



Book One: Martin Series  
3<sup>rd</sup> of 3 short stories  
3,240 words

Manuscript @ March1/04  
Edit comments at March 1/04

## ***SMITHEREENS***

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

Martin loved Mondays because right after dinner he went to Junior Badgers. Each week his troop did something different. Tonight they were building model rockets.

Martin glued on the fins, working ever-so-carefully. It reminded him of his favorite television hero, Zip Rideout: Space Cadet. Zip was always fixing his rocket.

“Holy cow,” said Alex, who had come over to see what Martin was up to. “Your fins are perfect!”

“Thanks,” said Martin, shrugging modestly. He was used to nice comments about his artwork, and Alex was right. His fins *were* perfect.

Alex held up his own rocket. “What do you think?” he asked.

Cripes. As usual, Alex had not taken his time. Big gobs of glue oozed from his rocket fins, which were crooked. And it looked like his rocket had crash-landed into a can of gray paint. Even his Badger shirt was splattered.

Martin was trying to think of something kind to say when Stuart joined them. When he saw Alex's rocket he burst out laughing. "Ka-boom!" he said, throwing up his arms.

Alex ignored him. "What should I do, Martin?" he asked hopefully.

Martin studied the rocket. Whenever he glanced up, Stuart mouthed "ka-boom." Then Alex whipped around and saw what Stuart was doing. A shoving match started between the two, but Martin stepped in with an idea.

"How about painting flames on your rocket?" he suggested quickly.

"Good idea," said Alex, who shoved Stuart one last time before they both returned to their places.

Martin sighed. He wondered what Zip Rideout would do if he had two best friends who sometimes didn't get along. But Zip always fought evil alone.

"Oooh!"

"Aaah!"

Some Badgers had gathered around Alex. He held up his rocket so they could have a better look.

"Flames!" the crowd murmured.

Martin looked over. Wow! Flames beat plain rockets any day. He dipped his paintbrush in red and got to work.

"So you're copying Alex?" said Stuart, who had sauntered over for another visit.

"What do you mean?" asked Martin. "I'm the one who thought of the flames."

"Sure," said Stuart. "But Alex painted them first."

Martin sucked in his breath. He was about to argue when his thoughts were interrupted.

“Okay, Badgers!” announced Head Badger Bob. “Start packing up. You can finish your rockets at home. We’ll launch them this Saturday at Tupper Grove Park!”

The troop cheered, and there was a flurry of activity as everyone tidied up.

Not Martin. He stood for a moment trying to shrug off Stuart’s words. The flames *were* his idea, and they *did* look good, but he decided he would think of something else. Besides, there was plenty of time before Saturday’s launch. He quickly painted over his flames, and then headed to the door where his dad was waiting.

“Hi Sport.”

Before Martin could answer, Alex rushed by.

“Whoa!” said Martin’s dad. “Nice flames, Alex. Well done!”

“Thanks, Mr. Bridge,” said Alex, and he stopped to give Martin’s dad a better look.

Martin’s dad never said “well done” unless he really meant it. Martin looked at his own plain rocket and frowned.

“The flames were a good idea, weren’t they, Alex?” said Martin. He thought that now would be a good time for Alex to thank him, but Martin’s dad cut in.

“Say, why don’t you boys get together this week to finish your rockets? We have plenty of paint and brushes, right Martin?”

“Sure,” said Martin in a flat voice.

“How about Thursday?” asked Alex eagerly.

Martin nodded.

“Well. Gotta go,” said Alex. He bolted for the coatrack.

“The flames were my idea,” blurted Martin, but his dad didn’t hear. He was asking Head Badger Bob about helping out at Saturday’s launch.

Martin swallowed hard. A niggling feeling in his stomach told him that maybe he shouldn’t have been so quick to give away his flames idea.

On Tuesday morning, Martin woke up with that same niggling feeling. It grew bigger each time Alex bragged about his rocket at school that day. Several times Martin was tempted to tell everyone that the flames were his idea, but Stuart’s words burned in his head. So he fumed and said nothing.

When Martin got home from school, he flopped down on the sofa to watch his favorite cartoon.

“Let me guess, *Zip Rideout*?” his mom teased.

“Uh-huh,” said Martin without taking his eyes off the action. “This is the one where Zip races his rocket in the Outer Space Olympics.”

The competition was on. There were rockets with stripes. There were rockets with swirls. Some had polka dots. Some had checks. But there was only one with flames.

Zip Rideout’s.

And Zip won gold.

“Arrgh!” said Martin as he clicked off the show. He was angry that he’d given away such a great idea. He was angry that Alex hadn’t thanked him. And he still didn’t know how to finish his own rocket.

By Wednesday at dinner, Martin could barely taste his food. It had been another day of Alex gloating about the flames. Another day of Alex not thanking Martin. And another day of Martin staring at his own unfinished rocket.

“You must be getting excited about Saturday’s big launch,” said his dad between bites. “How’s your rocket coming along?”

“Lousy. I can’t think of how to finish it,” said Martin glumly, pushing his mashed potatoes around his plate.

They ate in silence.

“Say, I have an idea,” said his mom.

She jumped up from the table, opened a cupboard and plunked a box of cereal in front of Martin. Zip Rideout Space Flakes. On the back was a picture of Zip’s rocket painted with flames and blasting across the sky.

“Flames!” said his mom, pointing to the picture.

Martin barely glanced up.

“Can’t,” he said bitterly. “Flames are already ... taken.” He almost spat out the words.

“Taken?” said his mom. “Oh. Well, I don’t know what could be better than flames.”

“Me, either,” muttered Martin. He scuffed at the floor.

“You’ll think of something,” she said brightly, the way mothers do when things look bad.

Martin didn’t answer. He wouldn’t have to think of something if it weren’t for Alex taking his idea with not so much as a thank-you.

Wait a minute.

Alex hadn't thanked him because he had stolen Martin's idea. That's right! *Stolen!* No wonder Martin felt rotten. He'd been robbed! His stomach churned as he pushed his plate away.

By Thursday, talk of Alex's rocket had spread far and wide. He never grew tired of chatting to anyone within lift-off range. Martin huffed and glared, but Alex didn't notice.

"Hey, Martin," Alex called when Martin tried to hide in the lineup for his bus home. "I'm coming over to your house tonight so we can finish our rockets. Remember?"

"Humph," said Martin over his shoulder. He took a step up onto the bus.

"See you after dinner then," said Alex without missing a beat.

Martin turned back and tried to think of a quick excuse, but Alex had already walked away. The bus door slapped shut. Martin had only one hope as he took his seat beside Stuart. Maybe Alex would forget to show up.

When the doorbell rang right after dinner, Martin's heart sank.

"What do you have there?" asked Martin's mom as she opened the door.

"My rocket," said the rocket expert. He held out the box that had been tucked under his arm.

"Oh, let's see!" she said, clapping her hands.

Alex lifted the lid and dramatically peeled away layer after layer of tissue paper. Martin wanted to snatch off the final layers and get on with it. He tapped his foot instead.

Finally, Alex uncovered the rocket like a scientist showing off a new discovery.

"Ta da!"

“It’s gorgeous, Alex!” said Martin’s mom. “Look, Martin! Flames!”

Martin glared at her. He now understood why Zip Rideout’s mom never appeared in any of his shows.

“Can we get going already?” Martin demanded with a scowl.

Without waiting for an answer, he shoved past Alex and stomped upstairs to his room. He yanked open drawers and rifled through his art supplies.

Alex caught up and stood in the doorway. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

Martin stopped rifling. He wheeled around to face Alex, anger exploding inside him.

“What’s wrong with me?! It’s about time you asked! But I guess you’ve been too busy stealing my idea!”

“What idea?” asked Alex. His eyebrows shot up.

“Flames,” said Martin, his ears burning. “The flames were my idea and you stole it!”

“I didn’t steal anything!” said Alex. Now he scowled. “You gave me that idea, remember? You said I should paint flames. So I did.”

Martin blinked hard.

Sensing victory, Alex picked up Martin’s rocket and continued. “Paint flames, too. I don’t care.”

Martin snatched his rocket back. “I can’t paint flames. Everyone will think *I* copied *you!*”

“Oh, I get it. You think you’re too good to copy me.”

That stopped Martin. He really *did* think he was too good to copy Alex.

“I thought so,” said Alex smugly. “Well, if you’re so good, why don’t you think of a better idea than stupid old flames?”

“If they’re so stupid,” sputtered Martin, “why’d you steal them?”

Alex gave Martin a level glare.

“*Nobody* calls me a stealer,” said Alex. His words dropped out like ice cubes. He stuffed his rocket into its box and piled the tissue paper back in. Without another word, Alex shut the lid and stomped downstairs to call his dad for a ride home.

“What’s going on?” Martin’s mom demanded after Alex left.

“Alex stole my idea,” declared Martin hotly. He sat cross-armed on his bed.

“He did, did he?” she asked as she gently sat beside him. “Was it the flames?”

Martin nodded miserably.

“That was a good idea,” she said, patting his knee.

“Well I know that now!” said Martin impatiently. “You should see all the to-do Alex has been getting.”

“Good ideas do get a lot of attention,” she agreed.

“But Alex didn’t even thank me,” he implored.

“Perhaps Alex forgot because he’s not used to all the fuss.”

Martin rolled his eyes.

“So what will you do about it now?”

“I’ll show him! I’ll think of something way better than flames.”

“Oh, Martin,” she said, shaking her head. “Revenge never works.”



Revenge works for Zip Rideout, thought Martin, but he didn't say it out loud. He knew his mom would launch into a big talk if he did, and he was in no mood to hear any of it.

Instead, he curled up tight and turned on his side to face the wall. His mom bent to give him a kiss, then left him alone with his thoughts.

When Martin woke up Friday morning, the first thing he saw was his unfinished rocket laying on his night table. It mocked him. Then he remembered his fight with Alex. His stomach churned.

"I don't feel so good," he announced at breakfast. "I think I should stay home."

"Oh. That's too bad," said his mom, feeling Martin's forehead. "You'll miss art class today."

Martin's heart did a leap. Art class was his favorite. Maybe there he would come up with an idea to finish his rocket in time for tomorrow's launch.

"I'm feeling a bit better," he said, after finishing a large bowl of Zip Rideout Space Flakes.

When Martin arrived at school, a crowd had gathered around the display case in the art room. Each week their teacher selected someone's work for the case. Martin's work had been chosen many times. Just last week he had painted a brilliant picture of Zip Rideout. Martin smiled, sure that Zip was this week's pick.

Martin squeezed past everyone to admire his work in the display case.

No!

It couldn't be!

But there it was.

Flames and all.

Martin shoved his way back through the crowd and stormed over to a workspace in the farthest corner of the room. Alex proudly opened the case and gave a talk about his rocket, but Martin couldn't stand to hear one more word.

Instead, he mixed colors furiously and began to paint a picture of a rocket exploding in space. It had flames just like Alex's. But Martin found it hard to concentrate with Alex yammering on and on, so the more paint he added the worse his picture got.

"Ka-boom!" called Stuart from across the room. The crowd surrounding Alex turned and saw the worst picture Martin had painted since kindergarten. There were gasps.

Martin stared back, red-faced. Zip Rideout didn't need best friends. Neither did he. His hands shook as he doubled the wet painting over on itself. Then he folded and folded until he had a tight square wad that was as hard as the knot in his stomach. When no one was looking, he pitched it at Alex's rocket.

But by now Alex's rocket had a force field all its own. Martin missed by a long shot. He knew then that Alex's rocket was unstoppable and that Alex was sure to have a spectacular first flight at tomorrow's launch. Martin carried that dark thought for the rest of the day.

After school, Martin hugged his knees as he watched a *Zip Rideout* rerun. Zip had crash-landed on an unknown moon and was building jet packs for his rocket.

Martin bolted upright. Jet packs. That was it! Jet packs beat flames any day!

Martin rushed to his room. Building the jet packs was easy, and he used duct tape to fasten them on. When he stood back to admire his work, the jet packs looked even better than he expected. Zip Rideout would be proud.

“Take that, Alex!” he said with satisfaction.

Later Martin’s dad came up to tuck him into bed. “You’ve finished your rocket,” he said, when he spotted it on Martin’s night table. It stood poised ready for takeoff.

“Like the jet packs?” asked Martin, getting up on one elbow to have another look.

“They’re a blast,” said his dad, flicking off the lights.

Martin fell asleep smiling, his rocket glowing beside him in the moonlight.

Saturday morning. Launch day! Martin was too excited to finish his bowl of Zip Rideout Space Flakes.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” he insisted, while his dad gulped down his coffee.

The drive took forever, but when Martin stepped onto the launch field at Tupper Grove Park, his rocket was an instant success.

“Jet packs,” the Badgers murmured, nodding approval. Martin shrugged modestly.

Alex pushed through the crowd. Martin gave him a smug grin and held up his rocket so Alex could have a good, long look.

“I thought of jet packs *myself*,” Martin announced. Alex’s face fell. He turned away and lowered his rocket to his side as if it were a broken toy.

All of a sudden, Martin’s pride whooshed out of him, like the time Zip Rideout’s parachute shot out of Zip’s backpack but got tangled as he plummeted toward the ground.

Zip had pulled a second emergency parachute and it filled, but Martin wasn't so lucky. He landed hard.

“Attention, Badgers!”

Everyone bumped past Martin and Alex to surround the launchpad. Rocket launchings beat jet packs any day.

“We're going to use extra-big fuel cells,” announced Head Badger Bob, “so we can blast these rockets all the way to the moon!”

The troop buzzed with excitement, but Martin no longer cared about the launch. He glanced at Alex and tried to think of something kind to say.

“You ... did a great paint job with the flames,” Martin tested in his warmest voice.

Alex wheeled around.

“Flames?” he snapped back. “You mean the flames you said I *stole*?”

A few Badgers turned their way. Fights beat rocket launchings any day.

“Boys, boys!” called Head Badger Bob. “We're ready for the first rocket. Do I have a volunteer?”

“Me!” called Alex, shooting Martin an icy glare. The troop cheered as he raced up and placed his rocket on the launchpad. His moment in the spotlight was back.

“All systems ready?”

“Roger,” said Alex proudly.

Everyone stood back in a semicircle and began the countdown.

“Ten, nine, eight ...”

Martin was shaking.

“Seven, six, five ...”

Someone *had* tried to steal from a friend.

“Four, three, two ...”

But it wasn't Alex.

“One ...”

“It was me,” Martin realized with a thud.

“Blast off!”

Alex's rocket flew, not up, but into a zillion pieces. The explosion forced the entire troop to run screaming for cover.

“Holy cow,” said Alex in a small voice. Bits of his rocket lay scattered around the launchpad.

Martin stood up slowly along with the others, his ears burning. He remembered the spiteful picture he had painted of Alex's rocket and hoped no one else did. Especially Alex.

“Maybe your fuel cells are too big for the size of these rockets,” Martin's dad called over.

“Could be,” said Head Badger Bob, dusting off his pants. “Or maybe that was just a bad fuel cell. Let's try one more rocket.” He smiled the way leaders do when they aren't so sure. “Do I have a volunteer?”

The entire troop shuffled a step back. Each Badger clutched his prized rocket and looked away. Like the rest of the troop, Martin was certain the next rocket would be blown to smithereens, too.

Still, he wondered if Zip Rideout had ever felt as lonely as he did now.

“Try mine,” he called.

“Are you sure, Sport?” whispered Martin’s dad.

“It’s just a rocket,” Martin said in his bravest voice. He stepped forward and placed it on the launchpad.

“Stand back!” announced Head Badger Bob.

“Way back!” shouted Martin’s dad.

The troop started the countdown, but many of the Badgers didn’t wait. They had already hit the ground with their hands over their heads.

“Blast off!” shouted the ones still standing.

Martin’s rocket exploded just like Alex’s, jet packs and all.

The Badgers slowly got to their feet. Dazed, Head Badger Bob scratched his head. He stared at the charred smudges on the launchpad that had once been two splendid rockets.

“I’d say that’s enough for today,” said Martin’s dad in a firm voice. He patted Martin on the back before marching over to Head Badger Bob for a few words.

The troop cheered and broke into a game of tag. Alex did not join in. He sat down by the launchpad. Martin sat beside him. For a while, they plucked at the grass and said nothing. At last, Martin spoke.

“I guess extra-big fuel cells beat jet packs and flames any day.” He was beginning to think the whole thing a bit funny. There was more silence and then ...

“Ka-boom!” shouted Alex, throwing up his arms like Stuart.

They turned to each other and burst out laughing.

“Say, Martin,” said Alex when he recovered. “Maybe you could paint a picture of our rockets. You know, before they blew up and everything.”

“Great idea,” said Martin, giving Alex a playful punch on the shoulder.

Martin could already see what he would paint. Two glorious rockets soaring side by side into an unknown galaxy. One would have flames. The other would have jet packs. And his picture would be so good, he just knew it would be chosen for the display case.

Martin sprang to his feet, then pulled Alex up with the strength of ten superheroes.

“Let’s go join the troop,” Alex said, and he punched Martin back.

Together, they crossed the field, stepping over exploded bits and pieces without having to say another word.

Zip Rideout would be jealous. Sure, he knew how to fix rockets. But Martin had figured out how to fix friendship.

And friendship beats rockets any day.