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Martin Bridge Series
Book Eight: 1 of 2 stories
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ROPE

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

Martin grudgingly shoved over as Laila Moffatt wedged herself between him and his two best friends, Alex and Stuart.

“I want to join the Junior Badgers,” she announced.

“No, you don’t,” said Martin. He flipped open his starship lunchbox, determined not to give her idiotic comment a second thought.

“Yes, I do,” she insisted, opening her lunchbox, too.

Laila’s lunchbox featured an old-fashioned character named Rosie. She had a can-do look, and was flexing her arm.

Martin glowered as Laila bit into her smelly tuna sandwich.

In class, Laila sat right in front of Martin. Her messy orange curls blocked his view of the blackboard. She was forever borrowing his pencil crayons. And whenever she got the right answer, which was a lot, she'd turn around and smile at him as if they shared a secret.

Martin's ears burned just thinking about it.

"Junior Badgers meet on Monday nights, right?" Laila asked, plowing ahead.

"So what if we do?" argued Stuart, coming to Martin's rescue. "You can't be serious about joining."

"I *am* serious," said Laila, chewing thoughtfully.

"Forget it, Laila," said Alex. "Junior Badgers are all about rocket launchings and surviving in the woods and building weapons. None of those are up your alley."

"Junior Badgers are also about earning badges," said Laila with deadly aim.

"Oh, so *that's* it!" exclaimed Martin. "You want to scoop all the badges! Don't you have enough awards and first-place ribbons?"

Laila generally cleaned up at the school's annual Awards Day. Martin imagined that her bedroom must be absolutely stuffed with prizes. The rest of the class had to scramble for leftovers like "most improved in spelling" or "teacher's helper" or "best debater."

Come to think of it, Laila had won "best debater" last year, too.

And it wasn't just winning awards that Laila was good at. She was a master organizer of team projects. She could beat Martin at his Zip Rideout Space Race Game. And Martin knew that for someone her size, Laila was surprisingly strong.

He had made this last discovery after Laila had showed up a day late for his birthday, and Martin's mom had forced him to play with Laila in the backyard. Instead of taking the ladder, Laila had climbed all the way up to Martin's tree fort by rope to drop some water balloons.

Neither he nor his friends had ever climbed all the way up by rope.

It was just too hard.

And a little bit scary.

"You *can't* join the Junior Badgers, Laila," Stuart insisted, interrupting Martin's thoughts. "You don't even know the Junior Badger pledge."

Laila put down her sandwich, stood and recited the pledge flawlessly.

I promise with all my heart

To try new things with courage

And blaze ahead with honor

To learn something new every day

Especially from those around me.

Then she gave them the secret Junior Badger salute.

All three boys gasped.

"How'd you know that?!" Martin managed to ask, horrified by this breach in troop security.

"Martin! I sit in front of you all day long. How could I *not* know," she replied snootily.

Martin's best friends shot him death glares. He hung his head. Guilty as charged. He bit into his cheese sandwich, which now tasted like sawdust. So did his favorite chocolate chip cookies.

At the next Junior Badger night, Alex elbowed Martin and pointed to the double doors of the lodge. Stuart looked, too.

There entered Laila in full Junior Badger uniform, an empty badge sash draped across her chest.

"She'll be adding badges to that sash in no time," Martin predicted grimly to Alex, who nodded in resentment.

Stuart clucked his tongue.

Laila scanned the hall, and, spotting Martin, gave him a cheerful wave.

Martin turned away, arms crossed. If Laila insisted on joining the Junior Badgers, that was one thing. But he sure wasn't going to make it easy for her to fit in.

No way.

"Attention, Junior Badgers!" boomed Head Badger Bob, the troop's leader. He waved a gigantic flag bearing the Junior Badger logo, which was the signal for everyone to form a circle for the opening burrow.

The Badgers quickly took their places and grew quiet. All eyes rested uneasily on Laila.

Martin could tell she was also on edge. She had reached for her left foot and pulled it up behind her. Laila always did that when she was nervous.

Good! His earlier snub was working.

“I’d like everyone to give a warm Junior Badger welcome to our newest member,” Head Badger Bob called out jovially.

Laila received a polite smattering of applause that quickly petered out.

“What’s *she* doing here?” Kyle muttered to Martin.

Kyle was a year older than Martin, and he had only one more badge to earn before his sash was complete. A complete sash would mean that he’d receive high honors when he moved up to Trail Makers.

“Beats me,” Martin replied, taking a step back.

Kyle’s breath smelled like a dishcloth gone sour.

“Listen! This is no place for your brainiac friend,” Kyle warned, wagging his finger in Martin’s face.

“She’s not my friend!” Martin protested.

“Tell her to stay away,” insisted Kyle. “I’m *this* close” — he showed Martin the tiny gap between his thumb and pointer finger — “to filling my sash, and I don’t need that brainiac taking up our Head Badger’s marking time.”

“But I don’t —” Martin tried to defend himself.

Kyle cut Martin off with a rude wave of his hand.

Fuming, Martin struggled to return his attention to Head Badger Bob. Laila stood across from him and grinned when she caught his eye.

He returned her friendliness with his fierce hands-on-hips stance.

It worked. She reached for her foot.

“As always, we’ll start off by awarding the latest badges,” announced Head Badger Bob.

Then he called out Martin's name. Martin eagerly stepped forward to receive his badge for bicycle safety.

Bicycle safety was one of the easier badges to complete. Many in the troop already had that one. But since Martin wasn't moving up to Trail Makers until next year, he was in no rush to get started on the harder badges.

After the awards, everyone took a seat on the floor.

"Tonight we have a special guest who will be teaching us about" — Head Badger Bob checked his clipboard — "oh, yes, *that's* the correct term. Scat!"

A man wearing a park ranger uniform moved into the circle. Laila shot her hand up into the air.

"What's scat?" she asked boldly.

"It's animal poop, Laila," explained Head Badger Bob.

Laila frowned.

"Why would we want to learn about *that*?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

"You can learn all kinds of things from studying scat," the park ranger cut in.

"Like what wildlife eat, how healthy they are and where they've traveled."

Alex nudged Martin excitedly. Poop was right up Alex's alley.

And that was probably true for the rest of the troop, judging by the growing buzz.

The park ranger proceeded to show them all kinds of scat — owl, deer and even coyote. Laila pushed each new sample away with a grimace, much to Martin's satisfaction.

The next morning at school, Martin took his seat and tapped Laila's pointy shoulder. She wheeled around and smiled.

“Hi, Martin,” she said pleasantly.

“What did you think about the poop?” Martin asked, knowing full well that she had hated that activity.

“Not *poop*, Martin! Scat!” Laila corrected him. And then she added curtly, “I have no intention of quitting, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

That was *exactly* what Martin was thinking. His ears burned.

“Besides,” Laila continued, “I’ve already started working on several badges. Public Speaking. Journalism. And Good Citizenry.” She counted them off on her fingers matter-of-factly.

Martin rolled his eyes. She was going straight for the hardest badges!

Typical.

On the next Junior Badger night, Laila showed up again, just as she had promised. And during the opening burrow, Head Badger Bob made a big deal out of awarding Laila the first badge on her ambitious list.

Laila beamed at Martin, still seeking his approval. But Martin quickly turned away, only to come face-to-face with Kyle.

Kyle did not look impressed.

After the opening burrow, everyone sat down.

“Tonight,” boomed Head Badger Bob, “we’ll be focusing on skills for outdoor survival. And as a special treat, we have a museum biologist on hand to teach us how to cook and eat ...” There was a dramatic pause, and the Junior Badgers fidgeted in anticipation. “... bugs!” finished Head Badger Bob gleefully.

“Holy cow!” exclaimed Alex, rubbing his hands together.

Eating bugs was right up Alex's alley.

Martin was thrilled, too. Laila had had a hard time handling last week's poop. He was positive that she would not be overjoyed about eating bugs.

Come to think of it, Martin wasn't so keen on eating them, either. But he'd do it if it would show Laila why she was not Junior Badger material.

All through the bug-cooking demonstration, Martin noticed that Laila was looking queasy and clutching her stomach.

"What's that know-it-all friend of yours still doing here?" snarled Kyle to Martin as the museum biologist began to serve the bugs.

Kyle's breath hadn't improved, and now there was a hint of dirty-sock-at-the-bottom-of-the-hamper added to the sour dishcloth smell.

"How should I know?!" Martin replied, fighting the urge to plug his nose.

But Kyle persisted.

"Tell that keener to stay away from the badges," Kyle growled. "Like I said" — he held the space between his thumb and finger close to Martin's face — "I'm this close to completing my sash."

"I get it," said Martin flatly. "Have some bugs," he added as the plate was passed around to their part of the circle.

"Delicious!" said Alex, who sat beside Martin, munching a handful. "Can I have seconds?" he earnestly asked their chef.

Martin gingerly picked the smallest bug he could find and quickly forced it down. It tasted mostly of the spices that the museum biologist had added. Only the *thought* of eating bugs tasted really bad, Martin realized with surprise.

Triumphant, he looked across at Laila. A look of revulsion and horror swept over her face as she tried to swallow a bug. She jumped up and bolted to the washroom.

Martin smiled smugly.

The next morning in class, Martin tapped Laila on her pointy shoulder. This time, he thought he'd try a different approach to make her see that it was time to throw in the towel. Instead of grossing Laila out, he would pretend sympathy.

"I'm sorry about the bugs," Martin said in an apologetic tone. He shook his head woefully to look even more convincing.

"I didn't like the bugs," Laila admitted. "But I'm not quitting, so you can forget it!"

Martin felt as if he had been hit in the stomach by a dodge ball.

"Besides," she continued. "I've added a few more badges to work on. Archaeology. Emergency Preparedness. And Soil and Water Conservation."

Martin's fake pity was replaced with genuine outrage.

"You're going for so many badges that Head Badger Bob won't have any time left to mark work from the rest of the troop!" Martin accused.

Laila shrugged off his outburst and turned to the front of the class.

Martin seethed.

Then he remembered Kyle's warning, delivered in that obnoxious breath of his. Martin smoldered some more.

The next Junior Badger night, Laila received two more badges. If she kept going like that, she would catch up to Kyle in no time!

Martin hoped Kyle wouldn't notice, but his sinking heart told him there was no chance of that.

"Before we begin this evening's activities, I have an important announcement!" boomed Head Badger Bob as everyone sat down.

The Junior Badgers held their breath.

"The National Junior Badger Council has created a new badge to go with our pledge. It's called the Badge of Courage."

"The Badge of Courage," murmured the troop.

"Only this badge is a little different," explained Head Badger Bob. "With all the other badges, you prove to me that you are worthy of receiving them. With the Badge of Courage, members of your own troop must nominate you, and then I make the final decision, based on the nominations."

"What does 'nominate' mean?" Alex whispered to Martin.

"It means to vote for someone," Martin whispered back.

"So you'll nominate me, right?" Alex replied without missing a beat. "Courage is right up my alley."

"Hang on," said Stuart, who had been listening in. "I'm plenty courageous, too. I think Martin should nominate *me!*"

Martin said nothing. He hardly considered either of his two best friends courageous.

Take the time that Alex and Stuart had tried to get out of rescuing their class parakeet, Polly, from a junior high school. Or the time they made a big show of signing up for lead roles in the school play, only to back out at the last minute, leaving Martin to

sing solo. And then there was the time they went to their superhero's movie premiere, *Zip Rideout and the Revenge of Crater Man*, but covered their eyes during the terrifying opening scene.

Kyle cut in. His breath was diabolical.

"You're all nominating *me*," threatened the older boy in barely a whisper. "I'm" — he showed the impossibly small gap between his thumb and finger — "this close to completing my sash. I only need one more badge to get high honors, and I'm all out of the easy ones."

"There's still Archaeology," said Martin dryly. "Or Emergency Preparedness. Or Soil and Water Conservation."

"Are you nuts?!" Kyle demanded, glaring at Martin. "Those badges are *hard*! They'd take *forever*!"

Martin fanned away the ghastly breath with his hand. He wondered if Kyle ever brushed his teeth.

Head Badger Bob started to hand out the nomination forms.

"Each Badger can only nominate one other Badger. You'll see that you have to explain how the Badger you nominate demonstrates courage. Only one Badge of Courage will be awarded per troop each year, so this badge is very special."

Martin studied his form. There were an awful lot of blanks to fill out. Then he scanned the members of the circle. He'd have to nominate someone. But whom?

"Get these nominations back to me in two weeks so that I'll have time to review them before our move-up-to-Trail Makers ceremony. That is," he continued jovially, but looking directly at Laila, "if I'm not swamped with other badges to mark."

Kyle leaned toward Martin again, his breath a lethal weapon. “Hey! How come that whiz-head friend of yours is still here?”

Martin snapped.

“I told you! For the hundredth time! Laila is *not* my friend!” he shouted. “And for the record, I don’t want her here, either!”

Everyone sitting in the circle stopped talking and stared at him.

Including Laila.

Her face went beet red.

Serves her right, thought Martin doggedly, fists clenched. The sooner she figures out that she doesn’t belong here, the better. And if he had to be the one to come right out and say so, well that was fine. At least now, Kyle would get off his back.

The awkward silence was broken when Head Badger Bob cleared his throat. “Perhaps it might be a good time to recite the Junior Badger pledge,” he observed.

He always suggested that whenever someone in the troop went off track.

Together, everyone stood and dutifully recited the pledge. Martin, still unrepentant, shoved his fists in his pockets and only mouthed the words.

“Now I’d like to introduce tonight’s special guest,” announced Head Badger Bob as everyone sat down. “He’s the president of the local reptile society, and he’s brought some live specimens to show us.”

The reptile expert pushed into the circle carrying several pillowcases with the ends knotted. The pillowcases squirmed when he put them down, much to the troop’s delight.

Martin glanced at Laila. She had pulled her knees to her chest, making herself as small as possible.

The special guest carefully untied the knots one at a time. Out came snakes in all kinds of patterns and colors. And everybody held one except Laila, who adamantly refused when it was her turn.

“Watch this,” said Kyle menacingly to Martin.

He sneaked up behind Laila and lightly squiggled his fingers against her neck, as if a snake had gotten loose.

Laila screamed and screamed as she frantically tried to brush it away.

The troop exploded into laughter, Martin included.

But it wasn't nearly as funny to Martin when, moments later, Kyle did the same thing to him.

“Get it off me!” Martin shouted, pawing at the back of his neck.

This brought about a second round of hysterical laughter.

“Very funny,” muttered Martin when he realized he'd been duped. His ears burned with humiliation.

And for the first time, Martin felt a little sorry for Laila.

When the troop gathered for the next Junior Badger evening, Kyle pounced.

“Hey, Martin!” he called, making sure that Head Badger Bob was out of earshot.

Head Badger Bob was at the far end of the lodge, going over plans with that night's special guest, a military historian.

“Guess you and Laila won't be getting the Badge of Courage any time soon,”

Kyle mocked.

Then he began to scream and go berserk the way Martin and Laila had done during last week's fake snake prank.

Badgers doubled over with peals of laughter, while Martin filled with enough anger for both he *and* Laila.

Laila said nothing. She clasped her left foot, but by now she had stopped looking to Martin for acceptance.

If only Laila would quit, Martin thought with bitterness, this would all go away.

Yet even though the solution was simple, he knew that Laila wouldn't quit. That she *couldn't* quit. She simply did not know how. She was going to keep coming week after week after week, snapping up badges left and right, while Kyle continued to make life miserable for her.

And for Martin.

There's no way out, thought Martin glumly.

And then he spotted the rope circuit.

The rope circuit was an awe-inspiring tangle of lines and cables that towered at their end of the lodge. It was reserved for the Trail Makers, so members in Martin's troop hadn't trained on it yet.

That meant there was only one Junior Badger brave enough to make it to the top.

Martin took hold of the rope.

"Kyle's wrong!" he announced boldly. "Laila's got plenty of courage. Just watch her climb this rope."

Laila seemed confused by Martin's sudden show of support. She did not let go of her foot.

“No way she can do it,” Kyle retorted loudly, just as Martin knew he would.

The doubters in the crowd began to chuckle.

“Oh, she can do it all right,” Martin boasted, still holding the rope out to her.

“Onwards and upwards,” he added.

It was something Zip Rideout said at the start of every mission.

Laila dropped her foot and beamed at Martin.

“Get out of my way, Kyle,” she demanded, grabbing the rope.

By the time Kyle let out his first guffaw, Laila was halfway up. By the time he wiped the smirk off his face, Laila had reached the top and was on her way back down.

Alex elbowed Martin. “How’d you know she could do *that*?” he asked.

“Laila sits in front of me all day long. How could I *not* know?” replied Martin.

He gave her the Junior Badger salute when she touched the ground in lickety-split time.

Laila smartly returned the gesture.

That evening, the troop’s special guest taught them how to build catapults. It was exciting to hurl objects, but conversation kept returning to Laila’s amazing rope feat.

“Will this fling water balloons?” Laila asked the military buff.

Smiling, Martin recalled the afternoon that he and Laila had spent together exploding water balloons from his tree fort.

A few weeks later, Laila was awarded the Badge of Courage, much to Kyle’s disappointment. Almost all of the Junior Badgers had nominated her because of her impressive climb.

But that's not why Martin had filled out Laila's name on *his* form. His nomination had more to do with how she had kept coming back to Junior Badgers week after week.

Even when she had to look at scat.

Even when she had to eat bugs.

Even when she had been terrified by snakes.

And most difficult of all, even when she knew that no one had wanted her there.

"Courage is right up Laila's alley," Martin had written.

And he had underlined his words.