

Book Three: Blazing Ahead
1 of 2 short stories

3,767 words

RELISH

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

“Psssst! Check this out,” said Martin’s friend Alex from the backseat as he pulled a jar from his knapsack.

Martin turned around to read the label.

“Relish?” he asked. “What do you have relish for?”

“It’s not relish,” said Alex mysteriously. “Open the lid.” He rocked the jar from side to side with a flick of his wrist.

“Forget it!” said Martin matter-of-factly. He straightened the tie of his Junior Badger uniform. Knowing Alex, there could be anything in that jar.

Anything.

And Alex’s eagerness made Martin extra suspicious.

Martin returned his attention to the road. His dad was driving, but Head Badger Bob's van led the way. Eight vehicles trailed behind, each one crammed with Junior Badgers going on their very first overnight camp trip.

It was supposed to be a short ride, yet they had been driving for hours. Martin's dad thought Head Badger Bob was lost, especially since they had passed the same gas station twice.

"I'll open it," offered Clark. He and Stuart were sharing a seat with Martin.

Alex handed the jar to him. Martin and Stuart leaned away.

"It's just relish," said Clark with disappointment.

Martin cautiously peered inside the jar at the chunky green contents.

"Try it," urged Alex.

Clark was about to stick his finger in when Stuart batted Clark's hand away.

"I wouldn't if I were you," warned Stuart. He commandeered the jar and twisted around to face Alex. "What is it, really?" he demanded.

"Classic horror-movie slime," announced Alex in a haunted house voice.

"Can you eat it?" asked Clark. He was known for eating anything on a dare. Crayons. Eraser shavings. Even paste.

"Clark!" blurted Martin. "You've really got to stick to regular food. No kidding."

"Come on, Martin," said Alex. "Where's your sense of adventure?" He turned to Clark. "Sure you can eat it," he said. "I made it from stuff in the kitchen. It's all natural."

"Natural slime," Stuart scoffed. "Now I've heard everything."

But Martin had watched a show about different types of slime on the all-science channel.

“Let’s have a look,” he said with new fascination. He took the jar from Stuart to pour some into his hand.

“Stop!” said Alex. “Don’t waste it!” He rescued the jar from Martin.

“What are you going to do with it?” asked Martin.

“You’ll see,” said Alex. He returned the jar to his knapsack. “I just hope we get there soon. I’ve got to get this back in a fridge, or it will go bad.”

Martin glanced warily at Stuart.

Stuart shook his head. “Ka-boom!” he muttered. Stuart said “ka-boom” whenever he thought something would go wrong.

A few minutes later, their van passed a large sign.

“Camp Kitchywahoo,” read Martin’s dad with relief. “Next turn on the right.”

The boys shifted excitedly in their seats as Martin’s dad parked beside the large ranch-style gate that marked the entrance to the camp.

“We’re here!” he announced. The boys whooped and tumbled out the doors as the rest of the cars and vans pulled up.

Martin took a deep breath. The air smelled like pine needles and moss and lake water. This was going to be way better than playing park rangers in his tree fort back home!

“Attention, men!” announced Head Badger Bob between cupped hands. “Grab your gear and follow me!”

The troop formed a ragged line and marched past the gate into the compound. Shoving through the double doors of the lodge, they gathered in the colossal mess hall.

Rows of tables and benches made from logs filled the room. The kitchen was off to one side, and tiny cabin rooms beckoned from the other.

Martin looked up at the banner that hung from the ceiling. “Blazing Ahead,” he read out loud. It was the Junior Badger motto.

Head Badger Bob consulted his giant clipboard jammed with papers.

“Listen up!” he ordered above the growing hum of excitement. “Pick your bunks and be quick. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

Badgers scurried past him, then crisscrossed from cabin to cabin trying to team up with friends.

“In here, Martin!”

Martin followed Alex’s voice to cabin room number seven.

“Saved the top bunk for you,” Alex continued in high spirits.

Somehow, Alex had already unpacked. His gear was strewn everywhere. Stuart and Clark sat on the opposite bunk beds, bounce-testing the mattresses. Their room had a soft, woody smell, and former Badgers had covered the walls with their signatures.

It was nice.

“Okay, troop!” Head Badger Bob called as he marched up and down the hallway, Papers kept dropping from his clipboard. “I want everyone to report to the flagpole. Pack your bug spray, your field guide and your mess kit.”

“What’s a messy kit?” asked Alex.

“A *mess* kit,” corrected Stuart, side-stepping Alex’s overflowing duffle bag. “But I could see how you’d get confused.”

Alex scowled.

“A mess kit is your plate and cup and fork,” explained Martin proudly. “We’re going to have our lunch in the woods.”

At the last Junior Badger meeting, the troop had been given a schedule chock-full of meals and activities. Martin had reviewed it every night at bedtime for the past week.

“You go ahead,” said Alex. “I’ve got to put this in fridge.” He bolted out the door with his jar.

Martin sighed. He knew that *someone* would be slimed before the weekend was over. But maybe, if he kept an extra sharp lookout, it wouldn’t be him.

The entire troop stood waiting by the flagpole when Alex finally joined them.

“Let’s head out!” commanded Head Badger Bob, big whistle, compass and binoculars hanging from his neck.

The troop whooped.

When Martin entered the woods, it felt like he was stepping into a tunnel. The trees overhead blocked much of the sun. The path was damp and spongy.

Pinecones. Birch bark. Deer droppings. Head Badger Bob pointed them all out. And Badgers made notes in their field guides to earn their Junior Hiking Badge.

Martin was about to draw the woodpecker he had glimpsed when Alex came over.

“Look what I spotted,” he said mischievously. He had drawn some kind of life form in the margin. It had knobby antennae, an extra set of arms and it appeared to be yelling.

Martin gave him a puzzled look.

“It’s Stuart,” said Alex, chuckling, and then he moved off.

When Martin looked up again, Alex was showing his sketch to Stuart. The shoving match that followed broke up only when Head Badger Bob blasted his whistle.

Birds and animals scrambled for cover, and any chance of seeing more wildlife disappeared with them.

At last, the troop came to a clearing and stopped for lunch.

“The blackflies seem hungry, too,” observed Martin, swatting his neck. He doused himself with half a bottle of bug spray.

Satisfied with his efforts, Martin turned to Alex, who was sitting beside him. Only Alex was now fiddling with Martin’s mess kit!

“Gotcha!” Martin shouted as he snatched his mess kit back.

“Got me? For what?” asked Alex, startled.

“What were you doing with my mess kit?” Martin demanded, checking for slime.

“*Your* mess kit? That’s *mine*.”

“Oh, *really*?” said Martin, eyebrow raised. He flipped the kit over and pointed to his name written on the bottom.

“Easy mistake,” said Alex. “My mess kit’s the same color.” He looked about.

“Oh. Here’s mine.” He plucked his kit from the ground nearby.

Martin stared at the two mess kits. They *were* the same color.

“Fine,” admitted Martin, wagging his finger. “But I’m on to you.”

Alex shrugged innocently. His infuriating grin said something else.

The hike back was uneventful except for the occasional soaker that happened whenever a Badger stepped in a puddle deeper than he thought.

“Cripes!” muttered Martin when he got one, too. He had been so busy keeping an eye on Alex, he hadn’t watched where he was going. His footsteps made embarrassingly squishy sounds all the way back to the lodge, much to Alex’s amusement.

After a big dinner of spaghetti, with chocolate brownies for dessert, the troop was ready for the next adventure.

“Attention, men!” Head Badger Bob called as they cleared their plates. “It’s time for a campfire. Go back to your rooms and grab your jackets.”

Benches scraped against the floor as the mess hall quickly emptied.

“How’s it going, Sport?” asked Martin’s dad as he intercepted Martin.

“Great, Dad,” said Martin, anxiously watching Alex bolt from the room at top speed. “But I should get to my cabin.”

“Oh, yes. Campfire,” said his dad appreciatively.

Martin nodded, even though the campfire was *not* his immediate concern.

“See you out there,” called his dad as Martin hurried away.

Martin barely heard him. He burst through the doorway and saw Alex scrambling up to Martin’s bunk.

“Gotcha this time!” shouted Martin.

“Got me?” repeated Alex, puzzled. He turned around on the ladder to face Martin.

“For what?”

“Get away from my bunk!”

“I wasn’t doing anything to your bunk. I was juggling,” said Alex, pointing to a couple of pinecones on the floor. “But I lost control.”

“Move out of my way,” insisted Martin, pushing by Alex. He whipped open his sleeping bag.

No slime.

He thrust his hand under his pillow.

Nothing!

But he did find the third pinecone wedged in the corner of his bunk.

“Here,” he said curtly, handing it to Alex.

“You seem awfully jumpy,” said Alex in a tone that made Martin’s ears burn.

Moments later, smoke began to drift back to the lodge. Cabin rooms sprang to life as Badgers rummaged through their duffle bags for their jackets, then scrambled out the door.

Martin stayed behind, searching for his Park Ranger Super-Charged All-Night Flashlight. He finally found it buried underneath Alex’s jumbled gear. Cripes! Martin rushed outside and joined the others.

Flames crackled and licked the tepee of logs under a black sky loaded with stars. The campfire blazed so high, the troop had to stand way back.

Martin glanced over at his dad and the other leaders, who stood by with buckets of water. Head Badger Bob busily whittled marshmallow sticks, ignoring the raging inferno.

Eventually, the fire burned down. Head Badger Bob showed them how to roast marshmallows and slide them between chocolate chip cookies. It made for a delicious, gooey sandwich.

Martin ate six.

“Okay, troop,” boomed Head Badger Bob. “A few of you are going for your Junior Campfire Badge tonight. To earn this badge, you have to entertain the troop.”

There were excited murmurs from the crowd.

“First up,” said Head Badger Bob, consulting his clipboard, “is Stuart. Stuart is going to play the recorder.”

Stuart stood. He played a soulful rendition of *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* while Alex hummed loudly, off-key. Stuart glowered at him until Alex stopped. Then Stuart played the first few bars of the national anthem for good measure.

He received a polite round of applause.

“Next up,” announced Head Badger Bob, “is Clark. Clark will wow us with some magic.”

Clark stood and pulled a roll of tape from his pocket. “Name an object, any object,” he called out.

“Clouds!” Alex shouted a split second before the others.

Clark blinked at him. “Pick something more solid,” he urged.

“Campfire!” Alex called out. “Lake!”

“Solid!” insisted Clark. “With shape!”

“Bunk beds,” Martin suggested, coming to Clark’s rescue.

“Thank you,” said Clark with relief. “Bunk beds it is.” He turned his back on the circle and began to fiddle with the tape.

Screech, scritch went the tape as he pulled off various lengths. After a few short minutes, Clark wheeled around and held out his hand. There in his palm was a dollhouse-

sized bunk bed made entirely out of tape. With his other hand, he placed two tiny campers on the bunks and tucked them in with all-tape blankets.

“Ooooooh!” chimed the crowd, applauding earnestly. “Neat trick!”

“Martin Bridge,” called Head Badger Bob. “You’re next. Martin will entertain us with a lesson on Morse code.”

Martin stood and turned on his flashlight.

“Morse code is a way to send messages without a phone or a computer,” explained Martin. “Each letter is made up of short and long bursts of light or sound. I can signal any letter you want.”

“How about the letter I’m supposed to write to my mom on this trip,” Alex called out. “Can you signal that?”

“Not letters you mail,” said Martin, rolling his eyes. “Letters of the alphabet.” He took a deep breath, refusing to let Alex rattle him. “Here’s how to signal the word ‘lost.’”

Martin proceeded to flash his light on and off, naming the letters as he signaled.

“Now see if you can guess *this* word. It uses most of the letters in ‘lost.’”

Martin flashed “stop.” But guesses from the troop were drowned out by Alex.

“Clouds!” he shouted above the others. “Campfire! Lake!”

“No,” said Martin, shooting Alex an icy glare. “I spelled ‘stop.’ Now here’s one more for you to guess. It uses some of the letters in ‘lost’ and ‘stop.’”

Martin flashed his light for three short bursts, three long ones, then three short.

This time, the troop buzzed with anticipation. Even Alex.

“I signaled ‘S-O-S.’ It stands for ‘save our souls,’” said Martin. “That means ‘send help’ if you’re in an emergency.”

Martin received a hearty round of applause. His dad gave the thumbs-up.

“We have two more entertainers tonight,” announced Head Badger Bob. “Next up is Jonathan. Jonathan is going to lead us in a song about —” He checked his clipboard. “— swallowing a fly.”

Martin’s dad leaned over and spoke quietly. “Jonathan got homesick, remember? His mom came to pick him up an hour ago.”

The troop nodded sadly.

“Right,” said Head Badger Bob. “Well, then. Last up is Alex. Alex, I believe you have a story to tell?”

“I do!” Alex jumped up with a wicked smile.

Before Alex even started, Martin flashed “S-O-S.” Stuart threw his arms up in the air and mouthed “ka-boom.” Clark joined the fun by jabbing relentlessly at the fire with his marshmallow stick until sparks shot up.

Ignoring their antics, Alex launched into a story about a space alien who was posing as a Junior Badger on a camping trip.

He went on at length about how the campers went missing, one by one, whenever they ventured into the woods. Even the leaders disappeared. Only puddles remained where they had last been seen. As if they had *melted*!

At last, there were only two campers left. And it was getting dark.

“They made each other promise not to leave the lodge until help arrived,” said Alex solemnly.

The circle of Badgers leaned forward, but nobody spoke.

“And to be sure, they shook hands on it,” said Alex. He reached out to shake Martin’s hand.

Playing along, Martin shook, but Alex didn’t let go.

“And then do you know what happened?” asked Alex mysteriously.

Martin gave a small shrug.

Alex measured out his next words carefully. “One of the campers looked at the other and said ... ‘Gotcha!’”

Alex pulled away from Martin dramatically. Long strands of chunky slime stretched between their hands.

Some of the younger Badgers screamed.

“Good one,” muttered Martin, wiping his hand on his jacket. He slipped Alex a smile.

The troop gave them both a standing ovation.

After that, the Badgers went back to roasting marshmallows. Martin had never been so full in all his life. It almost hurt. But he managed to force down three more.

Now that Alex’s prank was over, Martin could relax.

Still ...

It would be fun to get Alex back.

But how?

Lost in thought, he reached for another marshmallow.

The full moon was beaming directly overhead when Head Badger Bob finally announced, “Let’s put this fire to rest.”

They doused the flames and trekked back to the lodge.

After changing into his park ranger pajamas, Martin clambered to the top bunk and slid into his sleeping bag. He could feel the bunks shake as Alex climbed in below.

“Hey, Alex!” Martin called out in the dark. “I’m going to get you back.”

“Fat chance,” Alex taunted. “*I’m* the King of Pranks. If there was a badge for pranks, I’d get it. And besides, I still have plenty more slime in the fridge.”

Martin leaned over the rails to look down at Alex. Alex stared back, an impish grin on his moonlit face.

Martin rolled onto his side and schemed earnestly until he fell asleep. The next morning he woke up with a plan. Martin smiled smugly. All he had to do now was get a little help.

After an enormous pancake breakfast, everyone was fitted with life jackets, and the troop headed down to the lake for canoe lessons. Alex paired with Stuart, leaving Martin with Clark.

Perfect!

Martin climbed into the stern of a canoe, and Clark sat in the bow. Once they got good at paddling together *and* in the same direction, Martin leaned forward.

“Hey, Clark,” he whispered. “Want to help me play a trick on Alex?”

Just then, Alex glided by and splashed them with his paddle before quickly slipping out of range.

“You bet I do!” exclaimed Clark, shaking the water from his hair. “His campfire suggestions were awful.”

“Good,” said Martin, lifting his feet out of the puddle on the bottom of the canoe. “I’ve signed us up to help with lunch. It’s part of my plan.”

Campers earned Junior Helping Hand Badges if they assisted with one of the meals.

“But we’ll have to leave canoeing early,” said Clark, a note of disappointment in his voice.

“It’ll be worth it,” said Martin. “Trust me.” He proceeded to whisper his entire plan so there would be no chance of Alex overhearing.

“Brilliant,” said Clark enthusiastically.

They paddled around the lake once more and then returned to the dock.

“We’re going to help with lunch,” said Martin to his dad as he helped them bail out the water.

After they tended to the canoe, Martin traipsed back to the lodge with all-too-familiar squishy footsteps. Only this time, *both* shoes were squelching. So were Clark’s.

“Double cripes,” Martin muttered.

They changed into dry shoes, then beelined it to the kitchen. Head Badger Bob stood in front of a huge pot of water, dumping all the hot dogs in at once.

“Reporting for duty,” said Martin, cautiously eyeing the overfilled pot. “What would you like us to do?”

“You can haul out the dishes and cutlery,” ordered Head Badger Bob.

“What about ketchup and relish?” asked Martin helpfully. “Can we set them out, too?”

Head Badger Bob waved away the billowing steam with his tongs. Then the pot began to boil over.

“Sure,” he agreed quickly, distracted by the ensuing mess.

“Okay,” Martin whispered to Clark. “We haven’t got much time. You grab the dishes. I’ll go find Alex’s relish jar and make sure it ends up at our table.”

“And Alex will spread it on his hot dog!” exclaimed Clark gleefully, repeating what Martin had told him in the canoe.

Martin beamed. “Now, fall out,” he said, Head Badger Bob-style.

Martin made his way to the fridge and yanked open the door.

Whoa! It was jam-packed.

He began to pull out the items one by one.

Milk. Apple juice. Lettuce. Carrots. Broccoli. *Broccoli?* It was untouched. Must have been Martin’s mom who sent it. Martin shoved the broccoli way to the back. Ham. Cheese. More milk. Chocolate chips. He took a big handful. Ketchup. Mustard ...

But no relish!

Where could it be?! Martin began to panic. He quickly pulled out everything else holus-bolus.

“Three short bursts, three long, three short!!” shouted Clark.

Martin wheeled around to see his dad striding toward him. Martin glanced at the pile of groceries at his feet.

“What are you doing, Sport?” asked his dad. There was an edge to his voice.

“Helping with lunch,” said Martin meekly.

“More like helping yourself *to* lunch,” said his dad. Then he added, “Where’s the chocolate?”

Martin wiped his mouth guiltily, then rooted around and pulled out the bag of chocolate chips. His dad took a handful.

“Why don’t you go help Clark?”

“But —”

“Go on,” insisted his dad.

Martin watched helplessly as his dad took another handful, then started to repack the food. It would have felt so good to see Alex eat his own nasty relish! If only —

“Still here?” asked his dad coolly, turning around.

Martin sagged in defeat and joined an equally disappointed Clark in the mess hall.

They were setting out the last stacks of plates when the troop began to tumble through the doors.

Head Badger Bob bustled in from the kitchen carrying two large trays.

“Attention, men!” he announced. “I’ve already dressed the hot dogs. These ones have ketchup only.” He held up a tray. “And these ones have the works.” He held up a second tray.

“That reminds me,” said Alex, who stood nearby. He dashed up behind Head Badger Bob and snatched a hot dog from the tray with the works before disappearing into the kitchen.

Head Badger Bob didn’t notice. He set the trays on the food table beside the bowls of salad and potato chips and the stacks of plates.

“Start the line here.” He pointed. “And make sure you fill up. It’s a long ride home.”

Badgers rushed to the table. Everyone talked at once, but the mess hall gradually grew quiet as the troop filled their plates and sat down.

Clark handed Martin a hot dog when they got to the trays.

“Here you go,” he said. “The works.”

Martin reached for it just as Alex burst into the mess hall.

“Has anybody seen my slime?!” he called frantically. “I had it in a relish jar!”

The line came to a halt. Those seated stopped eating, their hot dogs frozen in midair.

Head Badger Bob cleared his throat. “Where was the jar?” he asked. For once, his voice wasn’t booming.

“In the fridge door,” said Alex.

Head Badger Bob let out a small gasp.

The mess hall full of Badgers stared in growing alarm at Head Badger Bob, then at the tray with the works, then at Alex and the half-eaten hot dog in his hand.

Alex gulped.

“The works?” repeated Martin to a jubilant Clark.

“I’ll pass,” he said with relish.