authorities never tested him.

Due largely to his “declining health”, the federal authorities dropped the charges against him. Russell had once again fooled the system. However, the state of Texas

wasn’t so sympathetic, and in December 1994 he was extradited to face felony insurance fraud and escape charges.

ON JULY 21, 1989, Phillip Morris, a 5ft 2in, slim, blonde 20-year-old from Arkansas wound up on the wrong side of the law for the first time in his life. He was moving home from Houston to Atlanta, but was late in returning his rental car and was arrested. Years later, struggling to keep up with restitution payments he was sent to a halfway house. He fled and was re-arrested for breaking his bail conditions. Which is how he ended up in Houston’s Harris County Jail library that December in 1994.

“Phillip was trying to reach for this book that was bigger than he was,” Russell tells Esquire. “He’s little — he only weighs about 115lbs soaking wet — so I grabbed it for him and we started talking.” Russell told Morris he was a lawyer. “I told him all kinds of bullshit,” he says. “You don’t expect to meet someone cool in jail; you expect to meet the derelicts. And damn, was I wrong.”

Russell was paroled in October 1995, after serving just nine months of a three-year sentence, and Morris followed two months later. The pair moved into an apartment together in Clear Lake, just 30 minutes drive from the Harris County Jail. Free from the shackles of the Texas criminal justice system, the pair devoted themselves to a life of hedonism and excess. With the help of a friend, Russell was able to cash another life insurance policy he’d taken out for Jimmy Kemple. “We bought each other Mercedes Benzes,” Russell says. “It was ostentatious; it was outrageous. We were out of control. But we were on parole and we were free, so we had a good time.”

After faking his CV, Russell had walked into a job as the chief financial officer for North American Medical Management (NAMM), a company overseeing patient care. NAMM’s founder Don Holmquist has described his employee as a “likeable guy, engaging and easier to work with than most chief financial officers. The guy is the world’s best actor. He said all the right things”. But what Russell was saying and what he was doing were two very different things. He began investing millions of dollars in short-term accounts, siphoning off 50 per cent of the revenue and pocketing \$800,000 in the process.

To this day Morris insists he had no idea Russell was embezzling money. He knew his partner had a fantastic job; they had just bought a house with a pool, and the lifestyle of fast cars, jet skis and fancy

restaurants seemed to fit. “Hindsight is 20/20,” he says. “I was like the housewife; I had no mind for finance. Steve would call me up in the middle of the afternoon and say, ‘Honey, get dressed and meet me at the Moose Cafe at six o’clock; we’re going to celebrate — I made \$90,000 today.’ I didn’t think, ‘What illegal activity did you do?’ We were great together and I enjoyed him. I’d been lonely and miserable for so long. I didn’t know how they implicated me in the theft until I went to jail. Steve had been writing cheques in six variations of my name.”

As Russell was being arrested he told detectives he was diabetic and urgently needed his insulin (actually prescribed for Morris). Russell gave himself 40 injections on the journey to the station in what he now says was a failed suicide bid. (Morris, however, says, “It’s easier for him to plan an escape when he’s not in law enforcement custody. It’s much easier from a hospital. He’s always thinking ahead. That’s why he did that.”) Russell went into shock in the booking room. At their arraignment, Morris was freed on bail of \$40,000, but unsurprisingly, considering his penchant for slipping through the net, Russell’s was set at \$900,000 — a figure even he couldn’t hope to meet. So he reduced it.

“When a lawyer makes a bond order, he types it up himself and just gets the judge to sign it,” Russell explains, lowering his voice a little as a guard hovers close by. “So I called a friend of mine in Florida, told him how to type it, and he mailed it to me. Now I just had to get the record changed in the court’s computer system.”

He had another hearing on 12 July, and for the short walk to the courthouse he knew he’d be shackled to other prisoners. He hid his typed letter under his jumpsuit and hoped he’d find a way to get it in the right hands. On the way, he noticed a woman carrying a huge bundle of paperwork, and as she passed the shackled inmates, Russell dropped the letter on the floor. “Sure enough somebody grabbed it and handed it to the deputy who put it in the file folder in the court room,” Russell says. “That night I called my friend in Florida again and asked him to make a three-way call. I got through to the night clerk at the magistrates’ court and told her I was a judge and that I’d had a bond hearing for Steven Russell that day. I said I had filed the hard copy, but that the clerk in the courtroom hadn’t entered it into the computer, so my client was having trouble getting out on bond.”

Within hours Russell’s bail was



SWINGERS: JIM CARREY AND EWAN MACGREGOR RECREATE 80’S HIGHLIFE IN I LOVE YOU PHILLIP MORRIS, THE FILM VERSION OF RUSSELL’S LIFE

**“SEE YOU ON THE OUTSIDE”
3 OTHER DARING JAILBREAKS**

ALFRED HINES — While serving a 12-year sentence for robbery, “Houdini Hinds” broke out of three high-security prisons. Caught after six months on the run, he launched a lawsuit charging prison authorities with illegal arrest. He smuggled a padlock into court and while in the toilet bundled two guards into a cubicle and snapped the lock over some hooks an accomplice had earlier screwed to the door.

PASCAL PAYET — The convicted killer escaped not once, but twice from high-security prisons in France, each time using a hijacked helicopter. Once outside, he managed to spring three of his friends, again by helicopter. The men flew to the Mediterranean coast where they released the pilot and fled.

THE TEXAS SEVEN — Each of the seven escaped by subduing a prison worker during lunch and stealing their clothing and IDs. They eventually broke out in the back of a maintenance truck. They were picked up within a month of their faces appearing on America’s Most Wanted. One has since been executed, another committed suicide and the other five are currently on death row.

reduced from \$900,000 to \$45,000. And at 8pm on 13 July 1996, a Friday, naturally, the bail bondsman came to the county jail and he was a free man again. Back in Clearlake, he climbed over the wall of his house, ran round the back and started banging on the French doors. Morris had been asleep and their two daschunds were barking as he pulled back the curtains. “I could see his eyes,” Russell says. But he knew he couldn’t stay in Clearlake long — just long enough for a swim in the pool.

“Steve was getting ready to go to Florida,” Morris says. “But he told me there was a warrant out for my arrest too, which I later discovered was a lie. But being the gullible fool that I am, I got scared and we ran. Big mistake.” Russell’s face was all over the papers, and it wasn’t long before he was arrested in Florida again and flown back to Houston. This time there were 20 police offers waiting to meet him off the plane. In court, he pleaded guilty to escape. The judge called his behaviour “reprehensible” and sentenced him to 45 years at the Estelle Unit.

ON FRIDAY 13 DECEMBER, after he’d donned his spare prison-issue uniform and dyed it green, Russell headed home — still in his “doctor’s scrubs”. “Phillip was coming out of the back door of our house when I got there,” he recalls. “I said, ‘Boo!’ He screamed, ‘Asshole!’ and we hugged each other. Now they were both wanted men — Morris for jumping bail and Russell for escape and fraud. In addition, Russell’s photo had made it on to the front of the Houston Chronicle. They fled to Biloxi, Mississippi, and it was there, in the Grand Casino hotel, that Morris’s frustration finally came to a head. He swung a table across the room and attempted to push Russell out the window. “It was glass from floor to ceiling and the window bowed. If that thing had given way I’d be sitting on death row,” he says.

Just a few years before, Morris had been a law-abiding citizen with no convictions, a hassle-free life, a good relationship with his family and hardly a care in the world. Now he was implicated in the theft of almost a million dollars and, though he didn’t know it, was about to be arrested. After a call on a tapped phone line, he and Morris were picked up a quarter of a mile from their hotel. Morris wouldn’t see Russell again for seven months, and when his case finally came to trial he barely recognised him. “I gasped because he’d lost so much weight,” he recalls. “The District Attorney placed

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find him guilty. In addition to his 45-year sentence for the NAMM embezzlement, Steven Russell was given a life sentence for escape. A total of 144 years.

AFTER BEING RELEASED early on parole, Morris now lives alone in Arkansas. He likes to go fishing for catfish and bass, and he loves to travel. He also owns a lake house a few hours away: it’s eight miles from the nearest store and is a place where he can disappear off the map. He still has days when he’s angry about what happened. “It’s hard to describe my feelings because they change daily,” he says. “But it eats me up sometimes. I wake up in the middle of the night, sweating, thinking I’m still in prison. And when I think of those things it makes me mad at Steve.”

He has never visited Russell in prison — he says he has no desire to set foot in one ever again. “But I’ve forgiven him and he’s paying for it now.” I ask whether, if Russell ever got out, he would see him again. “I don’t anticipate him coming out anytime soon.” Morris says. “There are various reasons why I’d love to sit down face-to-face with him again — I’d like him to tell me he’s truly sorry and mean it. But we’d never be together again. I could never trust him.”

Just before filming started on the movie, Ewan McGregor visited Morris for a few days in Arkansas, and Morris gave him the restaurant tour of his town. “He really wanted to hear my side of the story. He’s a great guy,” he says. “We email now. He’s said we’ll go to the premiere together and wear matching tuxes.”

As the prison guard returns and motions to me to wind the interview up, Russell becomes insistent that his jail-breaking days are over. He’s been in prison now for 10 years. And 17 Friday the 13ths have slipped by without so much as a Magic Marker going missing. “I’m getting old,” he says. “I’m 52 now. When you lose the anger and the bitterness it makes a big difference in your life. They say I’m still a flight risk, but I’m not. If you’d asked me 10 years ago, I’d have said yes, in a heartbeat. I’ve been told I’ll have to serve about 25 years flat jail time. So I’d say I’d get parole by the time I’m 65. I’ve never lost hope.”

Locked in his cell 23 hours a day, Russell also studies the share prices listed in the daily newspaper. I ask whether he’d play the markets if he ever got out. “Absolutely. I play them now in my head,” he says. How much do you think you’d have made in the last 12 years if you were on the outside? “Oh God,” he says. “Way more than any money I ever stole.”



ABOVE A SEDENTARY EXISTENCE OF 23 HOURS IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT MIXED WITH HIS REFUSAL TO PARTAKE IN ANY RECREATION ACTIVITIES, HAS LEFT RUSSELL PALE AND PUFFY. BELOW CAPTION TO COME

Steve’s medical records where I could see them showing he was HIV positive. Of course, I knew he wasn’t but by this point my mind wasn’t even on my trial, it was on what was going on with him. And of course he was laying down the groundwork for his next escape.”

Morris was convicted of helping Russell steal \$800,000 and sentenced to 20 years in prison. Russell, meanwhile, was sent back to the Estelle Unit, but only temporarily. By October 1997, he was down to 153 pounds, and by his own admission, “looked like hell”. He was soon transferred to a prison nursing home near Beaumont, Texas and five months later was sent to the Restful Acres Care Home just south of San Antonio: Russell had succeeded in getting a “special needs” parole from the Texas State

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He invested millions of dollars in short term accounts and pocketed a huge \$800,000

Board of Pardons because he was “dying”. He was eventually freed on 13 March 1998 (a Friday) — Phillip Morris’s 39th birthday. And he almost got away with it. Until an eagle-eyed detective spotted him a year later. Russell was arrested and in August 2000, a Texas jury took just 30 minutes to