

## The price of being with Jez

748 words

"Alex, you're a dork, but I think you're alright," said Jez.

Music to my ears. I'd aspired to be accepted at any level, by anyone, but to have Jez take me on board like that, was, well, the best.

"Cheers Jez," I said, keeping my tone gruff, although inside I was singing and leaping.

"Want to hang out later?"

OMG. Acceptance *and* an invitation.

"Yeah, great, whatevs."

"Cool. I'll message. Later."

"Later, Jez."

Like a clever rodent in his black sweats, with weird music and drug stuff on the front, Jez slipped away silently around the corner of the playground wall, gone in an instant.

I guess I'm what you'd call nerdy, or, according to my uncle, who's old, a bit of a swot. It never used to bother me, not when I was at St Mildred's. But then mum and dad decided they couldn't stand the sight of each other (big surprise, NOT), and got a divorce. There was talk of me staying on at Mildred's but the lawyers had a bit to say about that and in the end the house got sold, mum downsized and I got sent to Midgate Secondary.

I'd been there six months, lonely and ignored, apart from geeky Meg, who'd liked my sci-fi posts on Insta and once sent me a review of her favourite book. One day I pretended not to notice Jez looking over my shoulder in a maths lesson, and when the teacher picked on him he had the answer. It wasn't much of a favour, I thought, but seems it was enough.

Message from Jez!

"Maccy D 2 2day".

I waited a tense five minutes before replying, *kool, seeya*. Then I hesitated. Two in the afternoon was school time and skipping class felt uncomfortable. Which, I suppose, made it the price of being with Jez.

Jez was there with his gang, all hunched over their phones. Jez nodded me over to him and showed me his phone, like I was an old mate. Sweet. He was in a chat with some girl, asking her for pics. I felt a bit weird, like, bad, but then I felt tingly and wanted to see them. But she didn't send any.

"Dumb ting," he muttered. "Fancy a bit of fun, Alex?"

I shrugged.

"Start sending her messages. Like, tell her she's fat and ugly. Or just say you hate her. Go on."

Something went cold inside me.

"Who is it anyway?"

"Meg."

Shy, nerdy Meg. Who'd once smiled at me. Who'd already had more than her share of bullying and had chronic anxiety.

"Nah, Jez, mate. Leave her alone."

"You *gay* or *summat*?"

He snatched my phone and typed rapidly.

"I don't wanna do this." I reached for my phone but he moved it away. The gang sneered and laughed. I'd blown it.

"I thought we was mates, Alex. Just send the message. C'mon." He held out the phone to me.

The way he looked at me. Like he needed me. It felt sweet. And I didn't want to be *gay* or *summat*. I took the phone and hit Send.

Jez chuckled and the gang nodded at me, approving. "Nice one, mate!"

I nodded, settling into the space they'd made for me. My phone pinged. Meg.

*Alex???*

Crap, how did she have my number? I must have written to say thanks for the review. I could feel the shock behind her words. And I couldn't avoid seeing the message, brutal, personal, threatening. I felt sick.

Jez grabbed my phone again and laughed, typing rapidly, and in that moment I knew it wasn't worth it. I lunged for my phone but he saw me coming and ducked, hitting Send before I could stop him. The gang all laughed too, seeing me for the mug I'd been.

Jez raised my phone above his head and made as if to drop it. "I think I'd better look after this for a bit," he smirked, "so 'Alex' and Megsy can get it on, y'know?"

A customer with a full tray nudged past Jez and disturbed his balance enough for me to grab my phone and run. Jez and the others jeered as I ran back to school, sick and scared.

I didn't get the chance to explain myself. The police were already there, along with an ambulance and a load of blue flashing lights. On my phone, a torrent of threats from Jez and a single message from Meg.

*Alex. You were my friend.*