



No One Can Know Who You Are



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1

Secret Number and No Photos

He whizzes into the bike shed right behind me, hops off his bike, and takes off his helmet. He has short black hair, a gray hoodie, and blue pants. I've never seen him before, but I know who he is.

“Hi,” I say. “Are you Stian? I’m Casper. You’re starting in my class.”

Stian looks at me without saying a word. He just moved here, which is strange because Vågen is a tiny town way up north, the kind of place most people leave as soon as they can. Maybe I’m the first person he’s meeting here. In that case, it’s my job to make Stian feel welcome. I pull out my phone. Maybe we can share some cool videos.

“What’s your number?” I ask.

Stian doesn’t respond. He speaks Norwegian, right? I hold out my phone and ask in English: “Your number?”

“It’s secret,” he mumbles.

“Why?”

Stian’s eyes kind of go dark, and he looks down.

“We can call each other and text,” he whispers. “But no photos. And don’t give my number to anyone. No one. Do you promise?”

He’s messing with me! I feel a laugh welling up. I love this kind of humor—saying crazy things with a straight face. I reply seriously, without laughing:

“Roger that! Secret number, no pictures, top secret.”

I give him my number, then he says his in a really quiet voice, even though the playground is totally empty. All the others have already gone inside and no one could possibly hear us.

In the classroom, everyone goes quiet and stares at Stian when we come in. It’s the first time we’ve ever gotten a new student. There used to be seven of us, and yesterday, the

teacher, Jan Rune, told us we'd be eight. We have double desks, and everyone sits with their friend: Andreas and Matti, Adele and Sara, Elise and Eva Maria. Stian will sit with me—at the only free spot.

Jan Rune introduces himself and says he's been our teacher for the last three years. He welcomes us to the second day of the seventh grade and Stian's first day. Everyone says hi and what their name is.

"Why'd you move here?" Andreas asks.

"My mom and dad got divorced. Oslo's expensive, my mom wanted to get out of the city, and she can work from home so we can live anywhere."

Stian's voice is loud and he talks really quickly, and it almost sounds like he's reciting lines he's memorized.

Jan Rune starts class by talking about netiquette: think before you click on a link. Always ask permission before you take a picture. If someone's in the background of your selfie, you have to ask them, too. Never spread names, addresses, or phone numbers.

Jan Rune's gaze sweeps over the class as he speaks. You have to look up now and then, otherwise he'll say your name and ask something to check if you're really paying attention. You would think he might give Stian a little smile to show he cares about the new student, but Jan Rune's gaze just skips over Stian and he hardly looks at me either, as if netiquette is about everyone besides the two of us at this desk.

Secret number and no photos... What if Stian really meant it? Is that why Jan Rune is talking about netiquette during the first ten minutes of Stian being in our class?

2

Who's Bastian?

We head toward the gym during break. Andreas is talking with Matti and Adele is talking with Sara. Elise and Eva Maria walk behind us like always. Everyone keeps sneaking curious glances at Stian. Aren't they going to try to get to know the new student? Stian walks close to me, almost like we became friends in the bike shed earlier. He's maybe an inch shorter than me, so I'm still the tallest boy in school. It must be awful to move and be the new kid, especially when everyone is looking at you but no one is talking to you.

“Do you like scary movies?” I ask loudly. “We have a movie club.”

“We meet up in my basement,” Adele tells him.

“We watch all kinds of horror movies,” Matti says. “Ghosts and zombies and monsters and aliens. If you’re the kind of guy who gets nightmares and pees his pants, you should probably stay at home.”

Stian doesn’t respond. Either he doesn’t like scary movies, or maybe he doesn’t talk that much, kind of like me. I brought up the movie club so the others would talk to Stian, and it worked.

“Did you take the wrong bag or something?”

Andreas points at Stian’s light blue gym bag, which has some small letters written on the side in Sharpie. The writing has almost faded away, but Andreas reads it aloud.

“It says Bastian Jensen. Who’s Bastian?”

Stian’s gaze goes dark and he looks down. Just like when I asked for his number earlier. Everyone is quiet, waiting for an answer. I can feel inside me how uncomfortable Stian is. I want to say something, to save Stian from Andreas’s nagging, but then Stian answers:

“Bastian is my cousin. It was a hand-me-down.”

“Did you just make that up?” Andreas says with a grin.

Stian’s face gets red. Andreas always has to mess around. Not even Stian, who’s new, can get a break. I should ask Andreas to cut it out, but then he’ll just tease me instead.

Some keys jangle behind us and Jan Rune lets us into our first PE class of the year.

We warm up by dribbling basketballs in zig-zags around the gym. Right, left, right, left...

Bang! No more than ten seconds have gone by when I trip over the ball, fall onto the floor, hit my knee, act like it was nothing, and jump up as quickly as I can—but everyone saw it happen and they all laugh loudly. Clumsy Casper makes a fool of himself in PE again. This year, just like the last.

Jan Rune asks if I’m hurt and I can hear in his voice that he’s trying not to laugh, but I don’t respond. He was my sister’s teacher, too, and everyone knows that she was the absolute best at PE, but I gave up a long time ago.

Stian picks up my ball and he tosses it over to me. My knee hurts, but I keep dribbling.

I try to follow Stian, who's moving quickly and has perfect control over his ball. He must be pretty athletic. But he didn't laugh when I tripped, he didn't even smile, and he passed my ball to me when I was back up on my feet.

"Baaa-Stian!" Andreas says behind us.

Stian whirls around. His eyes are serious. I can see it clearly as I come up behind him, wheezing.

"Pretty quick reaction!" Andreas says.

"We were just talking about him," Stian says.

"Right. Stian. Ba-Stian. Whatever."

Andreas smiles that sly smile of his. He's not the best at tests and that sort of thing, but in a way, he's kind of the smartest in class. Andreas and his mom know something about everyone in Vågen. That's why no one ever asks him to stop teasing. Andreas sort of sees right through you. Reveals everything that's embarrassing and secret. Or a lie. Was Stian lying about who Bastian is?

6

The Blue House and Henriksen

The Blue House is north of Vågen, almost a mile from the closest neighbor. You can see it from far away—it's light blue with white trim, and the colors sort of shine through gray rocks, leaves, and moss. The fjord is just below, cold swells rolling in from the Barents Sea and crashing against the rocks along the shore.

We park our bikes and walk up a concrete staircase with rusty iron railings. Stian rings the doorbell and I hear an old-fashioned *ding-dong* coming from inside. They don't have a nameplate. There's a click from the lock and the door opens slightly, stopped by a security chain. I've seen that kind of thing in movies, but never in Vågen. We don't even lock our doors during the day when we're at home. A pale face appears in the crack of the door. Stian's mom is thin with short hair and no make-up. She almost looks like a young man. She seems surprised. I guess Stian didn't tell her that I'd be coming over. She opens the door and lets us in.

"This is Casper from school," Stian says.

“Hanne,” she says with a smile, extending her hand.

I’ve heard people gossiping about how Stian’s mom walks a bit strangely, and it’s true: she tiptoes into the living room with short, careful steps, like she’s on slippery ice. I have a bruise on my knee after PE, but it hardly hurts anymore. I take off my shoes and hang my bike helmet on a hook by the fuse box.

The Blue House smells like a mix of freshly washed bathroom and old basement. In the living room, there’s a desk with a computer and a printer, plus two packs of printer paper from the store. Three moving boxes are in the middle of the room. Tall bookshelves line the walls. I read some of the titles: *Terrorism in a Global World*. *Surveillance*. *The Rough Guide to Russia*. *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*. *The CIA in Norway*.

Stian and his mom go to the kitchen and speak softly, almost whispering. I hear his mom saying that Henriksen is coming and that she thought he was the one ringing the bell just now. Stian says he thought that was next week. I wonder if I should leave... No, I have to befriend Stian before anyone else gets to him.

“Come on, let’s go to my room,” Stian says.

He has a bed with striped, dark-blue sheets, a white dresser, a white desk, and a full bookshelf by the door. No childish toys on the shelves. No pictures or posters on the green walls. An open moving box that looks like it’s full of clothes is standing in one corner.

Stian plops down in his gaming chair, starts up his computer, and turns on some music.

Ding-dong! the doorbell rings, and Stian jumps up.

“Wait here. Listen to some music, find a game, read a book or something.”

Stian opens the door. His mom’s short steps creak carefully past on the old wooden floor. A man says hello out in the hallway. Stian shuts the bedroom door and I can only hear the music he put on.

Techno isn’t my first choice, so I lean over his computer to change it and maybe find a game. My fingers stop midair before I manage to type anything. The webcam has been covered up with a piece of black tape. An old trick to make sure hackers can’t secretly watch you. The icon in the lower right shows the computer isn’t even online. The music isn’t being streamed; it’s something Stian downloaded.

Secret number and no photos. A chain on the door. Books about terrorism and espionage. A visit from a man I’m not supposed to see or hear...

I turn the music down and tiptoe over to the door. I gently press my ear up against it.

If Anything Happens

Stian's mom is speaking quietly and I can't hear a word she says. Henriksen talks louder, with a thick Finnmark accent:

"It's safe here. Easy to keep track of things. No strangers can snoop around Vågen without people noticing."

Stian says that everyone knows who he and his mom are, where they live, that they drive a gray Golf, and that his mother bought printer paper at the store. Stian says that he heard all this from me, Casper Johansen. He repeats my name and then reads my number aloud, one digit at a time. Are his mom and Henriksen writing it down?

I lean down toward the keyhole. A stream of air hits my eye. There's a draft and it's warm out, and the curtains in the window flutter in the breeze. Through the keyhole, I can only see the wall in the hallway, which is painted the same green color as Stian's room. His mom says my name. Casper. I carefully put my ear up to the keyhole. His mom says:

"Find out if he can be trusted. Don't tell him too much about us."

"Security is the top priority," Henriksen says. "I can do a little background check on this Casper Johansen's family."

His mother shushes him. "Don't speak so loudly. He might hear you."

Henriksen lowers his voice and says something about GPS, pressing a button, and being directly connected. "Take a look," he says. "Like this..."

My phone beeps and vibrates in my pocket. I jump, hitting my forehead on the doorknob, which is old and loose and makes a loud rattling noise. They must have heard that! The bookshelf is right by the door. I grab a book, sit down at the desk, and try to look like I'm busy reading. My heart pounds fast and hard, just like the techno music still streaming from the speakers.

They're speaking quietly in the living room and I can't hear what they're saying anymore. Heavy steps creak across the floor. It must be Henriksen. Stian and his mom are too light to make that kind of sound. The footsteps creak back and forth out in the hallway. The voices are low. They're whispering so I can't hear.

What happened? Did Henriksen message me? Did he hack my phone? I take it out of my pocket with shaking hands.

It's a text from Dad: *Dinner in 30 min!*

I respond *ok*. Then I check to see if there's any wireless network here. Nope, no WiFi. Which means that Stian only has ethernet. That's disconnected.

The door opens all of a sudden. I jump in the chair, almost dropping my phone. Stian comes in. He shuts the door and looks at my phone in my hand.

"What are you doing?"

He seems almost angry. I've never heard his voice sound like that before.

"I was reading a book and got a text from my dad. Dinner's soon."

I show him my phone. Stian reads the message and the one before it where I wrote that I'm going over to the Blue House after school.

A car door slams outside. The open window is facing the mountains and we can't see the car, but we can hear the tires crunching over the gravel down to the road. The sound disappears toward Vågen.

"That guy Henriksen," I say. "Who is he?"

Stian sits down on the bed. He's quiet. For a long time.

"Forget it. Don't talk, don't take pictures, don't tell anyone about me and my mom, don't say that we live in the Blue House in Vågen, don't say a word to anyone. Do you promise?"

"Um, we're in the same class. We can be friends, right?"

Stian sighs heavily.

"Sorry," he says. "I can't have friends."

The words kick me in the stomach and pound in my head. The bruise on my knee stings and prickles. Stian is new in Vågen. I've shown him around, he's been in my room, we've joked around and laughed, and now I'm at his house for the first time. But he talked about me behind my back in the next room, gave my number to a strange man, and now he doesn't want any friends. I shouldn't have asked to come over here.

"Fine. Sorry for trying to get to know you."

My words sound a lot harsher than I meant them to. But Stian said something just as hurtful to me—that he can't have friends. I get up and walk toward the door. Very slowly. Hoping he'll stop me.

"Wait!" he says. "Can I trust you?"

"Can I trust *you*?" I ask back.

“I brought you here, didn’t I?”

“Because I kept bugging you about it, yeah.”

“Prove to me that you trust me,” Stian says. “Tell me a secret. A mistake you made. Embarrassing stuff. What’s the worst thing you’ve ever been through?”

Embarrassing memories pop up: when Andreas pantsed me last summer and Matti filmed it. When I spilled paint on Adele’s new jeans by accident and she kicked my leg so hard I couldn’t walk. My clumsy feet that always mess up in PE and how I’ll never be as good as my sister. Everyone knows all that. But there are other things that might make Stian want to be my friend. He wants to know if he can trust me. But can I trust him?

I hesitate, just like Stian often does. But I know the answer. There’s something that gnaws at me every single day at school, something that twinges inside me when I sit at home and my phone is silent. And that gnawing and twinging is why I’m here in the Blue House, wanting to get to know Stian. He’s new, he doesn’t know anyone here, and he didn’t laugh at me in PE. That’s why I take a chance.

“I’ve never had a real friend.”

I immediately regret having said it. I feel exposed. Stian probably thinks I’m some kind of nerd, a weirdo no one wants to hang out with.

“I mean, I have buddies,” I say to try to save face. “I hang out with Andreas and Matti all the time.”

My words taste like lies. Andreas and Mattias are buddies with each other, and I don’t really hang out with them much. Andreas’s mom is friends with my mom, and our moms like to believe that Andreas and I are best friends, but that’s never been the case.

Stian looks out the window toward the mountain. Is he not listening?

“Your turn,” I say.

Stian looks down at his hands. He picks at one of his nails.

“If anything happens,” he says quietly.

“Like what?”

“If I don’t pick up the phone. Then my mom and Henriksen can call you and check. I hope it’s okay that I gave them your number.”

I don’t get it. “What could happen?”

“I can’t talk about it. It’s secret.”

Stian stares out the window again. He can’t have friends. Because of something secret. He doesn’t trust me. I have to go home now anyway.

“Gotta go. Dinner.”

I open the door. Very slowly. I want Stian to say something, to show that we can be friends after all. But he doesn't. He just stares down at the floor without saying a word.

Stian's mom is sitting in front of the computer, but the screen is dark and she's staring at her phone. It must be old; it's thick and chunky. It looks like a GPS—the kind people use when they're out at sea or in the wilderness.

"It was nice meeting you," I say.

I've never said anything like that before. That's the kind of thing grown-ups say, but it seems to work, and she smiles.

"Likewise. I'm sure we'll see each other soon!"

As we're talking, I see an ethernet cable lying on the table, not connected to her computer. Black tape is covering up her webcam, just like on Stian's laptop.

I go into the hall and put on my shoes. I grab my helmet off the hook by the fuse box and sling my backpack over my shoulders. I open the chain lock on the door and hear some light footsteps creaking behind me. It's Stian.

"Do you want to borrow this?"

He's holding out a book, the one I'd grabbed to pretend I was reading when I was actually snooping. Stian knew I was lying. That's why he doesn't trust me. I can't manage to meet his gaze and can't think of anything to say. I shove the book into my backpack, jog down the stairs, and hop on my bike.

"Don't forget we're going on a run tomorrow!" Stian shouts after me.

I roll down to the road. I can see the tire tracks in the gravel from the mysterious Henriksen's car. Stian and his mom are scared something's going to happen, something Stian doesn't want to talk about. They have books about Russia, about terrorism and espionage. Is Stian's mom a spy? Some kind of agent? Undercover here in Vågen?