

CRUEL

by

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Short play

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ONE SIDE OF THE STAGE IS THE LOBBY OF A HOUSE
CONVERTED INTO BEDSITS, THE OTHER SIDE, AMBER'S
BEDSIT. ALTHOUGH WE CANNOT SEE THEM, (THEY WILL
BE MENTIONED) THE BEDSIT FEATURES A LARGE
ANTIQUARIAN TRUNK AND A HEAVY OAK WARDROBE
WHICH WILL FEATURE IN THE PLAY. OKAY, BORING
FLOORPLAN DONE, LET'S BEGIN!

TWENTY-SOMETHINGS **JESS** AND **BEN** CONVERSE AS
THEY AMBLE THROUGH THE LOBBY. SHE LOOKS
CONCERNED AND ANXIOUS. HE DOESN'T. IN FACT, HE'D
RATHER BE SOMEWHERE ELSE, ANYWHERE BUT HERE.

BEN: I really don't get why you had to drag me with you to Amber's
bedsit. It's my day off. I wanted to go bowling.

JESS: You know why. I haven't heard from her for days. No calls, no
texts, no emails, no Facebook posts, nothing. I'm worried about
her.

BEN: Maybe she's been busy.

JESS: Or maybe she's done something stupid. Don't forget, we're the
reason she went on Britain's Got Talent in the first place.

THEY'VE REACHED THE DOOR TO AMBER'S BEDSIT.
JESS KNOCKS ON THE DOOR AND WAITS.

BEN: She'll bounce back, she always does.

JESS: How can you be so sure? You saw how badly her audition
went.

BEN: Yeah, I suppose. I've never heard Simon Cowell use the C-word before.

ON THE BEDSIT SIDE OF THE STAGE, **AMBER** APPEARS AND HEADS TOWARDS THE DOOR.

JESS: She was made to look a total laughing stock in front of all those people. The poor girl must be devastated.

AMBER WRENCHES THE DOOR OPEN, ALL BIG EYES AND CHEERFUL, BOASTING A CHEESY SMILE SO HUGE, IT'S IN DANGER OF FALLING OFF THE SIDES OF HER FACE.

AMBER: Hiya, Jess!!! Hiya, Ben!!!

JESS AND BEN SWAP WTF GLANCES.

AMBER: Are you coming in or what?

AFTER A SECONDARY UNSURE GLANCE TRADE, THEY BOTH ENTER THE BEDSIT. AMBER PROMPTLY CLOSES AND LOCKS THE DOOR BEHIND THEM. SHE THEN PULLS THE KEY OUT AND HOLDS IT IN HER HAND, STILL SPORTING THAT MEGA-CHEESY SMILE.

AMBER: Well? Spill the goss. What's been happening in the outside world?

JESS AND BEN ARE STILL TOTALLY THROWN BY HER CHEERY, HAPPY-GO-LUCKY Demeanour.

BEN: Well, it's... still turning.

JESS: What about you, Amber? Are you... okay?

AMBER: Why wouldn't I be?

JESS AND BEN SWAP FURTHER UNSURE LOOKS.
THERE'S SOMETHING WEIRD GOING ON, AND THEY
KNOW IT.

JESS: Well... this is why we're here. To make sure you're... um...

BEN: Not dead.

JESS SCOWLS AT HIM FOR HIS INSENSITIVE SENTENCE-
FINISHING. HE SHRUGS A "WHAT DID I SAY?"

AMBER: There's no need to worry. I'm perfectly fine. That audition, I am totally over it. Besides, I have good news to share. Simon has invited me in for a second look.

SURPRISE ENGULFS THE FACES OF JESS AND BEN.
THEN A HINT OF CONFUSION. THEN SUSPICION.
SOMETHING DOESN'T QUITE ADD UP.

JESS/BEN: Really?

AN ANIMATED NOD FROM AMBER. AND ANOTHER
HUMUNGOUS SMILE. HMM, THINGS STILL DON'T FEEL
RIGHT, BUT JESS DECIDES TO HUMOUR HER ANYWAY.

JESS: That's... great. Isn't it, Ben?

SHE EYES HIM A PROMPT TO ALSO HUMOUR THE GIRL.

BEN: Oh, um, yes. Well done.

AMBER: Actually, when I say he's invited me back, discussions are currently at the probably-maybe stage. But I'm sure it'll only be a matter of time before I'm performing on that stage again.

THEN COME WEIRD NOISES BEHIND JESS AND BEN; MUFFLED, STIFLED, BARELY AUDIBLE. THUMPING ON WOOD. AND HUMAN MMMFFFFFFFING. THE KIND OF NOISES... OOOER, NO WAY! THE KIND OF NOISES A TRAPPED AND GAGGED MAN WOULD MAKE.

NERVOUS, ALARMED, JESS AND BEN SLOWLY TURN AROUND TO FACE THE ANTIQUARIAN TRUNK.

MORE THUMPING. MORE MUFFLED MMMMFFFFFFING.

WE CAN SEE EXACTLY WHAT JESS AND BEN ARE THINKING. WHAT THE HELL HAS THIS GIRL DONE?

JESS: Um... Amber. Who exactly have you got locked in that really old-looking trunk?

AMBER: Who do you think? I've kidnapped Simon Cowell.

A PAIR OF OMG FACES. A SINISTER GIGGLE FROM AMBER. AND MORE THUMPING AND MMMMFFFFFFING FROM WITHIN THE TRUNK.

JESS: Oh, Amber. Please, please, please tell me you're joking.

AMBER: This is no wind-up. I really have taken Simon Cowell prisoner.

OMFG. SHE IS SERIOUS. DEADLY SERIOUS.

JESS: You can't just... abduct a celebrity.

BEN: Yeah. Especially somebody high profile like... oh, God, what have you done?

CUE A WORRIED BEN PACING UP AND DOWN THE ROOM.

AMBER: I had no choice. He was ignoring my emails. And my tweets. And my DMs. And his front door when I found out where he lived. This was the only way I could get him to listen to me.

JESS: Jesus.

JESS TAKES A DEEP BREATH. TRIES TO CALM DOWN.
KNOWS SHE NEEDS TO TAKE CONTROL OF THIS
SITUATION.

JESS: Amber. Listen to me. So far, no harm's been done.

BEN: No harm?

JESS: (GLARING AT BEN) No real harm.

AND THEN SHE RE-AIMS HER EYES AT AMBER,
ATTEMPTING A COOL, CALM, COLLECTED DEMEANOUR.

JESS: Okay, so you've locked Simon Cowell in a trunk. It's hardly the crime of the century.

MAJOR THUMPING AND MMMMFFFFFFING FROM THE
TRUNK, CLEARLY IN PROTEST AT WHAT JESS HAS JUST
SAID.

JESS: (SUDDEN OUTBURST) Simon, shut the fuck up! I'm trying to negotiate your release!

THE THUMPING AND MMMFFFFING CEASES.

BEN: I can't believe you just told Simon Cowell to shut the fuck up.
That must be soooooo illegal.

ONCE AGAIN, JESS THROWS HIM A GLARE.

BEN: Fine. Don't mind me. You just carry on with your negotiations.
Be the hero.

JESS: Zip it, Ben. This has nothing to do with heroics. What I'm trying
to do here is help a girl in need.

BEN: Yeah, a girl in need who's gone and kidnapped Simon bloody
Cowell.

YET ANOTHER GLARE FROM JESS.

BEN: All right, all right. Consider me zipped.

JESS TURNS TO AMBER WHO LOOKS A TAD UNHINGED,
HALF-GRINNING, HALF-UNSURE, NERVOUSLY FIDDLING
WITH THE DOOR KEY IN HER HAND. JESS SPEAKS
CALMLY, SLOWLY, LIKE A SOFTLY-SOFTLY COPPER.

JESS: Amber. If you continue to keep Simon held here against his will,
you will land yourself in serious trouble. You do realise that,
don't you?

AMBER: Of course I do. I'm not an idiot.

JESS: That's right. You're not an idiot. You're a sensible, intelligent
girl. Which is why, quite frankly, I'm surprised you've got
yourself into a mess like this.

AMBER: Jess, you're missing the point.

AMBER FIRES AN ACCUSATORY POINT AT THE TRUNK.

AMBER: Simon is the one to blame here. If he'd put me through to the next round, which I thoroughly deserved, instead of ridiculing me in front of hundreds of baying wolves, this mess would not be happening right now.

JESS STANDS IN SILENCE, NOT KNOWING WHAT TO DO.
BEN, EQUALLY ANXIOUS, RESTARTS HIS PACING.

AMBER: You really think I wanted to kidnap Simon Cowell? By rights, I should be out getting drunk, celebrating my newfound success, spreading the word about how my acting career is finally beginning to take off. But no. He had to go and spoil things by hitting his stupid buzzer and saying all those cruel things about me... telling me I was pants... that I had no future in acting. So there you go. It's his fault he's here, not mine

JESS: Oh, Amber. I'm sorry you feel that way. But believe me, locking him in a trunk is hardly likely to help matters.

AMBER LOOKS AWAY, DEFIANT.

BEN: (QUITTING THE PACING) You might as well give up, Jess. You're not getting through to her.

JESS: I have to keep trying.

BEN: Why?

JESS: Because she's my friend. Our friend.

BEN: Friends don't kidnap pop moguls. Amber, consider yourself well unfriended.

AMBER: Oh, that's right. Kick me when I'm already down.

JESS: Ben, please. She needs our help.

BEN: What she needs is professional help.

JESS'S FACE, AWASH WITH DISAPPOINTMENT.

BEN: What's that look for? This is all Amber's doing. Which makes it her problem. It's got nothing to do with us.

JESS: Oh, is that right? Look at us. Present at the crime scene. With full knowledge of what she's done. Whether you like it or not, Ben, we are both well and truly involved.

BEN HEADS TOWARDS THE DOOR.

BEN: Bollocks to that, I'm out of here.

DEFIANT, AMBER BLOCKS HIS WAY, INDICATING TO THE KEY IN HER HAND.

AMBER: I don't think so.

BEN: Give me the key, Amber.

HE MAKES FOR THE KEY. SHE YANKS IT OUT OF HIS REACH.

BEN: Give me that bloody key.

AND THEN AMBER DOES SOMETHING TOTALLY
UNEXPECTED. SHE POPS THE KEY IN HER MOUTH.

BEN: No, no, don't!

ONE HEFTY GULP AND IT'S GONE. SWALLOWED WHOLE.

AMBER: You are going nowhere.

BEN: I can't believe you just did that.

HE FLICKS UP BOTH HANDS IN DESPAIR, THEN TURNS
TO JESS.

BEN: Did you see what she just did?

JESS: I do have eyes, Ben.

MORE THUMPING AND MMMFFFFFFING. THEY ALL SCOWL
AT THE TRUNK.

ALL: And you can shut up!

SILENCE FROM THE TRUNK.

BEN: Now what?

JESS: Now... I guess we wait for nature to take its course.

BEN: Yeah? And what happens when it does? Where's she going to do her number two, in a bloody saucepan? This building has a communal toilet. Like, out there in the lobby. And we're locked in here.

AMBER: (FOOLISH) Oh, yeah. I guess I didn't quite think things through.

BEN THEN SPOTS SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE TRUNK.

BEN: Look, Jess, she's left the key in the lock of the trunk.

TO AMBER'S DISMAY, BEN HEADS FOR THE TRUNK,
FOLLOWED BY JESS.

BEN: I'm letting Simon out and nobody is going to stop me.

UNSEEN BY THE OTHERS, A DESPERATE AMBER
SCAMPERS OVER TO THE KITCHEN AREA OF HER
BEDSIT AND OPENS A DRAWER.

BEN IS JUST ABOUT TO TWIST THE KEY WHEN –

AMBER: Get away from that trunk.

OH, SHIT. AMBER HAS A KITCHEN KNIFE IN HER
TREMBLING HAND. HUGE. SHARP. DANGEROUS. IF SHE
DIDN'T LOOK SUITABLY UNHINGED BEFORE, SHE
CERTAINLY DOES NOW.

ALARMED, JESS AND BEN BACK AWAY FROM THE
TRUNK. THIS IS SERIOUS, AND THEY BOTH KNOW IT.

BEN: Amber, please. This is not the answer.

AMBER: Isn't it? There's already one person on my to-murder list.
Another couple of bodies won't make a lot of difference.

UH-OH, BRANDISHING THAT WEAPON, AMBER LOOKS
DERANGED, BIG-TIME.

JESS: Amber, this isn't you. You're no killer. Why are you doing this?

AMBER: You laughed at me.

JESS AND BEN SWAP CONFUSED LOOKS.

AMBER: At my audition. When Simon was slagging off my performance. The whole audience... mocking me... jeering at me. I felt so alone, so unloved. So I searched through all those faces, desperate to find my friends. You two. The only people in the world I was sure would be on my side. But no. There you were, giggling away, joining in with the rest of those brainless sheep.

#AWKWARD!

JESS: Oh, Amber. I'm really sorry. We both are. But maybe...

JESS'S HESITANT PAUSE ANNOYS AMBER.

AMBER: Maybe what? Tell me!

JESS: Maybe you shouldn't have played both male and female characters.

BEN: Agreed. Those high and low alternating voices. Big mistake.

AMBER: I was demonstrating my range.

A FORLORN LOOK ENGULFS AMBER. HER BOTTOM LIP QUIVERS. HER EYES WELL. AND IN A CALMER VOICE –

AMBER: All I ever wanted was to be an actress.

BEN: Actually, these days it's "actor."

AMBER: Shut up!

BEN: Sorry.

AND IT'S BACK TO HER SPEECH.

AMBER: My lifelong ambition. To perform in theatres. And maybe even on TV. (THEN COMES A HATEFUL GROWL) But then Simon Cowell came along and shattered my dreams. And so did you. Which is why all three of you are going to pay.

SHIT. THIS IS IT. THE END.

BUT THEN AMBER'S FACE CHANGES. SHE CHUCKS THE KNIFE IN THE SINK AND LAUGHS LOUDLY. WTF?

AMBER: No talent, Simon said. No class, Simon said. Not convincing enough as a performer, Simon said. Well, I certainly had you two fooled.

JESS AND BEN GAWP AT HER IN STUNNED SILENCE, NOT SURE WHAT TO SAY OR HOW TO REACT.

AMBER: Relax. I haven't got Simon Cowell locked in that trunk. Go on. Take a peek if you don't believe me.

THEY HEAD OVER TO THE TRUNK. IT'S A TENSE MOMENT AS THEY OPEN IT TO FIND –

– EMPTINESS.

PHEW! RELIEF APLENTY.

JESS: Okay, fair enough, Amber, you win. I think it's safe to say you've well and truly proven your worth as a competent actress.

BEN: Actor.

JESS: Shut up.

IT'S THEN WHEN BEN HAS AN AFTERTHOUGHT.

BEN: Hold on a minute. How did you create those noises?

AMBER: Oh, that was Simon. I'm holding him prisoner.

JESS AND BEN, WTF?

JESS: But you just said...

AMBER: I said he wasn't locked in the trunk. He's trapped in my wardrobe.

RIGHT ON CUE, DESPERATE THUMPING AND
MMMFFING FROM WITHIN THE WOODEN PRISON.

JESS AND BEN GAWP AT THE WARDROBE, THEN AT
EACH OTHER, THEN AT THE AUDIENCE. TWO LOUD
GASPS AND –

BLACK-OUT

CURTAIN