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Calling Home

Laura Bender

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The fine Kuwaiti sand blew around us, settling like a coat of talc on everything. I removed my goggles and tried to wipe the lenses, but my sleeve only added more dust. Parting the flap on the headquarters tent, Chaplain Ron R. and I entered, then quickly secured it behind us. A few of the admin types looked up to see who was arriving, but finding it was only chaplains, they buried their heads in their work.

“The CO’s office is in the back.” Ron headed toward the rear of the tent, passing a large dusty table with two printers covered in saran wrap like everything else electronic. New to the command, I followed closely. He knocked on the tent pole in the area that housed the CO’s desk and cot. “Sir, this is Chaplain R. Permission to enter?”

Commander H. invited us in, but not to sit. He stayed behind his desk.

“Sir, this is Chaplain Bender with Bravo Surgical Company.”

“Welcome. You are the last chaplain to arrive. Two reservists, one an LT and the other an LCDR, got here a few days ago. They are in the neighboring camp. Have you met them yet?”

“No, sir. Only Chaplain R.”

“How long have you been in the navy, LT?”

“Four years, sir.”

“Hmmm. You’re probably not going to like what I’m going to say. Chaplain R. has only been in the navy for eighteen months, but he’s my chaplain. Even though he’s the most junior of the four of you, I’m placing him in charge of you. You may still see me directly, as chaplains do, but he is in charge. How does that sit with you, Chaplain Bender?”

“Commander H., we are here to take care of sailors and marines. As long as we do that, I don’t care who has the administrative lead.”

“Very well, chaplains. That is all.”

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Ron walked out smirking. "I'm in charge."

"Good luck with that. More naps for me."

After meeting with the CO, Ron took me for a walk around the base. His surgical company lived in tents on the northside and mine on the south of a flat expanse of desert enclosed by a sand berm. The headquarters tent and the motor pool were in the middle. Each side had a shower trailer, a water buffalo with non-potable water, and a row of porta potties. The chow tent sat in the middle of the north side.

"Guess I can count the hike from my area to the chow tent as PT."

"You'd better be doing real PT while you're here. It's still a requirement." Ron looked serious. I ignored him.

We walked near a large bedouin tent on the north side. "This is where I live. There are twenty-five other guys who live here, too."

"Same arrangement for me. I live with twenty-five women, mostly nurses."

Not too much further, we came to a smaller tent. "This is Charlie Company's chapel where I counsel people and lead bible study. We hold services in our training tent because its bigger. You and I will alternate leading those."

"And Bravo Company has a chapel tent on the south side? I haven't seen it yet."

"You did, but one of our 06 nurses said she is too senior to share quarters with anyone, so she claimed it as her private residence."

"And you allowed that?"

"She's a captain. I can't tell her what to do."

"Yes, you can, Ron. You are responsible for that space. It's not assigned to her."

Ron's face flushed. "I'll let you use my chapel tent. Just clear it with me each time."

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Later that day, I visited with the Bravo Company CO to inform him that a CAPT nurse had turned space assigned to the Command Religious Program into a residence. Another LT, he said I should say nothing and lead my study groups and counseling sessions outdoors.

My next stop was Commander H. “Sir, one of your nurses has taken Bravo’s chapel tent as a residence. That space is assigned to us.”

“So, use Charlie’s tent or a training tent when its empty.”

I stared at him. “Is there something else, Chaplain?”

“Yes, sir. I’ve noticed that everyone in Charlie Company sleeps on a cot. Bravo is still sleeping on the floor. When I asked about our cots, I was told we did not have permission to unload them. Our medical staff is not that young. We need cots, too.”

“Back hurting you, Chaplain?”

I stared at him.

“The cots will stay right where they are.”

The next Sunday after the church service, while chatting with one of our senior surgeons, I mentioned that several of our medical personnel had expressed concerns to me about sleeping on the floor where scorpions and spiders often walked. That evening, we got cots.

One day Ron came to me with a complaint. “Your unit is disturbing our unit in the morning. Tell them to be more considerate.”

“What do you mean? They bother your folks at chow? They drink all the coffee?”

“No, before that. Your unit musters at 0545. Ours is not required to muster until 0800. Since the chow hall doesn’t serve until 0700, your folks are stomping around and making noise while they wait. We can’t sleep.”

“Commander H. decided the muster times. Take it up with him.”

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The next day, H. changed Bravo's muster to 0615 so we could form up, get the word for the day, and go directly to chow. He also changed Charlie's muster to 0815.

"Hey, Ron, are you hearing concerns from your people about not being able to contact their families? My folks are getting antsy because they never got to tell their loved ones they arrived safely."

"No, I'm not hearing any of that since we all got a five-minute call on the CO's satellite phone the night we arrived."

"Really? Let's go visit the CO. I want to ask him about calls for our unit."

"He isn't in right now. He went to a meeting at another base. When I stopped by to deliver his chocolates, that's what his staff told me."

"Chocolates? What are you talking about?"

"To keep up his morale, I leave chocolates on his pillow every day."

I stuck my fingers in my ears. "Please don't say that again. That's a picture I don't want in my head."

Later that day, I went to see Commander H. without him.

"I'm sorry, Chaplain, but I will not authorize the use of my phone for your unit."

"We are your unit, too, sir. We are augmented to you for this mission."

"And you will be better able to focus on that mission if you are not distracted with news from home."

"But, sir, we are very distracted by the lack of it."

"Your sailors and marines are literate, aren't they? They know how to hold a pen, right? Tell them to write a letter."

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“Yes, sir, I believe our surgeons and medical staff are literate. I’ll give them the message.”

We all wrote letters. A week later, the not-ready-for-operation-yet postal system returned every letter to us.

“Ron, next time you deliver chocolates, please tell the CO that the letters he told us to write have all been returned. We are now getting inbound Red Cross messages from frantic families who have not heard from their service member in almost a month.”

“Chaplain Bender, I don’t like your tone. I think it’s time to rein you in. Starting tomorrow, I want you to muster with me every morning so I can review what you plan to do that day.”

“Really, Ron? You want me to get your permission to do my job, every morning? So where would you suggest we meet?”

“Since Charlie Company’s muster is at 0815, you will muster at my cot at 0745.”

“Your cot? In your tent? You are out of your mind.”

“That’s what I said, and that’s what you’ll do.”

As I stomped away, the image of mustering next to Ron’s cot danced in my brain. The more I visualized it, the more I liked the idea.

The next morning at 0745 exactly, I pushed open the flap on Ron’s tent. Thankfully, his cot was near the entrance. I walked over smartly, stood at attention, and announced, “Chaplain Bender, reporting as ordered.” Around me, twenty-five men in various states of dress whipped their heads in my direction.

“Chaplain Bender, what are you doing in here?”

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Before I could answer, Ron did. “I told her to muster with me here every day. I’m in charge of her, you, know.”

At the request of one of the senior officers, I left the tent. From outside, I could hear a lot of unpleasant yelling. Soon Ron appeared carrying his seabag and bedding.

“You can’t use my chapel tent anymore. I’ve decided I deserve a private place to live.”

Two days later, the senior chaplain for all marine units called a meeting. The guest speaker was Colonel M., the chief of staff. I rode to the meeting in an ambulance with Ron and our assistants. The other two chaplains Ron supervised were also in attendance. We sat together toward the back of the tent. Colonel M. began his talk with generalities about the pending war, what we should expect and what he expected from us. When he finished, he looked around the room and began asking us for input. He wanted to know how things were going in our units. Seeing me, the only female chaplain, he asked, “Chaplain Bender, how are my female marines?”

I stood to address him. “Sir, I don’t work with your female marines.”

“Then where do you work?”

“I am with the Health Services BN, sir. Specifically, Bravo Surgical Company.”

“So, Chaplain Bender, how is my medical unit?”

A surge of heat rose from my heart to my head. I took a deep breath. If I couldn’t speak up for the people I serve, why the hell was I here? “Sir, medical is not doing well.”

Every chaplain’s head turned towards me. Most were glaring. How many times at Chaplains School did they warn us never to speak negatively about our leadership?

“Why are they not doing well?”

“Sir, Bravo Surgical Company has been at Camp Guadalcanal for five weeks without being able to contact our families to let them know we arrived safely. I addressed it with the CO

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and he instructed us to write letters, but those were returned by the postal system. This is becoming a distraction for our personnel. For a week now, we have been receiving inbound Red Cross inquiries from frantic loved ones. If we could make a morale call, sir, that would help us be ready to cross over into Iraq.”

“Most camps have email. You don’t have it in yours?”

“Not for our use, sir.”

“Is this a concern for the entire unit?”

“No, sir. Alpha Company made phone calls home the day they arrived.”

Colonel M. paused, then nodded his head. “Commander H. is your CO, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That explains the problem. He likes to create his own kingdom with himself as the dictator. Thank you, Chaplain. After this meeting I will send two satellite phones to Bravo Company. They will remain there until everyone in your unit has had a five-minute call home.”

“Thank you, sir.” Weak in the knees, I sat. What did I just do? Commit career suicide? The other chaplains around me were shaking their heads like they had witnessed my justified demise. Oh, hell, what could the navy do to me? Send me to Iraq? If I survived, I’d likely be glad to get out of the military, anyway.

“Attention on deck.” My inner monologue ended abruptly as I snapped to attention for Colonel M.’s departure down the center aisle. When he arrived at the row where I was seated, he stopped, reached out his hand and shook mine. “Thank you for your honesty, Chaplain Bender.”

Ron was on me the minute the chief of staff stepped out of earshot. “How dare you throw our CO under the bus.”

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“I didn’t throw him under the bus, Ron. He threw himself by not taking care of his troops. I told the truth. If that puts him in a terrible light, he should have acted better.”

“I’m gonna tell him what you did when we get back to the base.”

Chaplain M., an LCDR Catholic priest who LT R. also supervised, scowled at him. “I’m sure you will, Ron.”

“I don’t like your tone. I’m in charge of you, too. By the way, I know something about your unit that you don’t know.”

“What is that?”

“I’m not going to tell you.”

Chaplain M. put his nose close to Ron’s. “Quit the fucking games. It’s poor leadership.”

Ron jumped to his feet. “We are leaving.”

I gathered my things, gave a thumbs-up to the priest, and headed out of the tent.

Once in the ambulance for the ride back to camp, Ron came unglued. RP3 Howell, my assistant and bodyguard, edged closer to me on the seat. As Ron ranted on about my disloyal behavior, I signaled RP3 to keep quiet. I did not want him involved in the mess I had chosen. He had a family to support.

“Stop the vehicle. I don’t want to be around you anymore.” At Ron’s order, his assistant hit the brakes. “Get out, Laura. You can find your own way back to camp.”

When I exited the ambulance, I could see we were only a half mile across the sand from the camp’s entry point. Even though the command had warned us never to walk out in the desert because of random attacks by disgruntled Kuwaitis, I was glad to be away from Ron. As the ambulance sped away, RP3 stood behind me.

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“I’m your bodyguard, ma’am. Besides, if I had stayed, I would have knocked him on his ass.”

“He’s pretty much all ass, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, and he should get in trouble for leaving us out here. But I bet he won’t.” In the distance his vehicle drove through the gate.

“Come on, RP3, let’s see if we can make it to chow before it closes.”

After lunch, I stopped in to see the Bravo Company CO to report my comments at the meeting and let him know to expect the satellite phones. I did not see Ron again until dinner when he blew into the chow hall in a huff. I was eating with the psychologists from his company when he arrived.

“I need to see you in private, right now.”

I excused myself from the table and followed him outside the tent.

“I have spent much of the afternoon relating to Commander H. the events of today’s meeting.”

“Did you remember to bring his chocolates?”

“Don’t get smart with me. You are in big trouble. He has ordered me to get statements from you and both our assistants. I already told him what you said, but he needs a statement about what Colonel M. said about him in front of that room full of people. I’ve already gotten statements from our assistants.”

“And what did they say?”

“They both said the meeting was boring, and they had stopped paying attention after the first five minutes. But I know you heard what he said.” Ron had paper and pen in hand, ready to write.

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“Chaplain R., I am much older than you. As you know, one problem that comes with aging is cognitive decline. I would like to help you, but I have no memory of what that colonel, what’s his name, said about Commander H. You should get dinner. The chow hall is closing soon.”

He stormed away without eating.

That night the phones arrived, and every member of Bravo Company signed for a time slot. I waited for my official reaming, but it didn’t occur. Instead, over the next two days, I received tearful hugs, whispered thanks, and even an ovation at dinner. The comments overwhelmed me.

“My wife thought I didn’t love her anymore because she never heard from me.”

“I got to hear my children’s voices.”

“You made it possible for me to tell my family I love them.”

“If I get killed in Iraq, at least I got to talk with my family one last time.”

RP3 gave me a big hug. “My wife says we’re having a girl!”

A few days later, I got a visit from the senior chaplain. “I bet you are wondering why Commander H. has not taken you to task for the phone issue.”

“Yes, sir. But I am ready for whatever he wants to do to me. Hearing the responses from my sailors and marines makes the consequences worth it.”

“Don’t worry about consequences. There won’t be any. Colonel M. heard that Commander H. wanted to know what he had said about him at the meeting. So, he paid him a visit and told him face-to-face. He also told him he had better be in good humor about what you did because it was the right thing to do. You also need to know that after Colonel M. visited with Commander H., he ordered every unit in Tactical Area Coyote, that’s all the camps getting ready

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to cross into Iraq, to give their people a morale call before they leave. I just thought you should know. Nice work. Stay safe out there.”

After the senior chaplain left, I took a stroll around the perimeter to mull over all that had transpired. I knew I was going to need all the strength God would provide for whatever else lay ahead.