



The Summer Trackers. Between Land and Sky

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Cousins Martin and Markus spend their summer holidays at the family cabin. One day, they discover a mysterious inflatable raft and a sack of money on the shore. As the boys are big fans of detective stories, they decide to investigate the source of the money. This leads them on an exciting and dangerous journey, by the end of which the boys start calling themselves The Summer Trackers. When a costly painting disappears from a neighbouring mansion the following year, The Summer Trackers are called into action again.

Award:
2017 Children's Story Competition My First Book, 3rd place (The Case of the Strange Sock)



Chapter 1

[...]

Martin hadn't been out of town in a very long time. He and his family had driven the three hours and back to Tartu once that winter, but the school year had otherwise passed in the capital and now, he was dying to see something else. There were places in the city where you could get down to the sea, of course, but it was one hundred times better at their summer cabin in nearby Vääna-Jõesuu.

Now, riding in the backset of the car and staring out the window, everything was exciting again. Martin had a sharp eye and noticed many changes in the scenery that had happened over the last six months. Trackers must be attentive and have a keen awareness of detail, he thought, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

"Is Markus coming, too?" he asked his mom, who was in the passenger seat.

"He should be, if they're not there already," she replied.

Who would get there first? Martin squirmed impatiently. He wanted to be number one on the scene and discover all that was new before his cousin did. To be the one who was "in the loop", so to say. Who knew everything so that whenever his cousin was surprised, he could scoff: "I've known that for ages already! I'm in the loop."

"Hey, check it out! Look what I found! There's moss growing on the roof of our fort!" Markus would yell, to which Martin would respond: "I've known that forever. It was the first thing I saw when I got here—before you, of course."

"Whoa! Come look at this cool hole in the ground! What lives in there? A water rat, maybe?" Markus would exclaim, to which Martin would yawn and say he'd spotted it the second he set foot on the lawn. When he'd gotten there first, naturally.

"You've always got to be the first one to see everything!" Markus would grumble, after which Martin would start to feel a little guilty. And then Markus would cautiously say, "Something made a nest up in the oak tree," and Martin would stare at it wide-eyed and say, "No way! I didn't notice that before! Wow!" Martin could tell whenever his friend was starting to feel down, and having a good relationship with his cousin—who was also his best friend—was far more important than the fact that he'd actually already seen the nest. Naturally, because he was first!

Martin daydreamed these things as he stared out the car window. When they were nearing the bus stop where his aunt and their family usually got off, he saw the bus had arrived before them and Markus and his parents were just starting to head towards the cabin. Martin's heart leapt with joy and he asked his dad to stop so he could get out and walk with them. He'd never have taken that journey alone, as it was close to a kilometer-long walk to the cabin. Still, walking it with a friend was completely different.

Dad was standing on the roof of the cabin holding a long metal cable, at the end of which dangled a metal brush and an iron ball tied to it for weight. He lowered the cable into the chimney and started pulling it up and down. A giant cloud of soot poured out. Dad was scraping all the dust and soot from inside of the chimney pipes to make sure it didn't catch fire, which could cause lots of damage. In spite of their mothers' warnings, Martin and Markus had climbed up after Martin's dad. The view over the squat apple trees was spectacular. It even gave a different perspective of things close by, such as the man reading a book on the deck chair below. The boys called to him and waved. Markus's father waved back.

Markus and Martin noticed that the neighboring cabin, which had been for sale the previous year and turned out to be the thieves' hiding place, had been demolished and a grand villa had popped up in its place. It was as if the building had sprouted overnight!

"I wonder who's going to move in," Markus pondered.

There was no one in sight. It was clear that the house wasn't completely finished yet. Judging by the various construction materials stacked in the yard, they could tell that the walkway was still a work in progress and the window trim hadn't been put up yet. Snow-white sculptures were waiting to be installed and young cedar trees with their root balls wrapped in netting were huddled together in one corner of the garden.

"It's going to be quite the castle," Martin's dad commented when he noticed the boys peering at the neighboring yard.

"Who's going to live there?" asked Martin.

"Don't really know. I heard it was some businessman," his dad replied.

"Hope it's not the same kind of 'businessman' as the last ones," Markus muttered.



His heart raced whenever the events of last summer came to mind. It had all ended well, but he didn't want to undergo that kind of fear ever again—even though it had been thrilling. He preferred things that were exciting but not scary. Like in movies.

"I bet we'll figure it out," Martin said, elbowing Markus. "All three of us. Where is Ricky, by the way? Have you seen him? Are they here yet?"

Ferdinand, their neighbor to the north of the cabin, hadn't arrived for the summer yet. Yet given how nice and warm the weather was, it wouldn't be long before he showed up with Ricky—the third member of their gang. Ricky was a dog which the boys had trained to track scents and even knew to save people from drowning. He was actually so good at water rescue that his owner could never go swimming in the sea when the dog was around. Ferdie (as his friends called him) did sometimes pull it off after a lot of plotting and planning, but for the most part, he ended up pantsless. The simple reason was that Ricky would tug so hard on his swim trunks while trying pull him from the water that they would eventually give way and rip. Therefore, Ferdie usually asked the boys to take Ricky off his hands while he went "for a little dip", as he liked to say. The boys didn't have to be asked twice. Ricky, Martin, and Markus were a team.

Chapter 2

Markus was lying flat on his belly on a beach towel between the dunes. He'd closed his eyes for a moment. Martin was lying next to him. The steady sound of waves crashing and the pleasant warmth broken only by cooling breezes was so relaxing that he started getting drowsy. Still, Martin's restless fidgeting helped to prevent him from falling asleep. He kept turning this way and that and just couldn't get comfortable. Martin decided to scoop up a handful of sand and let it trickle onto Markus's calf. The grains of sand bounced off the back of Markus's leg and piled up around it. A strong breeze then blew it all away.

"That tickles," Markus said in a muffled voice, adding: "I'm bored."

"Hold on, things are about to get interesting," Martin replied.

Markus pushed himself up onto his forearms and looked around. Walking briskly towards them was a man wearing glasses, a pale short-sleeved shirt, and big blue swim trunks.

"Excuse me, boys—you haven't seen a phone lying

around here, have you?" he asked, looking quite anxious.

"Is it yours?" asked Martin.

"Mhm, that's right."

"Where do you usually carry it?"

"Right here," the man said, patting his empty shirt pocket.

"Do you walk your dog here often?" Martin pressed.

"Yeah, sure. Every day. But I lost my phone just now." Then, asked in return: "How do you know I have a dog?"

"You're holding a leash," Martin said, pointing to the dog leash wrapped around the man's wrist.

"Oh, so I am."

"You just went for a run, didn't you?" Martin continued bombarding the man with questions.

"Yes, but how on earth do you know that?"

"You're sweating, your face is red, and you're out of breath. If I were you, I'd backtrack through all the places you were before you lost your phone."

"That's what I'm doing right now. I haven't seen it anywhere."

"But you were walking your dog before that?"

"Yes," said the man.

"And I suppose you leaned down somewhere?"

"That's right . . . How did you know? I had to scoop up some doggie doo-doo," the man said in astonishment.

"Fantastic. We must all do our part keep the beach clean. As for your phone, however, it's right where your pup did its business," Martin said, crossing his legs triumphantly.

"Where?"

"Right next to the trash can by the changing booth."

Markus was staring at his friend in amazement the whole time he solved the mystery of the lost phone with playful ease. The man looked just as stunned. He walked over to the changing booth, looked around a little, and then picked something up from the mossy ground. He then came back to where the

boys were reclining.

“That’s incredible—how did you know?” he asked.

“It’s elementary. Mere deduction,” Martin replied, grinning.

The man thanked Martin again and started to leave.

“Although, I might add,” Martin called after him, causing the man to stop and turn around, “you actually shouldn’t walk your dog here during the day.”

It was true, and signs at both ends of the path along the beach confirmed it. Dog owners were only allowed to bring their furry friends to the beach after eight o’clock p.m.

“You’re absolutely right. If I hadn’t brought my dog here, then I probably wouldn’t have lost my phone, either . . . my bad,” the man said with a smile and a wave, then politely thanked Martin again.

Markus couldn’t hold back his astonishment any longer. “How the heck did you figure that out? You’re a real detective!”

“My friend,” Martin said with a note of pretend arrogance in his voice, “it’s obvious that it’s all too easy for a phone to fall out of someone’s shirt pocket, but when they go for a run or bend over on top of that, then the risk is even greater.”

“I sure wouldn’t have been able to figure that one out!”

Martin grinned slyly.

“It’s simple experience, my friend,” he said, then broke down laughing. “And you know what? I saw it fall out of his pocket!”

That set Markus off laughing, too.

“Why didn’t you say anything right away, though?” he asked after a while.

“Well, I figured he would come looking for it sooner or later. I wanted him to learn a little lesson.”

“You mean about walking his dog on the beach?”

“Sure. I mean it doesn’t bother me personally, but I bet you can remember that time when there was a lady with an angry dog running around off-leash here, and it nearly scared a poor kid to death,” Martin said.

Markus remembered.