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The Boot Camp

Written by Kate Harrison

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The Boot Camp

KATE HARRISON



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👁️ windy hill country house hotel and spa, devon 👁️

Dear Boot Camper,

Are you ready? Because your life is about to change for the better!

You've heard it all before, right? You've bought the book, the T-shirt, the DVD, and the hypnotherapy tape too. There've been hi-tech gyms, old-school gyms, machines that vibrate your fat away. Juice fasts, meal replacements, colonic irrigation. A thousand pain-free, easy ways to a New You.

So how come the Old You is still hanging around like a bad smell?

At Windy Hill Boot Camp, we can make you a promise. If you do as we say for one week – that's just one hundred and sixty-eight hours, or a measly ten thousand minutes – then the New You you've been longing for will *finally* make an appearance.

Don't be afraid – you have nothing to lose but your muffin top tummies! We can't wait to meet you and start you on your New You Journey. All we ask for is one thousand per cent commitment. Oh, and that you bring enough sports bras. Prepare to get sweaty.

In return, we also promise delicious, nutritious food to support your body in its new adventure. Luxury accommodation (no bunk beds or latrines!). And plenty of holistic support and massage to keep your body and soul on track.

Ready? Steady! Boot Camp is GO!

Love and good karma,

Edie Simmonds, Chief Executive & Holistic Leader, Windy Hill
and Spa Boot Camp

'The celebrities' best kept booty secret'

Day 1: Sunday – The first day of the rest of your life

How you'll be feeling: excited, perhaps a little apprehensive. But don't worry. You'll love camp – and you'll love your staffs, too!

- 14:00 Compulsory safety & logistics briefing.
Please note: there will be no refreshments provided so eat beforehand. High protein recommended.
- 15:00 Fitness tests and weigh-in
- 17:30 Snack and recreation/unpacking time
- 18:00 Visualisation session
- 19:00 Dinner: Chef's Special Chilli sin Carne,
Power Grains, Spicy Apple Surprise,
Sleepyhead tea

Please note all activities and meals are subject to change due to circumstances beyond our control

Steph

I can see them through the bay window: two blokes in black army berets and camouflage gear, cross-armed and wide-legged, as though their balls are so big that they can't stand comfortably any other way.

Through the speckled glass, they look almost friendly. OK. I'll downgrade that to *reasonable*. Or perhaps *firm but fair*. Not the kind of guys who'd be too hard on a girl who's had the misfortune to arrive for the Compulsory Safety and Logistics Briefing thirteen minutes late, through absolutely no fault of her own.

I raise my hand to rap the lion's head knocker against the chipped black door, but my hands are shaking too much.

Bloody hell. I didn't have that khaki rash when I left London. Stress, it must be. I need to breathe more.

' . . . punctuality is **NON-NEGOTIABLE!**'

The window rattles as one of the soldiers suddenly turns up the volume. I shrink back.

I did everything possible to be on time. My own New You Journey was meant to start with a gentle awakening at seven, thanks to the Brighter Beginning Dawn Simulation Clock that my brothers clubbed together to buy me for Christmas.

Then I'd planned some yoga stretches to loosen up my body ahead of the week's exertions, followed by a breakfast of half a lemon squeezed into room-temperature (*not* refrigerated)

Evian. I'd already set the sat nav to take me to boot camp via a designer shopping village where I planned to buy some knock-down exercise kit – an investment in the *new me* – before a final relaxed drive along the coast to arrive early at the Windy Hill Country House Hotel and Spa. Hey, I might even have managed a quick dip in the Jacuzzi.

I was *so* going to be Teacher's Pet this time. To prove I can change, not just to Steve but also to *myself* (not to mention lose at least two stone before the Valentine's Ball in thirty-three days' time. But who's counting?).

'Self-discipline is **NON-NEGOTIABLE!**'

Like most disasters, today's was caused by a chain of events. Despite knowing my tech-ineptitude, my brothers bought me the most complex alarm clock on the market, which failed to go off due to user error, so it was *real* daylight that woke me at a very un-crack-of-dawn-like quarter to ten.

I then downsized my yoga routine to the last three of the exercises on the *Mail on Sunday's* 'Shake Your Booty' poster, but got locked in the Downwardly Mobile Dog and had to drive my car in a position that will henceforth be renamed as the Giraffe with Rigor Mortis.

When I got to the shopping village, it had been evacuated because the young offenders at the prison next door were rioting over the sub-zero temperatures in their single-glazed cells. The only alternative my sat nav could offer was the Happy Valley Hypermarket, a chain so downmarket that in the retail trade we call it Crappy Valley. But what choice did I have? Do seven days of workouts in kitten-heeled ankle boots and too-tight-even-before-Christmas size fourteen jeans?

'Respect for yourself and others is **NON-NEGOTIABLE!**'

So instead of weather-proof designer workout gear, my kit for boot camp consists of twenty pairs of acrylic Homer Simpson socks, two underwired sports bras so vicious MI5

could use them to extract confessions, one pair of mud-brown trainers, and five Juicy Couture-style patterned tracksuits in different sizes and colours (I cleared the entire shelf). The one I tried on over my clothes had a khaki camouflage print, which might at least help me blend into the foliage on manoeuvres.

Khaki.

Ah. That'll be the rash, then. I *knew* that fabric didn't look colour-fast. At least I worked that out before asking the squaddies for emergency medical treatment.

'If there's one thing we hate, it's **SLACKERS!** And **MOANERS!** And **WHINGERS!**

Oh, and then the postcode I'd put into the sat nav delivered me to the wrong cliff. Sure, I had the perfect view of the whitewashed building from over there, but it took me another half hour to find a single soul to ask for directions, and drive my protesting Panda up the impossibly steep single-track road.

Twelve-foot gates loomed ahead like the entrance to a Victorian gaol, and when I tried to unbolt them, my fingers froze on the rusted metal. A padlock and chain was looped round one of the curlicues – maybe they're going to lock us in later?

Close-up, the hotel's whitewash is crumbling off like country house dandruff, and the sash windows rattle thanks to the wind and the parade-ground orders from the sergeant major.

Oh God. Maybe Steve *is* right. In life's great journey, I'm more of a passenger than a pilot. Boot camp? Who am I kidding . . .

'But if there's one thing we hate above all others, it's *lazy*, **LARDY, good-for-nothing LATECOMERS!**

Shit. He's seen me. Not the doe-eyed one, but the shorter one with the World War One moustache. The one who's been doing all the shouting so far.

He's walking towards the window. No, *marching*.

I should smile. Or run. Or something. But as I stare into the abyss behind his black eyes, my body is paralysed. *That* doesn't bode well for ten hours a day of exercise.

'GIRT YOUR . . . RATTLE . . . BODY . . . RATTLE . . . HERE.'

He's so furious that I can only make out some of the words as he rants and raves. The paintwork is flaking off the window frames, like the Puff Pastry Cream Horns I was testing on Friday for our Granny Knows Best range.

Despite my fear, my tummy rumbles.

The soldier looks hungry, too. His lips are pulled back in an expression that makes me think of the dangerous dogs you see on the news. The glass has steamed up, inside and out. He's unhinged.

No. It's just an act, isn't it? Professional women don't pay good money to be abused and bullied. God knows, I can get that at work. The brochure said boot camp takes the positive bits of military discipline: teamwork, supporting one's fellow woman, being the best . . .

The soldier's eyes widen and I realise his doe-eyed sidekick has said something to him. *Don't headbutt the window, maybe?*

'GIRT YOURSELF IN HERE NOW!'

Behind the two men, ten women are watching me with relieved expressions. As I head for the front door, I understand why, and my heart sinks even further.

They know the soldier has found his scapegoat. Which means they're in the clear.

Steph

I reach down and pull on the elastic band round my wrist. Then I let go.

Ow.

It hurts more than I was expecting, but that's the point. I got the idea from a magazine article about New Year's resolutions: every time I slip back into bad habits, I should pull the band, and the sting will remind me to break the cycle. I nicked a whole bagful of elastic bands from work before I left: with my track record, I'm going to need a few spare.

The bad habit I'm correcting right now is expecting the worst. I just need to take a deep yogic breath of the ozone-rich sea air and remind myself that if I didn't have room for improvement on the fitness and motivation front, there'd be no point being here, and—

'Oww . . .'

I'm lying face down on a freezing flagstoned floor. I'm too dazed to work out how I got here.

I examine the evidence.

Floor.

Door.

Hallway.

'Gosh, I'm terribly sorry! I wouldn't have opened the door if I'd known you were, um, leaning against it. Are you all right?' A cat-like woman in silky yoga gear is peering down at me.

I try to move all my limbs. ‘Nothing broken. Though I might get frostbite from these tiles.’

She winces. ‘Sorry. Heating the hallway isn’t very eco, what with the door opening all the time. You’ll soon get warm once you’re inside the ballroom.’

She holds out her hand to help me up but she’s so tiny I’ll probably pull her over. Luckily a super-strong Yeti-sized hand appears next to hers. It belongs to the doe-eyed soldier, who is towering over me. But before he can grab me, the angry one pushes him out of the way.

‘Took a tumble, **DID WE?** At least you’ve got plenty of padding.’ There’s an evil glint in his eye – just the left one; the right one doesn’t seem to move much. ‘You’re wasting time. Join us in the ballroom, when you’re good and ready. Which is sarcasm, by the way. I mean **NOW!**’ And he stomps off.

The doe-eyed sidekick smiles, then pulls me up effortlessly, even though I weigh eleven and a half stone. *Isb.* That was when I last weighed myself, first thing in the morning, in my pants, before I broke up with Steve. Right now it might be a tad more.

‘Staff Pepper’s bark’s worse than his bite,’ he says. His voice is softer than I’d expected, with a hint of the Yorkshire Moors, but I’m not convinced he’s telling the truth. ‘I’m Staff Ryan. We’re just in there.’

When he lets go of my hand, it has warmed up very nicely indeed. And the warmth seems to be spreading through my entire body.

Yoga Woman watches his taut backside as he disappears. ‘He’s such a softie. Both staffs are, underneath, as I’m sure you’ll find out. Welcome. I’m Edie. Chief exec of Windy Hill.’

‘Hi. I’m Steph.’

I hold out my hand but instead she embraces me in a cloud

of jasmine perfume. Then she mumbles something in my ear. It sounds like 'Sausage and mash with onion gravy'.

'Pardon?'

She lets go and smiles: deep grooves appear either side of her thin mouth. 'It's a welcome mantra. The boys take care of your physical development; I'm all about your *spiritual* growth.'

'Ah. Fantastic.' Frankly, I'm not here for the holistic stuff. My spiritual growth is perfectly well provided for by an evening on the sofa with *Mad Men* and a plate of . . . well, sausage and mash with onion gravy. 'I suppose I'd better . . .' and I nod towards the door, 'you know, before Staff Pepper gets even crosser.'

She smiles vaguely, then wafts off up the stairs. It's only as I struggle to pick up my over-stuffed duffel bag and carrier bags that I realise she could have helped me. I guess that doesn't come under her spiritual remit.

As I drag my luggage into the room, I feel a dozen pairs of eyes on me. The other women are judging, comparing. Thin or fat? Fighting fit, or barely breathing?

And how do I know they're doing that?

Because, however hard I try not to, I do it myself. My Compare-o-meter runs twenty-four seven. Ankle size, boob evenness, muffin top. Not to mention my own particular area of paranoia, thigh circumference.

My wrists are slim, though. The only part of my body I actually *like*.

'Are you trying to catch flies in your mouth?' says Staff Pepper.

I clamp my jaw shut and look round for the nearest empty chair. There's one next to a slim girl whose thighs *are* almost the same size as my wrists. I scuttle across the room and sit down, trying to make myself as tiny as possible, so people stop looking at me.

What the—

I'm flying through the air at high speed. Either someone has *literally* fired a rocket up my backside or—

'Oww!'

Or the seat has broken under my weight.

My hand throbs where it hit the ground. I've come to a standstill right at the centre of this massive room. The orange plastic part of the chair has broken off and propelled me along the shiny parquet, bobsleigh style, and I couldn't be more bruised if I actually *had* done the Cresta Run. But it's the total bloody humiliation that's making my eyes well up. This is *so* not me. I should turn around right now and drive back before it gets dark.

Staff Pepper is staring at me. I think he's *waiting* for me to burst into tears.

And something changes.

No bloody way am I giving him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. I ping the elastic against my wrist and I resolve here and now that whatever that thug throws at me this week – mountain climbs, dawn runs, obstacle courses over barbed wire – I will *not* surrender.

I can handle seven days, can't I? It's for the Greater Good. Everyone knows that Steph 'n' Steve are meant to be together. Everyone except Steve, that is. So if it takes a week in the back of beyond with a dozen skinny women and a psychopathic soldier to make things right again, it's a small price to pay.

'There's a seat over there that looks sturdier . . .' Pepper points to a chair next to a blonde woman with dimples and a deep crimson blush on her cheeks.

She's the first person I've seen here who looks like she actually needs a boot camp. Her wrists are bigger than mine and so's her belly. But it suits her. She looks comfortable in her skin. As I sit down, lowering my bottom millimetre by

millimetre just in case this one is booby-trapped too, she whispers, ‘Bad luck. I almost sat on that one too. Reckon they leave it there on purpose.’

I frown. Why would they do *that*? But before I can come up with a reason, there’s a tap on my shoulder.

I swing round.

‘What’s your name?’ Pepper barks, his lips so close to my ear you’d think he was about to bite it off.

For a second, I can’t even remember. ‘It’s . . . Stephanie. Steph.’

He sighs. ‘Last name. We don’t mess about with first names, here. First names are for wimps and girls.’

‘Oh, um, Dean.’

‘Dean,’ he repeats, like it’s an obscenity. ‘Dean. Well, *Stephanie* Dean, I think I can safely say I’ll remember *that name*.’

He obviously doesn’t expect me to answer back. So I do. ‘Why’s that then?’

Pepper tuts, then addresses the other women. ‘Two types of people I remember on boot camp. The winners. And the losers.’ He pauses. ‘I think we all know which of those *Stephanie* Dean is going to turn out to be.’