

Martin Series  
Book Two: 1st of 3 stories  
2,637 words

## *YESTERDAY'S PARTY*

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

Ding dong.

Martin answered the door. There stood Laila Moffatt holding out a big, lumpy present. It was shiny with tape and wore a frilly, lopsided bow.

For once, Laila was wearing a dress. It was bubblegum pink. But something else was different. Martin ignored her wide grin and stared hard.

It was her hair!

Martin knew all about Laila's hair. She sat right in front of him at school. Her messy orange curls and constant hand-raising blocked his view of the blackboard. But today her hair was combed and held down with dragonfly barrettes.

"Happy birthday!" said Laila.

She turned to wave good-bye as her mom beep-beeped, then drove away.

"You're here for my birthday party?" Martin asked. He couldn't believe it.

“Am I early?”

“No, Laila,” said Martin dryly. “You’re late. My party was yesterday.”

“Yesterday? But the invitation said today. I think.” Laila’s smile faded.

“No,” corrected Martin. “*Yesterday*. It said *yesterday*. I invited the whole class, and they all came *yesterday*.”

Laila felt her pockets for the invitation. When she came up empty-handed, she whirled around. But her mom was long gone. Laila slowly turned back to face Martin. Then she reached for her left foot and pulled it up behind her.

Laila always did that when she was nervous. In that fancy dress of hers, she suddenly reminded Martin of a type of pink bird that stood around on one leg. He tried to remember its name, but his thoughts were interrupted.

“So I missed your party?”

“Yes,” said Martin, arms crossed. “You did.”

Laila let go of her foot and stood on her toes to look past him, as if expecting to see party guests inside. Martin leaned into the path of her stare until she stood down.

“Well,” said Laila in a little voice, “I guess I’ll wait on the steps until my mom comes back. She’s gone shopping.”

She tucked the present under her arm and turned to go.

“No,” said Martin glumly, eyeing the gift. “You’d better come in. I guess.”

He began to push open the door, but somehow Laila was already inside.

Cripes.

It was hard for Martin to like Laila. She was forever borrowing his pencil crayons at school. Somehow, she managed to sit beside him at lunch every day with her smelly

tuna sandwiches. And whenever she got the right answer in class, 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.

Frankly, Martin had been relieved when she hadn't shown up for his party.

But now here she was.

All to himself.

"Why, hello, Laila!" said Martin's mom as she came into the front hallway.

"Don't you look nice."

"Hello, Mrs. Bridge," replied Laila, and she curtsied. "I thought Martin's party was today." She held up her present as proof.

"Oh, dear," said Martin's mom, her face melting in sympathy. "And look how nicely you wrapped your gift."

Martin looked at the present again. He had never seen anything so overly taped together in his life.

"I picked it out myself," said Laila, rocking on her heels.

Martin rolled his eyes. "Can I open it?" he demanded.

Laila clutched the gift tightly to her chest.

"Where are your manners, Martin?" demanded his mom. She turned to Laila and smiled. "Come with me," she said cheerfully. "Let's go see if we can find some leftover cake." She put her arm around Laila's pointy shoulders and steered her toward the kitchen.

Laila did not look back.

"I'm supposed to go to Alex's house today! Remember?" Martin called. "Stuart will be there, too!"

Alex and Stuart were Martin's best friends. Today they were going to be Park Rangers on the lookout for forest fires. It was their favorite game, after intergalactic missions with their television cartoon hero, Zip Rideout, Space Cadet.

"That can wait," said his mom without slowing her step. "Why don't you set the table for your guest?"

She lingered on the word "guest" and shot him a look that said, "Set the table. Now!"

Martin swallowed hard, lips pressed tight. He took out two plates and glasses, then shut the cupboard doors harder than necessary.

"Fork or spoon?" he demanded as sharply as he could without causing his mom to turn around.

"Spoon, please," answered Laila as sweetly as icing with sprinkles. Martin set a spoon by each plate and plunked himself down at the farthest end of the table. He scraped his chair angrily against the floor and glared at his guest. But try as he might, he could not knock the annoying smile off Laila's face.

Martin's mom brought over what was left of the cake and cut it into two generous pieces.

Martin ate in stony silence.

"Shall I sing 'Happy Birthday'?" Laila finally asked between bites.

"No," said Martin. "We did that yesterday."

He licked the last smudge of icing off his spoon and pushed the empty plate away. Laila continued to eat like a princess, one morsel at a time.

“Mom,” Martin called impatiently. “Can I see you for a minute?” Without waiting for an answer, he stormed to the living room. His mom followed. “You’ve got to tell her to go,” he demanded. “My birthday was yesterday!”

“I know that. But she’s here now. We can’t very well send her away,” his mom said in a low voice.

“Well, I have plans!” Martin said extra loudly.

“I’m sorry, Martin, but a guest is a guest.” She patted his shoulder.

“All done!” Laila called merrily from the kitchen.

Martin sagged in defeat.

“What should we do now?” Laila asked when he trudged back into the kitchen.

“What should we do now?” repeated Martin, his voice a notch higher than usual.

“Yes,” said Laila, “until my mom comes to pick me up at four o’clock.”

Martin turned to stare at the little hand on the kitchen clock. He counted the hours on his fingers. His Park Ranger fire-fighting plans were going up in smoke! Martin was about to protest, but his mom gave him another look.

“Well,” he faltered. “I guess we could ...”

“You could play outside,” finished his mom. “It’s a beautiful day. Out you go.”

She ruffled Laila’s hair.

As Laila skipped out the back door, her curls started to spring up. Glowering, Martin followed.

Laila cut across the lawn. Spotting leftover party hats on the picnic table, she put one on and snapped the elastic under her chin.

“Here’s one for you,” she said, holding out a slightly crushed hat.

“No, thanks,” said Martin. “I already wore one. *Yesterday.*”

Martin picked up his basketball and began to bounce it on the shimmering hot pavement. Laila did not join in.

“I don’t like basketball,” she called from the grass, clutching her foot like that pink bird he still couldn’t put a name to.

Martin ignored her and shot three hoops in a row. He missed every time. This did not improve his mood. He bounced the ball some more to drown out her voice. Eventually, he glanced at Laila, who was now on the swings, head hanging, still wearing yesterday’s party hat.

Martin sighed. He picked up the ball and reluctantly joined her. They swung in silence, except for the scuffing of Laila’s feet as she dragged her polished shoes back and forth in the dirt.

Martin studied his swinging shadow. He knew it was nowhere near four o’clock because the blazing sun was still high in the sky, beating down on his neck. It was so bright, it made his eyes ache. He closed them.

It had been sunny yesterday, too. He remembered how his mom woke him up, covered his eyes and guided him downstairs to the backyard.

“Happy birthday, Martin!” she exclaimed as she removed his blindfold.

Martin stood in his rocket-covered pajamas and looked around. His superhero, Zip Rideout, was everywhere! On the tablecloth. On the plates and napkins. Even on those paper horns that rolled out when they were blown.

As Martin hugged his mom in delight, his dad came into the yard bearing a present. A Zip Rideout Solar System Explorer Set! It had been at the top of his birthday list. That, and a Park Ranger Super-Charged All-Night Flashlight.

He remembered how he played with Zip's set for the rest of that morning, right up until his backyard filled with laughing party guests, music and balloons.

"Say, do you have any balloons left from yesterday?" Laila asked.

Martin opened his eyes and yesterday's party vanished. In its place stood Laila, birdlike on one foot in her pink dress. Only she wasn't about to fly away.

"Why?" he demanded grumpily.

"Go get some and I'll show you."

Martin had no choice. If they didn't find something to do quickly, the afternoon would go on forever. He jumped off the swing and went back inside to the cool of the kitchen.

The telephone rang as Martin searched for the balloons.

"Where are you?" demanded Alex when Martin answered.

"Oh. Hi, Alex," said Martin with a heavy heart. "I can't come over."

"What? Why not? Ranger Stuart's here. We've already spotted our first fire!"

Martin peeked out the kitchen window, hoping this was all a bad dream. Instead, he saw that Laila had unrolled the garden hose and was inspecting the nozzle.

"Something's come up," muttered Martin. "I'll call you later."

“Call me later?” Alex repeated. “When?”

“I don’t know. After four o’clock, I guess.”

“After four?! But that’s the end of the day!”

Martin’s heart sank even further.

“Can’t help it,” he said, and he hung up.

Martin spotted the jumbo bag of leftover balloons next to Laila’s present on the counter. The gift was as big and lumpy as ever. Probably something from the all-pink aisle at the toy store to go with that fluffy dress of hers. He started to pick at the wrapping paper, but the tape got in the way.

“Martin!” exclaimed his mom from the doorway.

Martin jumped and bolted for the door. “Just getting balloons,” he muttered, grabbing the bag on the way out.

“Be nice!” reminded his mom.

Martin winced.

“Here,” said Martin to Laila, not altogether nicely.

Laila opened the bag. On each balloon, Zip’s rocket blasted across the sky.

“Perfect,” she said.

She fitted a balloon over the nozzle of the hose.

“Now turn on the water,” she called to Martin. “Real slow!” Then, “Okay, turn it off!”

Laila pulled the balloon off the hose and expertly tied a knot. She held the balloon up to the sun. The water inside wiggled and sloshed around.

“What do you do with it now?” Martin asked.

“Catch!” Laila teased.

She smiled and tossed it to him. Martin tried to hold on, but the slippery balloon burst in his hands with spectacular force.

“Wow!” he said. “Let me try!”

Martin filled a balloon while Laila worked the tap. But he had trouble tying the knot so Laila had to help. Martin didn't mind. He was too excited about all the possibilities for explosions.

“Let's toss them through the basketball hoop and see what happens,” said Martin.

“Okay,” said Laila, giggling.

Laila's balloons either hit the rim and blew up or missed altogether. Martin's went right through the hoop before splattering on the hot pavement below.

“EEEEEE!” Laila squealed in delight when their legs got sprayed.

“Do you think the balloons will break if we roll them down the slide?” he asked.

“Let's try it,” she replied.

The balloons wobbled as they skidded down and exploded in every direction when they hit the ground.

“It's like watching fireworks,” said Martin, fully impressed.

“What if we drop them from your tree fort?” Laila asked.

“Great idea!” said Martin.

“How do you get up there?”

“There are two ways,” said Martin, shrugging. “You can use the ladder or you can climb the rope.” He didn't mention that neither he nor his friends had ever shinned all the way up by the rope. It was just too hard. And a little bit scary.

Laila chose the rope.

“How am I doing?” she called as she neared the top.

“Great! You’re almost there!” whooped Martin, who had grabbed a water balloon and was climbing the ladder.

He reached for Laila’s hand and pulled her up through the trapdoor.

“Nice,” said Laila as she looked around.

“Thanks,” Martin said in awe, still amazed by her rope feat. “My dad helped me build it.”

They stood at the window and looked out at the balloon-strewn lawn and water-soaked driveway.

“You first,” said Martin, handing her the balloon.

She dropped it from the window, and they held their breath.

Down, down, down, down ...

BOOM!

The splatter reached as high as the tree fort.

“Did you see that!” Martin cheered. “Did you see that!”

They rushed down the ladder to fill more balloons.

Then one exploded in Laila’s hands. Her party dress got soaked, and her wet curls sprang out in every direction. When that happened, Laila laughed even harder than Martin.

The rest of the afternoon was filled with screams and laughter.

They were filling the last balloon when Martin’s mom came out with towels and Laila’s gift.

“Why don’t you open Laila's present, Martin? Her mom will be here soon.”

Laila nodded eagerly at Martin.

Martin had forgotten all about the gift. Seeing it now reminded him of how he had treated Laila when she first arrived. Uncomfortable at the thought, he tugged at his wet shirt and looked at his mom.

“Open it,” she urged as she plucked a piece of balloon from his hair.

Martin tried to unwrap the present, but it wasn’t easy. Laila must have used a whole roll of tape.

“Hurry up, Martin!” said Laila. She sat on her hands and squirmed.

Martin flipped the gift over to attack it from the bottom. More tape.

Finally, just as he was getting the wrapping off, she blurted, “It’s a Park Ranger Super-Charged All Night Flashlight!”

“Wow!” said Martin, freeing the big flashlight at last. “I really wanted this! I even wished for one when I blew out my candles! Thanks, Laila. How did you know?”

“I sit in front of you all day long,” said Laila. “How could I not know?”

Martin said nothing. He certainly did not know what Laila might like for her birthday.

Perhaps he should.

There was a beep-beep in the driveway.

“I’m sorry I missed your party,” said Laila. She got up to leave.

“Wait!” said Martin. “I almost forgot!”

He ran inside to get the last treat bag. Laila's name was printed on the side, but he had eaten some of the candy when she hadn't shown up yesterday. He hoped she wouldn't notice.

"Here," Martin said as he thrust the bag at Laila.

"For me?" she asked.

"Yes," said Martin, shoving his fists into his pockets.

"Thanks," she whispered, patting down the front of her pink party dress. An awkward silence followed.

Laila reached behind and grabbed her left foot.

Martin smiled. A pink flamingo! That's what Laila reminded him of! Like those one-legged plastic birds that flock to the front yard as a surprise for someone's birthday.

His birthday.

"Sorry you missed my party," he said. And he meant it. Then he added, "See you in class tomorrow."

Laila let go of her foot and beamed. She got into the car and waved good-bye.

Martin waved back.

"Are you coming in?" asked his mom as she started for the house.

"Not yet," said Martin. He lingered in the driveway for a moment, savoring the day. Then he headed to his tree fort and took a long look up.

After a deep breath, and then another, Martin grabbed the rope in both hands and slowly began to climb.