

Book Three: Blazing Ahead  
2 of 2 short stories

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*LIGHTNING BOLTS*

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

Martin was watching his favorite show, *Zip Rideout: Space Cadet*, when he saw smoke wafting outside the window, then heard shouting.

Martin was not alarmed. He merely turned up the volume, determined to watch *Zip* to the very end.

“Martin,” interrupted his mom from the doorway. “Your dad’s calling you.”

“Now?” asked Martin, sinking farther into the sofa.

“Yes, now,” said his mom in her no-fooling-around voice. “Please go see what he wants.” She turned on her heel.

“I *know* what he wants,” muttered Martin. He sighed as he clicked off his show, then stared at the blank screen, wishing he were at Alex’s or Stuart’s house. He was sure his best friends would be watching their space hero without *any* interruptions.

“Martin!” called his dad from outside the window as he tapped the glass with his ring finger.

“Okay, okay,” said Martin with resignation. He trundled outside and joined his dad.

There in the middle of the yard sat their dilapidated lawn mower.

Martin *hated* that lawn mower more than anything.

More than running out of Zip Rideout Space Flakes at breakfast.

More than his school bus driver’s cranky-pants comments.

Even more than his mom’s spring cleaning regimen.

“You know the drill,” said Martin’s dad. “Grab hold of Laverne for me.”

Martin’s dad had named the lawn mower Laverne after an old aunt of his. Aunt Laverne only did things when she wanted to. Her voice sounded all rusty. And she had blue hair the color of lawn mower smoke.

Even worse, Aunt Laverne always seemed to be wagging her knobby finger at Martin whenever she came for a visit.

Aunt Laverne was not his favorite family member.

Martin steadied the lawn mower by grasping the handlebar while his dad yanked the pull-cord again and again. Martin had to hold firm because the lawn mower had lost its fourth wheel some time ago.

Probably before I was born, thought Martin.

The lawn mower sputtered and hiccupped more smoke. *Ka-fump-fump-fump. Ka-fump-fump-fump.* But it refused to start.

“Wheel Laverne onto the driveway,” said Martin’s dad enthusiastically, “so we can have a better look.”

Frowning, Martin dragged the lawn mower across the partially cut grass while his dad scooted into the garage. Out came the toolbox.

Martin groaned.

“Can I go in now, Dad?” he asked, dumping the lawn mower onto the pavement. “*Zip*’s on.”

“*Zip*’s always on,” said his dad, flipping the lawn mower onto its side. “And besides, Sport, I need your help with the tools. Hand me the crescent wrench, please.”

Martin sighed and shuffled over to the toolbox. He flipped open the lid. Inside was an assorted mess of tools.

Wrenches, metal files, screwdrivers.

Ratchets, hammers, staple gun.

Martin dug around until he spotted the two-fingered claw with the twirling spool. It had dents from when Martin had used it to nail up his “Keep Out” tree fort sign. Martin remembered how his dad had bolted across the lawn and delivered his very first lecture on Tools and Their Use and Abuse.

“Here, Dad,” said Martin, handing the wrench to him handle first, the way he’d been taught. Then he added, “I was watching the one where *Zip* discovers a system of dwarf stars.”

“Dwarf stars. Haven’t you already seen that episode?” asked his dad, pulling off the carburetor.

“Not lately,” grumbled Martin.

“Hand me the needle-nose pliers, Sport,” said his dad, a smudge of grease on his cheek. He was fiddling with the spark plug.

Martin rooted around for the tool that looked like the beak of a pterodactyl. He had used the pliers once to punch air holes into the lid of a jam jar for his butterfly collection. That, too, was a no-no according to his dad and had resulted in another Use and Abuse lecture.

Martin tried a new tack.

“Didn’t *you* have a favorite superhero when you were a kid?” he asked grumpily, handing his dad the pliers.

“I sure did,” came his dad’s surprise response. “Mine was a comic book hero named Volt Thundercloud. He could shoot electricity from his fingertips. He was unstoppable.”

“Volt Thundercloud,” repeated Martin, intrigued. For a moment, he forgot his annoyance over missing his show. “What did Volt look like?”

“He wore an all-black disguise. Black cape. Black mask. Oh, and lightning bolts that blazed up and down his arms.” Martin’s dad paused. “I haven’t thought about him in years.”

“Lightning bolts?” repeated Martin. “And did Volt fight evil, too?”

“You bet,” said Martin’s dad. “Volt was very resourceful. He would get out of danger by using ordinary things in ingenious ways. And there was always a terrific section in the comic called ‘Did you know,’ where Volt would teach us about tools and gadgets and how to fix things.”

“Like lawn mowers?” said Martin dryly.

“Very funny, Sport,” said Martin’s dad, turning back to the lawn mower. “We all wanted to be like Volt. Pass me the screwdriver, please.”

“Which type, Dad? Cross or slot head?”

“Phillips.” His dad stood and smiled. This was a test.

Martin had to think a minute, and then he remembered. Phillips screwdrivers had cross heads. And they were not to be used to mix paint. His dad had caught Martin doing that once when he was working on one of his rockets. Martin dug out the Phillips, its handle still stained with flecks of fireball red.

The heat of the afternoon sun was making the back of Martin’s neck sweat.

“Why don’t we just buy a new lawn mower?” he complained while tugging at his sticky shirt. “This thing never works.”

“Oh, we can’t give up on Laverne that easily,” said Martin’s dad. “As Volt Thundercloud would say, all she needs is some tweaking now and then.”

He flipped the lawn mower onto its three wheels. Martin automatically clutched the handlebar as his dad yanked the pull-cord. The lawn mower wheezed to an unconvincing start. *Ka-fum-fum-fum-fum ...*

“See?” said his dad jovially, waving off the cloud of blue smoke while Martin doubled over gasping for air. It was worse than choking on Aunt Laverne’s lavender perfume.

“How are my boys doing?” called Martin’s mom as she came out of the house, screen door snapping behind her.

She handed them each a glass of lemonade. They gathered around the shimmying lawn mower, Martin’s dad beaming in triumph.

But that proved to be too much attention for the lawn mower. As if for spite, it sputtered, then died.

Nobody said anything for a moment. Then Martin took a loud slurp.

“Can I go in now?” he asked, crunching down on an ice cube. Perhaps there was still time to catch the tail end of his show.

He looked imploringly at his mom, who nodded slightly, then whispered something to his dad.

“Sure, Sport,” said Martin’s dad, a touch of sadness in his voice. “I guess I can handle Laverne from here.”

Without waiting for his dad to finish, Martin dashed inside, flopped onto the sofa and clicked on his show.

Too late. The end credits were already rolling up the screen.

Cripes!

The next afternoon, exactly the same thing happened, just as Zip’s rocket blasted across the Milky Way. The devious lawn mower coughed up blue smoke and refused to continue, followed by the predictable tapping on the window.

“Pass me the crescent wrench, Sport,” said his dad, who stooped over the upturned lawn mower while Martin fumed. All around, the air buzzed with sounds of neighbors cutting *their* lawns in lickety-split time.

Martin’s mom came out with two more glasses of lemonade, then snapped a photograph of the two of them working in the driveway. Martin refused to uncross his arms for the picture. And he intensified his scowl.

After what felt like an eternity of tweaking to Martin, his dad confessed that he couldn't get the lawn mower started at all. Not even a single *ka-fump*. One by one, he dropped tools into the box and snapped the lid shut with a sigh.

Martin was not sympathetic. Today's infuriating attempts at coaxing the lawn mower to start had taken so long, he didn't even get to watch the *Zip Rideout* end credits!

That night, Martin dreamt he pushed the hateful lawn mower off a mammoth cliff that overlooked the city's garbage dump. It somersaulted in the air before smashing onto the trash heap, tires ricocheting in three directions.

Martin woke up with a smile. He slid down the railing in his rocket-covered pajamas and fixed himself his usual bowl of Zip Rideout Space Flakes. His mom was reading the newspaper at the table when his dad came in to get some coffee.

"Here's an interesting ad," she said, pointing to the newspaper. "Announcing the grand opening of Mighty's Small Engine Repair. Specializing in snowblowers, outboards, motorcycles and, look here, *lawn mowers*."

"Really?" said Martin's dad. "Where is it?"

"Victoria Road just past Fenwick." She looked up. "Hey, that's not far. Why don't you take the lawn mower there?"

"What do you say, Martin?" asked his dad, new hope in his voice. "Maybe we should give Laverne one last chance."

"Ready and steady," said Martin, sounding like Zip Rideout on the final leg of a mission. He was sure that an actual mechanic would take one look at their rusty, three-wheeled smoke trap and insist that his dad buy a new one. Then Martin's days of missing *Zip Rideout* would finally be over.

They lifted the lawn mower into the back of the van, Martin heaving his side as if he was turfing a garbage bag into the bin.

“Easy there, Sport,” said his dad. “Be gentle.”

For the first few blocks, Laverne’s obnoxious stench of burnt oil and rotting grass clippings filled the van, forcing them to open their windows. Martin gulped the fresh air. He couldn’t figure out why his dad was going to such great lengths to save something so old and crotchety.

Not just great lengths. Super heroic lengths!

“Victoria Road just past Fenwick,” said Martin’s dad. “This must be it.”

He pulled into the parking lot. Over the front door of the new garage hung a brightly painted sign that announced “Mighty’s Small Engine Repair.” It had a bulldog hefting an engine over its head. They pushed the door open and went inside.

“Can I help you?” asked the clerk enthusiastically from behind the counter.

“Yes,” said Martin’s dad. “Our lawn mower needs repair.”

“And we’d like someone here to check it out,” said Martin, blazing ahead. “A mechanic,” he added. “Someone who knows about engines,” he said for good measure.

“I think we can help you,” said the clerk. “Have a seat. I’ll see who’s free.” She disappeared behind the repair shop door.

Martin studied the lobby. Because it was so new, there were no grease spots on the floor and no cracked vinyl benches with stuffing poking out. But loudspeakers blared heavy metal music, and he saw familiar advertisements for mechanical parts on the walls. Martin nodded, satisfied that real mechanics worked here.

“Martin? Martin Bridge?”



Startled, Martin turned to see who was calling him.

“Jenny?” he said in surprise.

There stood Jenny, his one-time substitute school bus driver. The world’s best, in fact. But then his old driver had come back. Martin had not seen Jenny since.

Jenny was wearing coveralls with the Mighty’s bulldog and her name stitched on the shoulder.

“Do you work here?” Martin asked.

“Just started!” said Jenny, beaming. She reached over to shake his dad’s hand.

“I’m Jenny. And you must be Mr. Bridge.”

“Nice to meet you,” said Martin’s dad.

“You have a terrific boy,” said Jenny. “A big Zip Rideout fan. Member of the Junior Badgers. And very artistic, as I recall.”

Martin’s ears turned red. “We’re here about our lawn mower,” he said, shrugging modestly, but enjoying her compliment.

“Let’s have a look,” said Jenny brightly.

They headed outside, and Martin helped his dad unload the lawn mower from the van. To show Jenny just what he thought of their lawn mower, Martin dropped his side to the pavement.

“Careful, Martin!” his dad implored.

Rust flakes sprinkled the ground at Martin’s feet like a caustic scolding.

“Wow,” said Jenny, circling the relic. “This is a real old-timer.”

Martin’s heart lifted. “Too old to fix. Right, Jenny?”

“Oh, I’m not saying that. This model can last years.”

“It’s already *been* years,” said Martin, smile fading. “And look how rusty it is. There’s hardly any paint left. Don’t you think we need a new one?” he added meekly.

“Not necessarily,” said Jenny, crouching down. “I’ve seen some of these mowers go forever with the right tweaking here and there.”

“Well, now!” said his dad, giving Martin’s back a pat. “That’s just what Volt Thundercloud would say!”

“I remember Volt Thundercloud!” exclaimed Jenny. “He was that lightning bolt superhero who fixed things!”

The mention of Volt sparked Jenny’s enthusiasm to new heights.

“Can you leave it with me for a few days?” she asked. “I might even be able to track down a fourth wheel for you.”

Martin’s hope for a new lawn mower went up in smoke.

Blue smoke.

“Wonderful!” said his dad, winking at Martin.

Martin did not wink back. And he barely said good-bye to Jenny as he climbed into the van.

But Martin did manage one happy thought. While the cantankerous lawn mower was in the shop, he would be able to watch his show with *no* interruptions.

Days drifted by, the grass grew longer and the garage began to smell fresher. Then one afternoon, Alex and Stuart came over on their bikes. The boys gathered in Martin’s driveway.

“Did you see *Zip* yesterday?” asked Stuart. “When he flew through the exploding yellow nebula?”

“You bet! The whole thing!” said Martin proudly.

“Hey, my seat’s loose,” said Alex, climbing off his bike. His little brother was always borrowing Alex’s wheels and crashing into things.

“That’s easy to fix,” said Martin. “Grab my dad’s crescent wrench. It’s in the toolbox in the garage.”

“The crescent what?” asked Alex.

“The crescent wrench,” repeated Martin.

Alex and Stuart stared at him blankly.

“I’ll get it,” said Martin, passing Alex’s bike back to him.

He retrieved the wrench and handed it to Alex. “Here you go,” he said.

Alex held it as if Martin had just handed him a high-tech gadget designed to fix rocket boosters. Shrugging, he started to hammer the wrench against his bike seat.

“Whoa, there!” said Martin, grabbing the wrench back. He tightened the seat bolt while giving a mini version of his dad’s lecture on Tools and Their Use and Abuse. His friends looked on in awe.

“Say, Martin,” said Stuart. “My bell’s loose. Think you can fix that, too?”

“Just needs a tweak,” said Martin over his shoulder as he headed back to the garage. He came out wielding a slot head screwdriver and deftly secured the bell.

The boys spent the rest of the afternoon touring the neighborhood before rushing back to Martin’s house for their show.

The dreaded call came the very next day. Martin picked up the telephone thinking it might be Alex, who had left his Zip Rideout goggles behind.

“Hello?” said Martin.

“Hi, Martin. This is Jenny. Your lawn mower’s ready.”

“I’ll let Dad know,” said Martin coldly. He hung up and let out a long, frustrated sigh. Couldn’t Jenny tell he didn’t *want* that lawn mower back?!

Martin traipsed outside. The garage door was open, but he dawdled in the yard. Then it occurred to him that if he hurried, they could get the lawn mower back home in time for his show.

He popped his head into the garage. His dad was pinning the photograph of them working on the lawn mower to the wall behind his cluttered workbench.

Martin stood perplexed. He knew his dad only put up pictures of things he really liked. There were a couple of Martin’s drawings of Zip Rideout, magazine pictures of sports cars and some aerial photographs from the helicopter his dad sometimes got to ride in at work.

Martin was about to ask why that loathsome piece of junk should make the wall when his dad interrupted.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“The lawn mower’s ready,” said Martin glumly.

“That’s great, Sport!!” exclaimed his dad, taking a step back to admire his wall collage. “Grab my keys in the kitchen, and we’ll go get Laverne.”

When they entered the lobby of Mighty’s Small Engine Repair, Martin went straight for the clerk.

“Our lawn mower’s ready,” he declared, leaning with both hands on the counter. *Zip* was on in less than an hour.

“I’ll see if Jenny’s free,” said the clerk, and she disappeared behind the repair shop door.

Standing there, Martin returned his thoughts to his dad and why saving the lawn mower mattered so much. It was a puzzle.

“Martin!” said Jenny as she pushed through the door. “And Mr. Bridge! How *are* you?”

“Good, thanks!” said Martin’s dad, shaking her hand vigorously.

“I have a surprise for you,” said Jenny. “Follow me.”

They entered the repair shop and stopped. There in the center was a lawn mower. Only it wasn’t the lawn mower in the photograph that Martin’s dad had pinned to his workbench wall. This one looked brand new.

“Oh, my,” said Martin’s dad, taking a small step forward. “You *painted* it?”

“Sure did,” said Jenny proudly. “Do you like it, Martin?”

Martin gulped hard. Cripes! Now their lawn mower looked as if it would outlast dwarf stars!

“It’s not quite done,” said Jenny, misreading Martin’s expression. “I was going to add some decals to the sides. But then I remembered how artistic you are, so I thought *you’d* like to pick out a design.”

“Maybe flames like Zip Rideout’s rocket,” suggested Martin’s dad eagerly. “What do you say, Martin?”

Martin knew he had to say something. Jenny had gone to so much trouble.

“It’s beautiful,” he mustered.

Martin's dad returned to the lobby to pay the bill. Martin remained behind, staring at their lawn mower with its gorgeous new paint job.

"Martin?" Jenny hunkered down beside him. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"It's just that ..." Martin faltered. "Well. I didn't really want this lawn mower back."

"Oh. I thought you'd change your mind once I fixed it up," she said.

Martin sighed. "You don't understand. My friends get to watch *Zip Rideout* whenever they want. But every time *this* breaks —" He paused to kick the new tire. "— I miss my show."

"Why's that?"

"Because my dad wants me to help him fix it."

"He does?" asked Jenny in awe. "Wow! I wish my dad had fixed stuff with me when I was a kid. I had to learn about mechanics on my own."

Martin didn't say anything, but he flashed back to the photograph of him and his dad with the lawn mower. He picked up a crescent wrench from Jenny's workbench and twirled the spool. More pictures blazed by as he remembered all the times his dad had taught him about tools and gadgets and how to fix things.

Then it hit Martin like a bolt of lightning. Volt Thundercloud also taught about tools and gadgets and how to fix things. Just like his dad!

And just like me, thought Martin, proudly recalling his bike repairs.

Martin smiled.

"So what about some decals?" asked Jenny. "Do you want flames?"

"No. Not flames," said Martin, lowering his voice and setting down the tool.

“But I thought you liked Zip Rideout,” said Jenny.

“I do,” said Martin softly. “But I want something that reminds me of my dad.”

“Wonderful! And what would that be?”

“Can you keep a secret?” he asked.

“Sure I can,” she whispered back.

Martin told her under his breath. Jenny stood and gave him the thumbs-up.

“Dad,” asked Martin when they rejoined him in the lobby. “Do you think I could stay and help Jenny add a few decals?”

“Sure, Sport,” said Martin’s dad. He did not catch the knowing glance between Martin and Jenny. “When should I come back to pick you up?”

“An hour,” suggested Jenny. “Maybe a bit longer.”

His dad checked his watch. “But Martin. You’ll miss *Zip*.”

Martin shrugged. “Laverne needs a few more tweaks,” he said, calling the lawn mower by name for the very first time. “And besides,” he continued, “*Zip*’s always on.”

Martin walked his dad to the van.

“Ready and steady,” said Martin, giving his dad a Zip Rideout salute as the van drove off. His stomach did happy flip-flops, so perfect was his plan.

“Lightning bolts,” he had whispered to Jenny.

“Lightning bolts!” exclaimed his dad, hugging Martin tightly when he returned.

“Get the camera!” Martin called to his mom as he and his dad gently lowered Laverne onto the driveway back home.