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Martin Bridge: In High Gear
Book Six: 1 of 2 short stories

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SCIENCE FAIR

by Jessica Scott Kerrin

“Who’s on your team?” asked Martin’s teacher, Mrs. Keenan, as she came around with her clipboard.

“Alex and Stuart,” said Martin proudly. They were Martin’s best friends. “And Laila,” he added a little less enthusiastically.

Laila, who sat in front of Martin, had done her usual pushy thing, insisting that she be on their team.

“You four worked together the last time the class did group projects,” said Mrs. Keenan. “I’d like to change it up a bit.” She consulted her clipboard. “Stuart,” she directed. “Why don’t you join *that* team?” She pointed to a threesome in the corner of the room. “And Gibson,” she called out. Gibson looked up. “I want you to join this team over here.”

Gibson? Martin frowned. He did not like losing Stuart from their group, but more than that, he was worried about the replacement Mrs. Keenan had assigned.

Gibson reminded Martin of Scoots, the notorious tabby cat who lived in their neighborhood. When Scoots wasn't getting stuck in trees or wedged under porches and having to be rescued by firefighters, the furry hazard liked to stroll across busy intersections, not even glancing at the cars that swerved in every direction.

Scoots was one lucky feline. And as far as Martin could tell, Gibson relied on luck, too.

"Okay, class," said Mrs. Keenan, after Gibson traipsed over and took a seat near Martin. "You now have your teams for the fair."

Martin's school held a science fair in the gym every spring. Last year, his class did solo projects, and he had presented his study of rockets. He would have gotten an A+ if it hadn't been for that minor trajectory error and the overhead lights.

Martin shook his head at *that* shattering memory. He still felt everyone had overreacted.

Cripes!

"This year's theme is Save Our Planet," Mrs. Keenan continued.

Laila's hand shot up.

"I'll take questions in a minute," said Mrs. Keenan.

Laila reluctantly dropped her hand.

"So, for the rest of today's class, I want your teams to discuss what your project will be for this theme."

Laila's hand shot up again.

"Not yet, Laila," said Mrs. Keenan, crankiness creeping in.

Laila huffed a little as she tucked both hands into her armpits.

“And one more thing,” said Mrs. Keenan warily. “I don’t want projects that involve any type of trajectory” — she looked directly at Martin — “exploding water balloons” — she looked directly at Laila — “or oozing slime” — she looked directly at Alex. “Any questions?”

Laila’s hand did not shoot up. Instead, she bunched her pointy shoulders to her ears.

“Now, as I mentioned, your project is going to be about saving our planet,” Mrs. Keenan continued. “But *this* year, it is also going to be about hard work and team effort.”

Martin glanced over at Gibson.

Hard work? Team effort? These were not words that Martin would use to describe their newest member.

“And for that, your contribution will be recognized,” said Mrs. Keenan. She began to dole out small blue cards. “Every group will receive twenty tickets. When your project is complete, you will decide, as a team, how many tickets each member will get.”

Laila’s hand shot up. “What if one person does *all* the work?” she demanded, protectively clutching the tickets that Mrs. Keenan had handed to her.

“Then that person would get all twenty tickets. But only if everyone on the team agrees. However, if members contributed equally, then the team would divide the tickets evenly,” explained Mrs. Keenan.

“What are these tickets good for?” asked Martin.

“That’s the fun part,” said Mrs. Keenan. “All the tickets will go into a basket, and I’ll draw one name on the day of the fair. The prize for hard work and team effort will be a signed copy of Zip Rideout’s special science edition comic book!”

“Oooooooooo!” chimed the class.

Martin practically whooped. Zip Rideout, Space Cadet, was his favorite cartoon superhero.

“So, does everybody understand the process?” asked Mrs. Keenan.

Heads nodded eagerly.

“Okay, then. You can begin your discussions.”

The class shoved their desks into groups.

“Any ideas for saving our planet?” Martin asked over the classroom buzz.

“I have a few,” said Laila with authority. She held up a long sheet of paper.

Somehow, she had already produced a list.

“Hang on, Laila,” said Alex irritably. “I have a few ideas, too!”

“Oh, *really?*” said Laila. “Like what?”

Alex fumbled around with the books on his desk, obviously buying time.

“Well,” he said at last. “What about a beach walk?”

“A beach walk?” Laila laughed. “What does *that* have to do with saving our planet?”

“The beach is part of our planet, isn’t it?” Alex demanded, red-faced.

Listening to this exchange, Martin saw how he could come to his friend’s rescue.

“You mean a beach walk where we go out and pick up litter, right?” suggested Martin.

Alex nodded. “Yes, that’s what I mean. Exactly.” He gave Laila a self-satisfied smile.

“I like it,” said Martin.

Laila frowned as she checked her list.

“A beach walk might not be on *your* list,” said Alex, arms crossed, “but it’s still a good idea.”

“Maybe,” said Laila, tight lipped. She turned to Gibson. “What do *you* think?” she asked in a last-ditch attempt to dismiss Alex and get back to her list.

“I say we go for a beach walk,” said Gibson, ignoring Laila’s blatant appeal.

As luck would have it, Mrs. Keenan swooped in to see how their team was doing just in time to hear Gibson’s reply.

“Great idea, Gibson! Well done!” she exclaimed. And before she could learn whose idea the beach walk actually was, she moved off to the next team.

Gibson shrugged sheepishly. Laila giggled at Alex’s indignant scowl.

For the rest of the class, they worked out the details about when the beach walk would happen and what supplies they would need. But even with all that planning, something about Gibson’s uncanny luck did not sit well with Martin.

And later, when Martin was out biking after school, he almost ran over Scoots. It cost him a scraped knee. He took this misfortune as a sign that Gibson was somehow going to cost him, too.

The next science class was spent talking about which beach they should clean up. Laila asked Gibson to take notes about their decisions, but he declined.

“I forgot my lucky pencil,” he explained.

“Can’t you write with something else?” asked Laila. “It’s your turn, according to the schedule.”

“What schedule?” asked Gibson.

“Glad you asked,” said Laila, switching gears. She dug into her desk and pulled out copies of a detailed work schedule for the beach walk. It had color-coded tasks and deadlines and everything.

“That’s a lot of tasks,” said Gibson.

“Holy cow,” said Alex.

Martin just whistled.

“Remember. This project is about hard work and team effort,” Laila reminded them sternly.

Everyone mumbled in agreement. Then, after much debate, they chose Carter’s Beach as their project destination. Laila ended up taking notes.

Martin sat back and surveyed his team members. Laila had certainly done more than her fair share of the work today.

More tickets’ worth than any of us, he thought.

And that’s how it went for the next few weeks. Laila kept everyone organized, Martin and Alex struggled to keep up with their ever-increasing list of tasks, and Gibson lucked out, doing very little because grown-ups kept coming to his rescue.

“Look! The librarian had a special display on beaches,” Gibson announced proudly, staggering under the weight of a stack of books that should have taken him hours to collect.

“Look! My mom’s environmental group loaned me these protest signs,” Gibson boasted as he lugged in placards to fulfill his task of making a backdrop for their display.

“Look! My uncle works in a radio studio, and he gave me this recording of whales singing that we can play during the science fair!” Gibson crowed in response to his sounds-of-the-beach assignment.

With each passing day, the team grew more and more frustrated. Gibson’s luck was just too much to take, especially since the rest of them had to work so much harder to complete their own tasks.

Martin was the first to speak up.

“Mrs. Keenan,” he said, standing in front of her desk after class was dismissed and Gibson had left the room. “Gibson isn’t doing any work.”

“Oh?” said Mrs. Keenan. “Didn’t I see him bring in books on the beach? Protest signs? Whale songs?”

“Well ... sure,” admitted Martin reluctantly.

“But he didn’t do any work to get those,” blurted Laila.

“He’s just lucky that way,” added Alex, to drive home their point.

“I see,” said Mrs. Keenan.

Martin could tell from her tone that she didn’t see.

“Have you told him how you feel?”

“Not exactly,” muttered Martin.

“Then give that a try,” offered Mrs. Keenan. “And if his tasks turned out to be easy, maybe he could take on a few more to even out the workload.”

Encouraged, they marched out the door.

“Gibson!” Martin burst out the next time the team met, and Gibson had breezed in without his lucky pencil once again. “You’ll have to do some *real* work if you want to earn tickets and a chance for the prize!”

“What do you mean?” replied Gibson indignantly. “I’ve contributed plenty.”

“You’ve contributed, all right,” Martin replied. “But you’ve had plenty of luck. We’ve had to work a lot harder than you to get our tasks done.”

Alex nodded as back-up.

Gibson gave an unconcerned shrug.

“He’s right, Gibson,” said Laila, licking the tip of her red pencil and furiously revising her schedule. “Here’s what you’ll need to do to even out the workload.”

She glowered at him, then spun her schedule around so that everyone could see it.

Martin and Alex leaned forward, eager to learn what Laila had come up with.

“Stuart was our best printer,” Laila continued, giving Gibson the gears. “Since we don’t have him, you’ll be in charge of making all the labels for our display board.”

Whoa, thought Martin, sitting back. Even *he* would hate *that* task. His printing was terrible. So was Alex’s. Martin could hear Alex suck in his breath at Laila’s pronouncement.

“I’m not very good at printing,” said Gibson. “The labels would take me a long time.”

“Look, Gibson,” said Laila icily. “This past weekend alone, Alex spent all kinds of time going to hardware stores to see if he could get donations of work gloves and recycling bags. Martin spent hours with his dad building those sticks we’re going to spear

the garbage with. And I passed on going to a matinee so that I could tackle, well —” She paused to review her schedule. “— everything else,” she concluded.

“Laila *is* way ahead on hard work and team effort,” agreed Martin.

Alex nodded.

“Okay. No problem,” said Gibson easily enough.

“He’s up to something,” grumbled Martin when Gibson left the room for a drink of water.

“I know!” said Laila, throwing her arms up helplessly. “But I can’t think of anything else that would make him work like the rest of us.”

“Well, if he doesn’t do those labels, then I say he gets zero, that’s *zero* tickets,” Alex swore.

Laila nodded, but Martin hesitated. He actually felt a pang of sympathy for Gibson. The printing task was a hard one. Martin certainly would not want to do it. But the pressure of both Alex and Laila staring at him made Martin nod in agreement, just as Gibson returned.

“I’m not sure I can make the beach walk on Saturday,” said Gibson casually.

“What do you mean?!” demanded Martin. His pang of sympathy was instantly replaced by raw anger.

“I have to take care of Alice’s pet hamster this weekend,” explained Gibson, nonplussed.

Alice was a little girl in the neighborhood, and Martin had taken care of her hamster many times when Alice’s family went away.

“A *hamster?!?*” repeated Laila. There was poison in her voice.

“Yes. Named Ginny,” said Gibson, as if this was the most reasonable explanation in the world. The rest of the team looked at one another in stunned amazement.

“You must be kidding!!” roared Alex.

Gibson blinked, unfazed.

“You’re going on this beach walk, Gibson,” insisted Laila, leaning forward menacingly.

“She’s right,” said Martin with a scowl. “Ginny’s no work at all. So you’re going to pick up garbage, just like the rest of us.”

Alex stepped in and pointed his finger right at Gibson’s chest. “And don’t ...” *Jab*. “be ...” *Jab*. “late ...” *Jab, jab*. His words dropped out like stones.

Gibson shrugged in his laid-back way.

The bell rang, and everyone shoved their desks back into rows.

“I bet he doesn’t show up for the beach walk,” Martin lamented to Alex and Laila over lunch.

And, sure enough, Gibson didn’t.

The team stood on the wind-whipped beach and waited a full fifteen minutes until Martin finally announced what was obvious to all: “He’s not coming.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon furiously spearing garbage along the shore and recording what they found. In the end, they collected four full bags. But making the beach pristine failed to lift their spirits.

On Monday, the team stormed into Mrs. Keenan’s class in high gear.

“Gibson didn’t do the beach walk!” they complained in unison.

Mrs. Keenan looked up from her desk. “Really?” she asked. “And you reminded him about the prize for hard work and team effort?”

“Yes!” they griped together. “We did just like you said.”

“I see,” she replied calmly. “Perhaps I’ll have a private word with Gibson. Are there still some important tasks that need to be done?”

“Labels,” said Martin with vicious precision.

“Then I’ll be sure to bring that to his attention,” said Mrs. Keenan.

With some small satisfaction, they took their seats.

On the night before the science fair, the team met at Martin’s house to put the final touches on their project. But there were still no labels.

“Where on earth is Gibson?!” demanded Laila, looking at her watch with wild eyes.

“I thought Mrs. Keenan had a word with him,” Alex snarled.

Martin didn’t say anything. He was too busy worrying about having to do those hateful labels himself.

As Martin’s mom came in with a tray of milk and his favorite cookies, the doorbell rang.

It was Gibson. Everyone froze when he entered Martin’s room.

“Sorry I’m late,” he apologized. “I was watching firefighters rescue Scoots from the top of a telephone pole.”

There was no time for niceties.

“Did you print the labels?” Alex demanded.

“No,” said Gibson, snatching a cookie from the tray.

Laila looked ready to scream.

“I brought this instead,” said Gibson. He held up a label maker.

“Is that a label maker?” asked Martin.

“You said we needed labels, didn’t you?” said Gibson, turning the machine on with one easy press of a button.

He proceeded to pump out label after label and stick them onto the display board. He was done in ten minutes flat, and *still* managed to eat most of the cookies.

“Got to go,” said Gibson as he packed up his label maker and brushed the crumbs from his face onto Martin’s carpet.

Out the door he went.

“The labels do look great,” said Martin, finally breaking the silence.

“Yes, they do,” admitted Alex. “But once again it took him no time at all. Meanwhile, I’ve spent *hours* on this project.”

“*You’ve* spent hours,” said Laila. “What about *me*?!”

“Okay, okay,” said Martin, quick to intervene. “The project’s done. Let’s divvy up the tickets for hard work and team effort.”

“There’s twenty altogether,” Alex reminded them while Laila pulled the blue cards out of her knapsack. “I say we give Laila seven. She did more work than anyone. And I say Martin and I should get six each.”

“Sounds fair,” said Martin, knowing Laila would double-check Alex’s math.

Laila counted out the tickets. “Wait a minute,” she said. She held up a ticket. “There’s one left.”

“Really?” said Alex. He recounted on his fingers. “Well, you can’t give it to Martin or me because we did the same amount of work.”

“What about giving one more ticket to Laila?” suggested Martin.

“No,” said Laila generously. “I didn’t do *that* much more work than you two.”

Silence.

“I guess Gibson gets it, then,” said Martin at last.

Alex and Laila looked at him as if he were a traitor.

“Well, what else can we do with a single ticket? Besides, the labels do look great. And he *did* come through with the whale songs and protest signs and library books,” Martin reminded them.

“I guess,” said Alex grudgingly.

“It’s only one ticket,” admitted Laila with reluctance.

They filled their names in on the tickets, and Martin completed Gibson’s for him.

The next morning, they dropped their tickets into the basket and set up their science project in the gym.

“Where’s Gibson?” asked Mrs. Keenan when she came around to check on their progress.

“Who knows!” growled Alex. “We gave up on him.”

Mrs. Keenan nodded sympathetically. She made a note on her clipboard before moving off.

Laila proceeded to neatly arrange a stack of handouts she had prepared on interesting ocean facts, a task that wasn’t even on her list.

“Great work, Laila,” said Martin sincerely, thinking she probably should have gotten that last ticket after all.

Laila beamed.

Gibson showed up moments later, once all the work was done.

“Lucky timing,” said Martin testily.

Alex and Laila ignored him altogether.

“Attention, class,” announced Mrs. Keenan from the stage. “I’m now going to draw the name for the prize for hard work and team effort.”

Martin’s heart did a little leap. He hoped his name would be picked. Sure, Laila had done more work, but because Martin was such a big Zip Rideout fan, he was certain the prize would mean more to him than to anyone else in the room.

“The prize goes to —” Mrs. Keenan plunged her hand into the basket of tickets, swirled them around, and pulled one out. “— Gibson.”

The crowd gasped.

Mrs. Keenan double-checked the ticket and cleared her throat. “Gibson,” she repeated a little louder. “Come on up.”

As Gibson wove his way through the crowd to claim his ill-gotten reward, there was a slight smattering of applause.

Alex wheeled around. “How could this have happened?”

Laila didn’t say anything at all. She just kept staring straight ahead, drop-jawed at the unbelievable turn of events.

Martin’s ears burned as he watched Gibson accept the Zip Rideout comic book.

“You told me that Gibson hardly did any work,” said Mrs. Keenan when she visited their project later on. Gibson was busy wandering around the science fair, showing off his prize.

“He didn’t,” said Alex with open hostility. “Gibson’s just plain lucky.”

“You’re absolutely right,” agreed Mrs. Keenan. “And he was especially lucky to have been placed with such hard-working classmates. You three have done an excellent job.”

The team mulled this over as she posted their mark on their display.

An A++

“Two plusses! said Laila in awe.

“Holy cow!” exclaimed Alex.

“Thanks, Mrs. Keenan!” said Martin. He felt as if he would burst.

Martin and Alex play-punched each other in the shoulder, and Laila gave them both little hugs.

“Gibson will get his own mark,” said Mrs. Keenan, and she moved off to score the rest of the projects.

The next time Martin spotted Gibson was on the school bus ride home.

“Just look at Gibson,” said Martin dryly to Stuart, who sat beside him. “He’s *still* riffling through Zip’s special science edition.”

“Gibson’s lucky, all right,” agreed Stuart. “But *you* got an A with double plusses! Congratulations on the top mark at the fair!”

“Well, thanks!” said Martin. “We worked hard.” He was surprised to discover that receiving two plusses still made him smile.

Beam, in fact.

The bus pulled up to Gibson's stop.

Martin watched Gibson hastily jam his lucky prize into his knapsack and jump off. But as the bus pulled away from the curb, something fluttered by the window and caught Martin's eye. He elbowed Stuart and turned around in his seat to peer out.

There was Gibson chasing his wind-blown comic book down the sidewalk. It stopped only when it landed in a monster-sized puddle. He bent down to retrieve the sopping mess just as Scoots rocketed past, a frisky dog in hot pursuit.

Gibson got soaked. Twice.

It was hilarious!

"That's the thing about luck," said Stuart with a shrug. "It comes and goes."

"But an A with double plusses stays put," concluded Martin. He heaved a contented sigh and settled in for the rest of the ride.