

# **NO ROOM FOR CREAM**

*An Adventure in Courage and Faith*

William E. Bullis



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Biblical references are drawn from the New American Bible Revised Edition as found on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website.

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TO MY MA AND POPS,  
YOU KNOW MY PRAYERS.



# AUTHOR'S NOTE

*No Room For Cream* began as a letter to my children. Like many parents, I have watched the world change and struggled to put my finger on it—the something not quite right, the something missing, whatever it is that seems to be causing people to lose their faith in God and his Church.

It didn't take me long to realize that I could not capture this in a letter, and I may still not have done it justice in this story.

The mountains in this book are real places I have camped in, climbed, and loved. The friendships portrayed here are inspired by the kind of loyal companions every person hopes to have in life. And the questions Sarah wrestles with are the ones thoughtful people inevitably face when confronted with grief, injustice, suffering, doubt, and the search for meaning.

At its heart, this story is about the greatest adventure any of us can undertake—discovering who we are meant to be and learning to love God along the way.

If this story encourages even one reader to look for the trail that is not found on any map, then it will have served its purpose.

— *William E. Bullis*



# PART I

# 1

## RISING STAR

It had been a year since her mother Maggie's death from cancer and about the same amount of time since moving to Silicon Valley, which didn't seem like much of a valley compared to her beloved Shenandoah, where her father still lived on three quiet acres along the North Fork of the river.

To Sarah's way of figuring, the opportunity she'd received from a top venture capital firm was too good to pass up. Plus, San Jose put her within a stone's throw of her best friend, Sophie Shriram, whom she had known her whole life and needed now more than she realized. Meeting her for coffee on Saturday mornings seemed to be the only reason to get out of bed, which didn't fit with her normal routine but had become her new reality over the last few months.

*You know you don't like sleeping in. Is something wrong with you?* She wondered while walking up the street from her studio apartment to the corner café. *Prolly. So what? Deal with it later. Who said time heals all wounds? What a load of malarkey...!* *Hey, good word. One of Grandpa's favorites!* She tightened her jacket against the morning chill and headed towards the café, hoping her good friend wouldn't notice her weary eyes – or the weight behind them.

After a hug and a quick order, Sophie just came out with it.

“Sarah, it isn’t good that you have not spoken to your dad for so long. This isn’t like you. I get being sad and angry with what you’ve been through, but your dad loves you!”

Sarah avoided eye contact while toying with her bagel, wishing there was a way to turn it into a biscuit. “I know, I know,” she whispered.

“What’s going on? Talk to me.”

“He’s so frustrating. He seems so confident in his beliefs. I don’t understand him. Mom was so young. Why her? How can the world be this way? It doesn’t make any sense. What’s the point?”

Sarah watched a squirrel scamper across the street, wishing her life could be that simple.

Sophie wondered, “Maybe Uncle Ronnie could help?”

Sarah put her coffee down and smiled. “What did you say?”

“Uh... Maybe Uncle Ronnie could help?”

“Hmm. Interesting you say that. I have a business trip to Charlotte next week. That will take me close to his home. Maybe I could talk to him. You’re right. He’ll know what to do.”

Sophie agreed, adding, “Uncle Ronnie loves you more than life itself. He’ll have the right perspective.”

“Yes!” Sarah said, suddenly animated. “You’re right. I can’t wait to see him!”

Uncle Ronnie met her for lunch the next week after she made the short journey from Charlotte over the ancient Uwharrie Mountains. They agreed to meet in the Village of Pinehurst, North Carolina, which was not far from Fort Bragg, where he had once been stationed, and near where he now lived.

“Why, Sarah, you look fit as a fiddle. You’re keeping yourself in shape,” said Uncle Ronnie as he pulled her in close for their traditional bear hug, which they had done since she was a little girl.

“You know me, Uncle Ronnie. I’m not going to let myself go

soft. Plus, I could easily beat you in a mile run, right here, right now!”

“I bet you could, girl dear. I bet you could! Let’s go inside and get us some barbecue and sweet tea and catch up on things.”

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It took him no time to determine what was troubling his best friend’s daughter, whom he had known since she was a baby. “I’ve got an idea for you, girl. Why don’t we go for a hike with your dad just like the old days?”

“What will that accomplish?”

“Do you have time for me to tell you a story about your Pa? This is going back a ways, but I think it might help you understand where he’s coming from.”

“Do I have to?”

“No, actually, you don’t. You see, Sarah, you’re a woman now. You are on a path, whether you realize it or not. You set the direction with what you do based on how you think and what you believe. Sometimes, God sends you a message. It’s up to you to listen, interpret, decide and act.”

She scowled. “What if I don’t believe in God or at least the God my dad believes in?”

“Don’t worry. He still believes in you!”

She sighed. “Okay, what’s the story?”

“I’ll tell you what, you set up that trip we talked about, and I’ll tell it to you while we’re walking out in the great wide open.”

As soon as Sarah left, Ronnie got on the phone to his good buddy, Jack Martin, who was Sarah’s third “uncle.” Ronnie knew he’d be essential on this mission.

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Somehow, as if by magic, Sarah was able to convince her father to accompany her and her best friend, Sophie, on a weeklong backpacking trip along the Continental Divide in Colorado. Even more remarkably, Sophie convinced her father, Rakesh Shriram, to join them. He was the CEO of a Fortune 100 tech giant. He also happened to be the best friend of her father, former president of the United States, Sean O'Malley.

How the girls were able to get "Uncle" Sean and "Uncle" Rakesh to join them on this adventure is on par with many of life's great mysteries. Perhaps the men were due for an adventure. O'Malley was six years post his presidency, but still very busy teaching at the community college and volunteering with the Knights of Columbus and St. Vincent de Paul charity. He was also on one corporate board and had recently been a special envoy for the United States. Dr. Shriram was also equally busy, although he was beginning to plan his retirement from NarrowGate Technologies, which he had founded thirty years earlier.

When they learned of their daughters' plans, they immediately called each other.

"Yo, Rakesh, can you believe what these girls are thinking of having us do?" asked O'Malley, laughing.

"I don't know how I can get out of it. You know me, I haven't been to the woods for years, and they think we're going to backpack for a week! They are certifiably insane!"

"I know! Don't these girls know we are distinguished gentlemen who are more at home at the country club than the backcountry?!" O'Malley laughed even harder.

"Look, Sean, you've got to get me out of this!" Rakesh laughed.

"What are you talking about? I bet Sophie came up with this idea!"

"Ha ha! You know that's not true. All Sophie cares about is how many views she's getting on YouTube, or is it Instagram? Hold it! She's

not going to film this damn hike! Oh, hell no! I am not going backpacking with my daughter if she's going to bring her GoPro. That's what this is all about, isn't it?"

"You know your daughter better than I do. I know she's popular, but I think Sarah's been struggling with some things lately. It seems she wants some time to sort things out. I'm glad she's asked us to come along."

"What kind of things?" asked Rakesh.

"I'm not sure, but I think she's struggling with her faith."

"Hmmm. Been there. Done that. I'm in for whatever she needs. How long do we have before we go?"

"Four weeks."

"I'm screwed!"

O'Malley added with deadpan seriousness, "Me too, but that never stopped us before. This is a mission from God."

"I'm in!" shouted Rakesh.

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Four weeks later, when O'Malley and his daughter arrived at the hotel in Denver, O'Malley was shocked to see not only his good friend Rakesh but also his two other best friends, whom he'd not seen since the funeral, along with Rakesh's daughter, Sophie. He immediately knew he was in trouble when Colonel Ronnie Gardner, U.S. Army Rangers (retired), hugged him and simultaneously grabbed his butt while whispering, "Love you, bro!" and then kissed him on the cheek while emitting a loud, guttural laugh that caused all activity in the lobby to come to an immediate standstill.

Thankfully, their other good buddy, Father Jack Martin, pulled Ronnie off and extended his hand for a more normal greeting, which O'Malley could not abide by, pulling him in close and saying, "Bless me,

Father, for I am about to sin!” while simultaneously grabbing his butt, too.

To which Father Martin added, in his best fake Irish accent, “Aye, dear President, let me ask for your consideration in advance because I’m worried I’ll be doing some sinning soon enough meself!”

Then Ronnie pulled Rakesh in close for a four-way, uncomfortably long love-hug, which was broken when Rakesh yelled their traditional, “Ireland Forever!”

The patrons gaped at the former president’s actions.

The daughters reacted a bit more subtly, having seen this kind of silly behavior many times from these men they had known all their lives.

Sarah approached. “Okay, that’s enough, boys. I suggest we get settled and meet back here in thirty minutes. We’ll go over our plans during dinner. We’ve got to get an early start tomorrow.”

All four men turned, came to full attention, saluted, and yelled, “Yes, Master!” which they’d done many times in response to Sarah’s stern leadership, going back to when she was a little girl.

They all laughed and brought both girls in for an even bigger hug and then broke ranks as directed.

An hour later, at one of Denver’s finest steak houses, the team came together for a pre-hike planning meal. As the food arrived, Rakesh asked if anyone would like to do the honor of saying grace, and at that instant, all eyes turned to Father Jack.

“So, here we go, ganging up on the old Catholic priest again, eh?” he said with a grin.

“But, Uncle Jack, you were trained for this, were you not?” asked Sophie.

“Why, dear Sophie, all of us can talk to God, but I’ll let you in on a little secret: He once said, “Where two or three are gathered together

in my name, there I am in the midst of them.”<sup>1</sup>

Father Jack said grace in the tradition he had learned from Sean’s family, making the Sign of the Cross over the whole table, saying, “In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Then Rakesh added, “I pray, Jesus, who is ever capable of removing all obstacles, for your blessings and protection on this hike. Plus, if possible, could you make it so I don’t break my leg!”<sup>2</sup>

Then all joined in with a hearty, “Amen!” except for Sophie, who was trying to foil her father’s silliness.

Much was discussed at dinner, including an agreement they would get an early start in the morning to reach the access point for the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) loop by midday.

Just as they were about to leave the table, a woman suddenly appeared standing directly next to O’Malley. She was about twenty-five years old, well-dressed, and extremely nervous, almost to the point of distress. “President O’Malley,” she said, “I want you to know how much pain you’ve caused me.”

He gazed up at her. “How may I help you?”

She frowned. “You can’t. What’s done is done. But you should know that what you say and do has an impact. You hurt me, and it’s a pain that won’t go away. You said you support women, but that is not how I see it!” Tears trickled down her face.

President O’Malley stood up. “Do you have a few minutes to talk? Perhaps we could go over to that corner table?” He put his arm

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:20

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from a Hindu Prayer of Protection. Rakesh had a deep affection for Hindu culture and incorporated this into his prayer to Jesus out of deep respect for his Hindu friends, most especially his wife’s family. He also added an Irish blessing element that he learned from Sean’s father.

around the woman, and together they walked over to the bar area.

Sophie and Sarah's eyes widened with shock as the intensity of the woman's emotions were palpable to them.

Father Jack said, "Good luck to that woman. She doesn't know it yet, but she's about to convert or revert to Holy Mother Church."

Sophie asked, "What do you mean, Uncle Jack? That woman is really upset."

Then Uncle Ronnie joined, "Ah, Sophie and Sarah, we've seen this happen many times, and not just when your dad was president. He has an extraordinary gift for listening with love. It's why his men admired him in the Army and why he became so successful in business."

Rakesh nodded. "I always thought he would be the one of us who would become a priest, but that was not his calling. Anyway, it's getting late. That young woman is in good hands. Let's go to our rooms, as we must get an early start tomorrow."