

BREAKING AND ENTERING

Escape is not an option.

BY HALL JAMESON

I had been a prisoner in an unlocked cell for 89 days, yet could not find a way out. The prison board had selected me — a *chronic escapee* — as one of the first inmates in the beta space-incarceration programme. I would spend the final year of my sentence in orbit.

Before my current predicament, no prison could contain me — no matter how many electric fences, meathed guards or high-tech monitoring systems it had.

But this time, the correctional system had stumped me.

My current digs were the size of a boxcar. The single porthole had a mind-bending view of Earth. I navigated in zero gravity using the handles attached to the walls. I watched movies, recorded my innermost thoughts (deep thinker that I was), and communicated with Dr Geary, using the computer nested in the wall.

And, of course, there was the unlocked door. Just the flip of a couple levers and the turn of a wheel, and I was free.

Oh, and dead.

My David Hasselhoff poster hung near my bed — from the *Knight Rider* days, none of that *Baywatch* crap. Somehow, it always appeared each time I relocated. I'm pretty sure Geary had something to do with that. His determination to 'fix me' was baffling.

Geary was not only a kneader of troubled brains, but also a space enthusiast (nerd). He *loved* to talk about meteoroids and comets, shit like that. I recalled our last conversation.

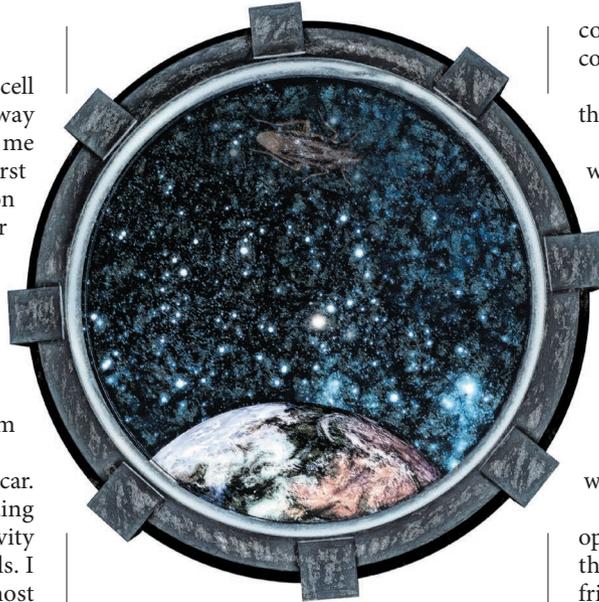
"New technologies have re-energized the space programme, Kelly. Antigravity chambers for training astronauts on Earth are no longer a myth. Space ladders are in place — one was used to transport your pod into orbit. And ion drives are now commonplace. It's all so incredible!"

"Ion drives. Yeah, phew! I was worried those would never happen," I had said.

Geary grinned. "Yes! So many exciting technologies, like space incarceration. Now that escape is no longer an option, you can focus on your rehabilitation."

Escape is always an option, I had nearly blurted, but nodded instead.

I had come to a decision. Eighty-nine days and I hadn't found a way out, so I decided that unless I received some kind of sign, I would open the door and be done with it.



An object floated past my face and I started. A creature the size of a jellybean spun through the air, delicate legs wiggling, reddish-brown body catching the light. I reached out and caught it between cupped hands, opening them a crack to peek.

I blinked in surprise. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

"So what are you in for?" I whispered to the cockroach.

Day 90. I named him Neil, after the astronaut. I considered Buzz, but it seemed too obvious for a bug.

Neil and I discussed life. Well, I discussed and he listened. I watched him climb, skitter and drift around the pod, admiring every angle of his sleek exoskeleton, his busy little legs. I drew countless pictures of him, and pinned my favourite next to the Hasselhoff poster.

We were alike. Both masters of B&E. He gave me the courage to plan for the future.

I put escape on hold. I'd let them release me, just this one time.

Day 116. Neil was missing.

I was wrecked; puffy-eyed from crying, greasy hair plastered to my skull. I had looked everywhere: the nooks I'd stuffed with crumbs where he could hunker down and dine without floating away, the bed covers, even the bottom of my shoe.

Without Neil, I

couldn't think. We had made plans. How could he just disappear?

Shit! I was trapped and alone up here. And there was no escape.

My gaze drifted to the door. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Just the flip of two levers, and the turn of a wheel, and I'd be free.

I did the breaststroke through the compartment, and put my hand on the top lever.

Don't think about it. Do it quick!

I applied gentle pressure, surprised at how easily the lever released. The door emitted a hiss and I flinched.

Did I just let space in?

I leaned on the second lever. It released with a gentle click.

I stared at the wheel. How many turns to open the door? I took one last look around the room, searching for any sign of my friend. Nothing.

I spun the wheel three times until it stopped with a loud *chunk!* The pod's interior fell into darkness. I steeled myself for the final struggle, my last breath as I twitched between the stars, Earth looming in the background. I would become legend to the other prisoners when they learnt of the *Great Space Escape*. They would sing songs about me.

I pushed. The door swung open, pulling me with it, and for a split second, I hung in the air, squinting in surprise as bright light struck my eyes.

Then gravity slammed me to the ground.

I landed face-first on a mat of soupy grass. I rolled over and blinked at the blue sky, then looked at my pod, its exterior rusty, dented and streaked with spray paint. A handful of similar pods surrounded mine enclosed by a fence topped with razor wire. One hundred yards away: the hulking form of Applegate prison.

My braying laughter filled the swamp.

Countless tantalizing escape options filled my head. The fence was not a problem. I was free to go wherever I wished.

But, I didn't go. Instead, I climbed back inside my pod and shut the door. The lights flickered on and weightlessness returned, cradling me like a featherbed. I smiled at the sketch of my friend pinned next to Hasselhoff.

It was enough that Neil had escaped. ■

Hall Jameson is an American writer who lives in the Pacific Northwest. When she's not writing stories, she spends her time kayaking, playing the piano and cat wrangling.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY