



SHAME

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1. Queen Bee.

1.

I knew my place. Even though not one of the girls had said anything, I knew where I was in the pecking order. It was all *very* clear!

Kimberly was the Queen Bee and all of the other girls, myself included, fluttered around her. She was very beautiful, perhaps the most beautiful of us all in a Cameron Diaz blonde, smiley sort of way. I always thought her body was a little too thin and her smile too broad and false but, of course, I didn't say anything.

I wouldn't have dared as Kimberly had the power, while we were in boarding school and university, who was allowed into her clique – called the Hive by envious bystanders - and who was not. Being *in* meant being part of the glamorous society life that swirled around Kimberly while being *out* meant despair and loneliness while all the other girls gave you the cold shoulder to curry friendship with Kimberly.

Any bloke that thinks girls are sweet and politely nice hasn't seen the inside of a girl's boarding school!

School and university have long passed but the group persisted. Kimberly was, of course, still Queen Bee. Her father's immeasurable wealth helped, as did the sizable trust account she had received from her maternal grandmother.

Kimberly could be devastatingly generous with gifts – (she gave Bronte a sports car for Bronte’s twenty-first birthday) but she always expected something in return. It could be your support in her lies to her parents or it could mean giving up your boyfriend because Kimberly wanted a fling. Whatever happened, you had to pay the piper if you danced to the tune. Perhaps that’s why Bronte charmingly took the sports car, sold it and gave the proceeds to charity in Kimberly’s name. She is one smart bird and Kimberly doesn’t seem to be able to get one over her!

On top of the inherited wealth, Kimberly was also, it seemed, very good at business and ran her own fashion line with an iron hand. I could have pointed out that she wasn’t successful in relationships as she had two failed marriages and no children.

However, there was no doubt she was number one in our social group.

Bronte was number two for two reasons. The first was that she was Kimberly’s best friend! That held immense power in its own right but Bronte was also black and beautiful, a combination that cast a bewitching spell over any male she wanted. Bronte came from a powerful diplomatic family, had lived in exotic places, spoke at least five languages and had a strong, sharp intelligence.

Her career since university had blossomed and she was now a renowned journalist on BBC World News, interviewing the leaders of the world. As Bronte explained at our monthly get togethers, she had no time for men, as

life was just too busy for her, although she *had* hinted at a brief fling with a movie star. You know the bloke; the one who is always voted the sexiest man alive by the magazines. There were moments when I thought that even Kimberly was in awe of Bronte.

Jamie and Shannon, the twins, were equal third and they were both living off the wealth of their parents while they searched for their calling in life.

They were, in my opinion, a joke, but I never said anything, just listened to them rambling on about their desire for a vocation while they partied and found ways to get their photographs in every gossip magazine imaginable.

I mentally called them the “twin sluts” but I didn’t dare say anything.

No, I could *never* say anything about any of them!

The last in the group?

Why, that would be me, of course!

I came from a poor family, just me and my mother and I had thought it was a stroke of good luck when I achieved a scholarship to the exclusive boarding school. Once the girls found out I was poor and, worse, had a Liverpudlian accent, they ostracised me very quickly.

It was clear I had no value to them so I focussed on studying and keeping out of the way of any of the “super bitches” as I mentally called them.

It was Bronte who brought me into the group that fluctuated around Kimberly.

I was in the library, sitting at a table down the back by myself and studying when Bronte walked in. I heard some of the muted whispers from the other girls and then they chorused “hi Bronte”, as all of the silly bitches hoping the great Bronte would sit with them.

She didn’t. Coolly, she looked around and then walked towards my table. I ignored her and buried my face in the book, wondering when I could get onto the library computers.

‘Can I sit here?’

Her voice was cool and well modulated, displaying the accent of the upper class and I just nodded, avoiding her eyes.

She sat down and I kept reading, although I could sense her presence.

‘You’re Laura, aren’t you?’

Shocked that she even knew I existed, let alone my name, I managed to stammer, ‘y...yes. How...how did you know?’

Bronte smiled.

‘How many black girls are here?’ Bronte asked calmly while laying her pens and pencils on the table in a precise pattern.

‘Ah...I...I don’t know...’

‘Are you being coy or stupid?’ Bronte asked and I flushed. ‘There is only *one*! Me!’

I looked away and tried to focus on the book.

‘How many Asian girls are there?’ Bronte pressed and, again, I tried to think but came up short.

‘I’m not really sure...’

Bronte ticked them off on her long fingers. ‘There the Chinese heiress in Robertson House, the Japanese media heiress in Tarquin house and,’ she smiled slyly, ‘you.’

‘Me?’ I squeaked. ‘I’m from Liverpool...’

‘Darling, we can all tell *that!* But, let’s face it, you have slanty eyes, ergo, you’re Asian.’

My mother had told me nothing about my father apart from the fact he left when I was born but a glance in the mirror told me I had Asian blood but that was as far as it went.

‘You are in Harlequin House, the same house I am in, so I know who you are. I love facts and knowledge. I’m going to be a journalist,’ she said calmly.

I didn’t know what to say so I just nodded and turned back to my book. As I read, I could feel her studying me.

‘You know, a ponytail all the time is just plain silly; you should really just brush your hair out.’

I flushed and kept staring at my book. Even though I kept my eyes down, I sensed the other girls in the library were watching us and whispering.

‘Laura,’ Bronte said and I had to turn my head to look into her dark eyes.

‘Y...yes?’

‘I understand you are the top in mathematics, biology and physics?’

‘Aah...I’m not sure. The results of the mid-term exams haven’t been posted yet...’

She waved a slender black hand to cut me off.

‘I know the results and rest assured, you are the top! *Numero Uno*,’ she said with a cheeky smile.

I couldn’t help but smile in return.

‘I believe I am *Numero Uno* in literature, poetry and many other subjects.’

‘Con...congratulations...’

‘Thank you but that won’t help me get into University. I need assistance in maths and the other mundane subjects that, frankly, bore me silly. That’s where you come in.’

‘Me?’

‘I think you should tutor me. You’re in my house so you can help me when I’m stuck.’

I looked at her while my mind raced. Did she *really* want me to tutor her or did she want something else? I knew that many of the girls experimented sexually when the lights went out but I had no interest in *that*!

Neither, I suspected, did Bronte. Already at sixteen, Bronte displayed the airs and graces of a mature woman. I suspected she was now beyond the experimentation stage.

I calculated quickly what the benefits of tutoring Bronte would be and what they could get me. I saw none. Even though I was shy around the wealthy girls that

surrounded me, there is no one tougher than a poor girl from the streets of Liverpool.

‘I see,’ I said carefully. ‘And what is in it for me?’

Bronte was not at all surprised by my bluntness and, in fact, smiled quietly.

‘Why Laura,’ she chuckled, ‘I will be your friend!’

2.

I shared a room with a Canadian girl sent to the Old Dart for a “good” education or so her parents said. I suspected it was to get her away from them, as she was the most obnoxious girl I had ever met. Not only was her hygiene suspect, she was also incredibly lazy and untidy. On top of that, she turned into a dragon with PMS.

The first few weeks of the term were hell and then one day, I returned reluctantly to my room after spending as much time as I could in the library to find all her stuff was gone.

Apparently, her parents had decided to divorce so that meant my roomy had to fly back to Toronto. Thankfully, nobody else was forced to share my room so I had the freedom of a room to myself. It was small and a long way from the bathrooms but it suited me.

Bronte had a room to herself on the top floor and I nervously knocked on the door that first night. Some girls on the top floor looked at me curiously, as they passed me on the way to the bathrooms while others openly looked at me with the same expression one would

adopt if you suddenly saw a pig roaming the floors of Harlequin House.

‘Who is that?’ I heard one blonde pixie demand of her friend.

‘Just that *scholarship* girl! Probably lost. You know what newbies are like.’

The door opened and Bronte smiled at me.

‘Right on time. I in deep angst regarding the third exercise.’

We sat at a small table and I couldn’t help but notice she had a television, a microwave oven and other things that made her room appear more of a home and not, like mine, like a small prison cell.

We were deep in the mathematical exercise, sipping hot chocolate Bronte had made when the door swung open and Kimberly walked in.

‘Who is this?’ Kimberly demanded as she poured a mug of hot chocolate.

‘This is Laura,’ Bronte said calmly. ‘Laura, this is Kimberly. Don’t mind her, she’s a bitch.’

‘Well, thank *you* so very much, you tart!’

Kimberly sat down at the table and I flushed as she casually examined me.

‘Is she the Japanese heiress?’

‘No, she’s not,’ Bronte said, trying her calculations. ‘Laura,’ she snapped, ‘I just can’t get the bloody hang of this! It’s useless to me; I want to be a bloody journalist! I really don’t need this bollocks!’

She said “bollocks” the same way I imagined the Queen would say it and I smiled slightly.

I pushed my glasses up the bridge of my nose.

‘I know but you’ll need mathematics...’

‘Rubbish!’

I shrugged and began putting my pencils into my pencil case.

‘If you are going to be an investigative journalist, you’ll need the ability to understand all manner of calculations from formula to corporate accounting.’

I closed the textbook with a bang while Bronte studied me quietly.

‘I think,’ she said slowly, ‘I underestimated you. You are correct. Don’t go, just bear with me.’

I shrugged.

‘Ok,’ I said.

Kimberly leaned forward and looked at me closely. I blinked owlishly at her and wished she wouldn’t get so close.

‘Are you sure she’s not the Japanese heiress?’

‘I’m from Liverpool, Kimberly,’ I said quietly. ‘I have no idea who my father was but, as everyone can see, he must have been Asian of some sort. I use a knife and fork and can’t use chopsticks!’

Bronte laughed while Kimberly frowned at me.

‘You’re that swotty scholarship girl who lives in the dungeon!’

‘Technically, it’s the lower basement but, yes, it feels like a dungeon sometimes.’

Kimberly smiled.

‘Do you always wear your hair in a ponytail?’

‘I’ve already told her,’ Bronte said with a sigh.
‘Kim, I need to study maths...’

‘Are you serious?’

‘I want to get into University and it’s almost impossible to bribe your way in there so I *actually* have to get good marks!’

‘Ok,’ Kimberly said, standing up, ‘I’ll leave you to study! Jamie, Shannon and I are going to watch a movie. Mummy sent me a gorgeous DVD.’

Bronte looked up.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s dreamy and that’s all I’m telling you.’
Kimberly walked to the door. ‘You’ll be sorry you missed it.’

Bronte glanced at me and then said, ‘give me forty minutes.’

Kimberly smiled broadly.

‘Done! We won’t start it until then.’ She paused at the door, hand on the door handle. ‘You can bring the Liverpool swot with you, if you want.’

‘I fully intended to,’ Bronte said evenly.

3.

And so, I shyly became a member of the close circle that surrounded Kimberly, the Queen Bee.

At first, I just helped Bronte with her maths and science assignments while Kimberly, Jamie, and Shannon tolerated me.

They were polite but I knew they excluded me from the real essence of the group. Girls are good at using exclusion as a punishment. It depends on whether it is intense – complete ignoring of the existence of the poor girl – or mild, but it kept the targeted girl in place.

They would breeze into Bronte's room to swap clothes or anything else they fancied and would smile and nod to me but did not include me in their conversations.

I suppose it was a little cruel but it was all they knew and they were used to being the top of the heap, used to people fawning around them.

I didn't, I made sure of that.

I kept myself a little aloof from them and decided that the advantage of tutoring Bronte was that the other girls in the school didn't know what to make of me and left me alone.

One day, Kimberly wandered into Brontes' room and surprised me by addressing me.

'You can do my maths assignment,' she said calmly, 'have it done by tomorrow.'

Bronte glanced at me and I immediately suspected this was a test of some sort.

I kept my head down, focused on the textbook and ignored Kimberly.

'You!' Kimberly snapped, obviously meaning me but I didn't turn.

‘What on earth is her name?’ Kimberly, exasperated, demanded Bronte.

‘Laura,’ Bronte said with a small smile, ‘her name is Laura.’

‘Laura,’ Kimberly said loudly and I turned my head. ‘I want you to do my maths assignment!’

I held her eyes and said softly, ‘no.’

‘No?’ Kimberly demanded, hands on hips.

‘No,’ I said quietly, ‘I don’t do assignments for other people. I hate assignments! I just do my own which is hell enough!’

Kimberly smiled slightly.

‘Are you refusing me, Laura?’

I shrugged. ‘I suppose I am. Is it a big deal?’

‘Do you know who I am?’

‘You’re Kimberly, the girl who struggles in maths,’ I said quietly and Kimberly blinked. ‘I can help you, if you like but it’s better to do your own assignments.’

‘Laura is very good, Kim,’ Bronte said quietly, ‘she’s helped me.’

Kimberly studied me for a moment and then nodded.

‘Come to my room after you’ve finished with Bronte.’ Kimberly turned on her heel and marched from the room.

I looked up at Bronte and asked softly, ‘did I pass?’

Bronte chuckled.

‘You’re a lot smarter than most people think, Laura!’

‘Let’s keep it our little secret. Now, have you done the fourth exercise?’

4.

And so I became part of the group. Not only did I tutor Kim and Bronte but also Jamie and Shannon when the mood struck the twins to actually think about study instead of boys.

Kimberly, Bronte and even Jamie and Shannon entered university. My results were good enough so I received another scholarship to university. They, of course were in a college while I boarded in a small house away from the university.

I thought I would have nothing to do with the four girls, as I hadn’t seen them since school finished.

I bumped into Bronte one morning and, to my surprise, she hugged me.

‘Laura! You’re here?’

I nodded.

‘Which college?’ Bronte demanded excitedly and I laughed bitterly.

‘I’m not in a college, Bronte as you bloody well know! Where are you?’

‘St Ann’s.’

I laughed. I should have guessed as St. Ann’s was just for the moneyed upper class.

‘Must be fun,’ I quipped, ‘do they have pyjama parties?’

‘Don’t be bitchy. Do you want to visit?’

I thought of all the super rich girls in the college, all probably wearing the latest fashion and talking about their “*brilliantly super*” boyfriends! I could hear their singsong, plummy voices now, trying to outdo each other while preening.

‘No thanks, I’ll give that a miss.’

‘Your accent has changed!’

‘No, it hasn’t,’ I lied as I had found a cheap voice teacher for elocution lessons to remove my Liver accent.

‘Yes it has! You no longer sound like a female Sir Paul McCartney.’

I looked away.

‘I think I liked your old accent better,’ she said quietly.

‘If I’m going to get ahead in the world, I need a non-regional accent,’ I said flatly.

Bronte shrugged.

‘What are you studying?’

‘Law and economics.’

‘Wow! She studied me for a moment. ‘Kim’s having a small party in her rooms to launch the year. Do come along.’

‘Look, Bronte...’

‘Just one drink. Come on! It’s at five.’

‘Oh, all right!’

I dreaded the entire event but was pleasantly surprised when Kimberly hugged me, as did the twins. They seemed genuinely happy to see me.

‘What college are you in, Laura,’ Jamie demanded. ‘Are you in one of the co-ed ones?’

‘I bet she is, the lucky bitch,’ Shannon chimed in.

‘I don’t know why we couldn’t go to one of the co-ed colleges, Kimberly,’ Jamie wailed.

‘You’d shag everything in the college,’ Kimberly said in a matter of fact tone and the twins squealed with mock indignation. ‘Besides, Mummy went to this college and she’s on the College Board. She’d be awfully pissed at me if I left and went to another. No, we stay here.’

‘The rooms are nice,’ Bronte said with a shrug, ‘it will do me.’

‘But you can’t get blokes in here,’ Shannon said petulantly.

‘So shag in the back seat of a car,’ Bronte said calmly, ‘that’s what you normally do.’

I laughed and relaxed, as it appeared nothing had changed.

I was making my exit, thinking I could creep away and that would be the end of it all when Kimberly seized my elbow. She dragged me to a corner.

‘Where are you staying?’

‘I’m boarding with a nice family...’

‘How frightful!’

‘It’s ok,’ I said lamely.

‘Sounds like a nightmare. Why don’t you join this college?’

‘Why not?’ I said sarcastically. ‘Why don’t I purchase a Rolls Royce at the same time?’

‘Don’t be sarky,’ Kimberly said mildly. ‘You’ve changed your accent.’

‘I’ve had elocution lessons,’ I said defiantly.

‘It suits you,’ she said, smiling and I smiled softly in return. ‘St Ann’s takes in a scholarship girl each year. I could speak to Mummy?’

She waited as my mind spun almost out of control. If I accepted her offer, I knew I would be in her debt but to be in St Ann’s! To have a decent bed and privacy!

‘If you want to,’ I murmured.

‘No, Laura,’ Kimberly said calmly, ‘do *you* want me to?’

‘Yes,’ I whispered, ‘yes I do.’