

# ANTS ACROSS THE PAGE

CONNIE AVERITT  
**WILLIAMS**



ST JOSEPH, MISSOURI USA

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-936501-66-3

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Printed in the United States of America

Dedicated to the memory of Ross and Pansy Burlingame.

Also dedicated to the students with learning struggles  
who power their way through school and come out on top.

My hat is off to you, and to the teachers, aides, parents,  
and friends who love and support you on your journey.



# ONE

Apple Valley, Indiana, September 1960

*This is when I learned that some people can whip  
you into shape without doing anything.*

I remember that one particular moment in 1960, an everyday moment when the school bus dumped me out and groaned on down the road, setting me free from all things related to school. With a happy sigh I strolled up our long gravel driveway past the pear trees, their branches dropping ripe fruit in the grass with a plop here and a plop there. I picked one up and took a bite, letting the sweet juice run down my chin. Cottony clouds glided over the fields, pushed by darker clouds, not the kind that crash their way across the sky, but the other kind—silent, gentle, sliding into place above me. My nose was telling me that soon I would feel the first pricks of cool water on my skin. Change was in the air.

When I came around to the side of the house, I saw a strange car parked in the driveway. A woman stood on the back porch, her hand on the doorknob. She didn't see me.

Oh, no. Not again. Dad bought us another woman.

That's when I tossed my fifth-grade history book into the grass and raced to the barn where I knew I'd find Dad. "Hey!" I squeezed between the tractors. "Dad, where are you?"

"What, Luke?" His voice came from under the green John Deere parked near the Dutch doors. He was on his hands and knees, proba-

bly hunting for a dropped bolt or something.

“Dad, didn’t you hear that car pull up? Somebody’s on our back porch. She’s looking in the screen door and wiggling the doorknob.” I took a deep breath. “She has a big stomach.”

Dad’s long legs moved, and his head clunked against something hard. “Ow.” Dad was silent under the tractor, probably recovering from his head bonk. I swear, my dad usually looked like his face just wrestled with a chicken.

He sat up on his knees, holding his right eye. “Did you say someone’s on the porch—a woman?”

I groaned. “Dad, did you buy us another woman?”

He crawled around to my side of the tractor and pulled himself up to his full height beside the huge wheel. As he rubbed the side of his head, his fingers scrambled the thick black hair around his ear. “We’re not going to buy us a woman, son. I’m just going to interview a woman, and possibly hire her. We don’t buy people, Luke. We hire them. There’s a big difference. Don’t go around telling people we buy women.”

“But, Dad,” I complained. “None of ’em like us. The last one practically drilled a hole in my ear with her finger in a washcloth. I’m too old for somebody to be doing that to me.”

“You must’ve needed it or she wouldn’t have done it.”

That’s when I noticed the new grease-lined scratch on his eyebrow. “I think she wanted to fix you, too.”

“Well she’s moved on to greener pastures.” Dad sighed. “And we need somebody to help take care of us.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“And Stevie?”

I pointed at my chest. “I can take care of Stevie.”

“Like you did this morning when he ran down the driveway in his socks?”

“You saw that?”

Dad rolled his eyes.

“Clean socks, Dad. He had on clean socks—and they matched!”

He rubbed his forehead.

“And I did get his shoes to him before he got on the school bus.”

“Saw that, too.”

“Whoops.” I’d thrown them.

“There’s a fifty-fifty chance he has them on the right feet today.” Dad shook his head as he set down his favorite wrench, the one that was almost permanently connected to his hand.

I liked the way our life was now, free and loose like my favorite pajamas that our last helper lady threw in the trash. She’d tried to whip us into shape, forcing baths on us all the time and lecturing Dad about my lousy schoolwork. I was so glad when she left.

“We’d better get to the house.” Dad wove through the tractors toward the front of the barn. “Luke, this lady needs us just as much as we need her. She’s a widow, and she needs a job so she can take care of her baby, or was it a kid?”

My jaw clenched. “You don’t even know if it’s a baby or a kid?”

He stopped just inside the barn door, and we both looked across the yard.

The lady had returned to the other side of her car. The door was open, and she was studying something in her hand. Because she was short, all we saw was her head poking up like a brown-haired pea on top of the car, a ’57 Chevy. Turning, she walked toward the back door again, her baggy blue jacket rustling in the soft September breeze.

“Who is she, Dad?” I asked.

“Aunt Louisa’s sister’s friend’s other friend’s cousin’s cousin’s cousin.”

“You’ll have to draw that in a picture later so I can understand it.”

He grinned. “To be honest, I don’t know exactly how it goes. I just made up the stuff in the middle. I do know it started with Aunt Louisa and ended with somebody’s cousin.”

“Man, you used to be real picky about who came to take care of us. This one—you don’t even know who knows her?”

“I know my Aunt Louisa. And if she knows all those other people—well, it’ll be fine with me. Aunt Louisa wouldn’t do us wrong. She loves us.”

The lady stood at the door, knocked, then squinted at the paper in

her hand. As she turned to look around, we backed into the shadows of the barn. With a squeak, she pulled the screen door open, shouted, "Hello?" and walked into our house.

"I guess we'd better get over there." Dad picked up a rag and started to wipe the grease off his hands.

"Did you do the dishes today?" I asked.

"I've been working out here. I don't even know what the kitchen looks like right now." He stepped out of the barn.

As we approached the house, a voice floated out to us through the screen. "Is anyone here?" A strong, steady voice. "Am I at the home of William Bradley? Hello?"

Dad yanked the door and walked inside, and I followed.

She stood at the sink, her back to us. Dishes lined the counter like a platoon of flying saucers that had skidded across a tomato patch and stopped against a fence.

She turned to meet us face to face. "Hm. Looks like you had spaghetti last night."

Dad stopped and I bumped into him. "Yes, we did," he said.

Even though she was small for a grown-up, there was something powerful in her sparkling dark eyes that made me almost salute her. If this was to be our next helper lady, we were in big trouble.

She glanced back at the dish pile. "And, let's see, for breakfast you had...cement?"

"Oatmeal." Dad answered quietly. I think he was in shock. I know I was.

After a pause, Dad hung his greasy rag on the doorknob, stepped toward her, and held out his hand. "I'm William Bradley, Aunt Louisa's nephew."

"Aunt who?"

"Aunt Louisa, whose sister is a friend of someone who is a friend of someone you know, cousins and other people."

"Martha Taylor?"

"Never heard of her." Dad's arm was still outstretched.

"Martha said you are Esther Hines' sister's neighbor's nephew, I

think, maybe.” After shaking Dad’s hand, she took off her coat and set it on our stool by the sink. I noticed there was a dark streak of grease on her thumb from Dad’s handshake.

He didn’t speak. He was staring at the lady’s stomach. It pooched out like she was hiding a volleyball under her dress.

Dad cleared his throat and pulled out a chair. “Please have a seat.”

She walked over and sat down. And wouldn’t you know, the chair creaked and wiggled, so she jumped up.

“It’ll hold you,” Dad reassured her.

She eased herself back onto the chair and looked around the room, sort of like she expected rats to jump out of our dish pile.

“We don’t have rats,” I told her in my most reassuring tone.

Her eyebrows lifted. “Good to know.”

Outside, Stevie’s school bus rolled to a screeching stop at the end of our long driveway.

“That’ll be my other son,” Dad said. “He goes to a special school. I’ll tell you that right off the bat, he’s a Down’s syndrome child.” Dad’s fingers twitched nervously against his pants pocket.

“Oh.” She put her hand on her cheek and slowly nodded. “Okay.”

Dad had already explained to me that Down’s was another name for what kind of a boy my seven-year-old brother was—with his flat hands, his runny nose and constant sneezes, clumsiness, limited abilities, and a truckload of sweetness deep down inside.

“Did Martha Taylor tell you about him?” Dad asked the lady.

“No. Martha didn’t really know much about you. She just said you were trustworthy.” She paused. “She knew I’d be safe here.”

So, Dad’s good reputation had inched its way into other towns and places. People from afar came because Dad was—

Stevie burst into the room. “Cool car!” he shouted.

That’s how Stevie was. He walked around all day with a foghorn voice and a smile plastered on his face that hit you like a big sneeze of butterflies. Anyway, Stevie got excited over a new crayon or an old crayon, or even a strange car in the driveway. And besides that, he never thought before he spoke. Instead, his thoughts just came shooting straight out of his boom-

ing mouth. "Cool car!" he repeated, walking to the sink. "Drink-drink."

I jumped to the cupboard to get a clean glass. Of course, there wasn't one, so I grabbed a dirty one, rinsed it, filled it with cold water, and handed it to Stevie.

"Cool water!" he said between glugs, sloshing drops all over his chin. He smiled at the lady, squeezing his almond shaped eyes into little slits. "Cool tummy," he sputtered, fumbling his glass against a pan as he set it on the counter.

"Watch out!" Dad warned—too late.

Stevie had started a dish avalanche.

Dad sprang forward and dove toward the counter. That probably would've worked, except the lady also dove with lightning speed, colliding with him, their arms getting tangled up while more dishes slid to the linoleum floor, crashing and rolling until the last pan lid bounced against a table leg with a loud ringing clang.

When it was done, Dad was sprawled across the floor in front of the lady, his arms stretched out like Superman with a rescued cowboy bowl sideways in his hands, dripping oatmeal globs. He had spaghetti on his arms and a broken plate under his elbow, which was slathered in red. Oh, no. Blood?

"Dad, your arm."

Dad, whose cheeks were a shade of bright red, carefully scooted back on his knees and looked up at the lady who was standing with her back against the sink. Her white blouse was peppered with tomato sauce spots.

Maybe I should tell you right now that my dad doesn't have much luck with the ladies.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Trying to get up." Still on his knees, he scooted farther away from her. "Are you okay?"

"Just dandy." She turned to the counter, pushing back the remaining pans with her bulging stomach and outstretched arms.

Stevie stood still, his mouth open.

I groaned. "Dad, your elbow, it's bleeding. I'll get something." I rushed to the nook by the kitchen door, grabbed a white sock off the

washer, knelt beside him, and wrapped it around his arm.

"It doesn't even hurt." He rubbed the sock bandage with his other hand. "I'll bet it's mostly spaghetti sauce." He looked down at his thumb. "Oh, wait. I am bleeding here, just a nick. Get another sock, son."

"A sock?" The lady set Stevie's cup in the sink. "You use socks for bandages?"

I got another one, and Dad wrapped his hand. Turning to Stevie, who was starting to cry, he said, "It's okay, buddy. Why don't you go play cool trucks in the living room?"

"Okay, cool trucks." Wiping a tear, my brother clomped down the hall.

"I'll get the mop and broom and stuff," I said.

Nobody talked while the three of us cleaned up the mess. All I heard was the patter of raindrops on the roof.

When the lady returned our mop to the nook by the back door, she stood for a moment and stared at the washer. "Oh, boy," she muttered.

We always kept our clean socks in a pile on the washer. We called it Sock Mountain.

The lady sat down at the table again. Dad dropped into a chair too. I wanted to know what was going to happen, so I joined them.

"I suppose if I do come to work here, I'll need to start with the dishes." She looked around the room. "Or put up new wallpaper?"

I'd never noticed the peeling wallpaper. It had just sorta always been there. My eyes wandered to the faded curtains and the petrified pink penicillin splotches along the windowsill where Stevie had knocked over the bottle last spring.

"I suppose the rest of the house is like this?" She waved her hand, palm up.

"We don't have the gift of housekeeping," Dad said.

The way I figured, she wasn't surveying the room to see what her jobs were. She was looking for the fastest way out.

She swung her eyes back to Dad. "Worse than I imagined."

For a second, I wanted to punch her.

Dad sighed. "I wouldn't blame you if you walk right out that door

and never come back.”

She continued to view the room, her eyes glancing along the crooked picture of a duck on the wall. “I think you might need me.”

What? No. We didn’t need anybody. We were fine this way. We liked it this way.

Dad didn’t say anything. He was looking around the room like she was doing, and I could tell he was noticing things for the first time—things that had always been there.

“Mr. Bradley, I have a feeling that I’m not what you imagined either.”

Well, she had a point there. Nobody could imagine her—not with the big belly, quick-as-a-panther-reflexes, and bold mouth.

I could tell that Dad, who had a stiff spaghetti noodle dangling from his hair like a piece of straw, was trying not to stare at her stomach.

The lady sighed. Her eyes moved down to his thick, dirt-caked work boots, then rambled upward to his long, grease-stained pantlegs, and on to his favorite plaid shirt with the ripped sleeve. If his clothes could talk, they would be announcing, I do tractor maintenance all day. Every day.

The expression on her face looked like she was viewing a train wreck. Her gaze rested on his hair again, a mass of black tufts and pasta particles.

I ran my hand through my own hair. All clear.

The lady glanced down at her middle, then back to Dad. “Did you know I was expecting?”

“No. I don’t even know your name.”

“Margaret Bowman. Most people call me Maggie.”

“William Bradley.” Dad pointed at me. “This is my son, Luke.”

“Hi.” She smiled at me, and I smiled back. Her eyes were chocolate brown.

“I don’t know who your folks know that I know,” she said to Dad.

“Me either,” he replied.

What a worthless conversation.

“I’ll just give you the facts about me. I’m from Richmond. My husband, Ted, was a fireman.” She drew a deep breath. “He died in June

while on duty. Did you already know that?”

My heart sank down into my shoes.

“No, I didn’t,” Dad said. “I’m so sorry about your husband.”

She continued. “Our baby is due December 27. My parents live in Brazil right now.”

Dad’s eyebrows moved up.

“They’re missionaries. They came home for a while to help me at first, but they had to return.”

Missionaries. She was probably really religious. I didn’t know how Dad and I would handle religious stuff going on in our house.

She was still talking. “If you have a room for me, I’ll stay in it.”

“Uh...” Dad started.

“I’ll get out a bulldozer and work on your kitchen. I might even try to sandblast some of the rest of this place. You can pay me whatever you told your Aunt LulaBelle’s cousin’s nephew’s sister’s friend’s cousin’s uncle’s kangaroo’s sister’s niece—whatever amount you said. I enjoy cooking. I can handle laundry. I like kids.” She turned to me. “You look like a good one.”

“Thanks.” Something warm flickered inside of me.

She shot a glance toward the living room. “And I’ll take that little loud guy in there, too—Mr. Cool, who is wearing two left shoes.”

Dad turned to me.

“What?” I raised my hands. “I’m sure I gave him a left and a right this morning.”

The lady put her fingers on her temples. “I’ve had a splitting headache since six this morning. Do you have any aspirin?”

I hopped to the cupboard, opened it, and handed her the aspirin bottle while Dad rushed to the pantry, found a clean peach jar, and filled it with water.

“Thanks.” She took the pills, then turned to Dad. “If I get a day off, I’d like it to be Wednesdays so I can go into town. I heard there’s a group of ladies who make quilts.”

“Fine with me.” Dad nodded. “And you can rest on Sundays. I’ll cook my famous hotdog lunch.”

“Okay, then.”

“Do you have your things in the car?” Dad asked.

“I have a couple of suitcases in the trunk. Eventually, I’ll need to go to Richmond for the rest. When my rent ran out, I gathered everything and put it in my Aunt Joyce’s garage.”

Dad rubbed his chin. “Aunt Joyce?”

“You don’t know her.”

Suddenly, I was anxious to get away from this weird conversation. “I’ll get your stuff from the car,” I offered.

She handed me her keys. “Thank you. There are two suitcases in the trunk.”

“Maybe you should rest a bit until your headache clears up.” Dad stood. “Luke and I’ll work on these dishes.”

“Oh, that’d be nice. Would you mind showing me to my room?”

Her room? I stopped at the door. Where? What room?

Dad turned toward the hall, probably trying to think of way to invent a room in the next five seconds.

I escaped.

Raindrops were pelting me, so I grabbed a suitcase out of the trunk and dragged it to the covered porch before it got soaked. I ran back for the smaller suitcase, then brought them both inside.

Dad and the lady were in his room, staring at the bed, which was all tussled up worse than usual.

I spoke. “Whoops. It looks like we forgot about the peanut butter and jelly fight Stevie and Bo-Wad had in here yesterday.”

“Bo-Wad?” the lady asked.

“Stevie’s friend,” I answered.

“Great.” Dad, who’d seemed mostly calm so far, now had a bit of a choke in his voice. “And I put the last clean sheets on the couch for myself last night.” He sighed. “Let’s get these off the bed and throw ’em in the washer, son.”

Even though I was still wrestling with the idea of a stranger sleeping at our house, I realized Dad needed my help. “She can use my bed,” I offered.

“Yours has clean sheets?” he asked.

“Well, they don’t have food stuck on ’em.”

“Um...” The lady was about my height, and since I’m tall for a fifth grader, her eyes hit me straight-on. “Okay.”

Dad began stripping off his sheets while I led her up the steep steps to the wide room I shared with Stevie. I showed her my bed, thinking how weird it was to have a woman invading our house like this, then went downstairs and helped Dad stuff the sheets into the washer. We shut the door to dad’s room. Nobody would sleep there tonight.

While she was upstairs, we ate tuna-fish sandwiches and alphabet soup from a can. Then we tackled the mess in the kitchen.

At about 9:00 we set the last sparkling dish on the cupboard shelf. And since the rain had stopped and we didn’t have a dryer, we hung the clean sheets out on the line. Dad always said he liked the all-night dewy smell.

We stood at the end of the hall and looked up the steps.

“Pretty long nap,” I said.

“I guess we’ll just leave her up there.”

We pulled out the roll-away bed and shoved it into the nook below the stairs.

“I’ll sleep here,” Dad said. We threw an old quilt on top of the mattress, and we both flopped down on it.

“This’ll work for you,” I said. “But don’t sit up too fast. You’ll bonk your head on the underside of the steps.”

“Yeah, I can see that happening.”

“Dad. Are you tired?”

“What do you think? I’ve been up since 4:30, besides milking three cows, working on that John Deere all day. Oh, boy. Ray Phillips never came to get it. Oh, boy. I forgot to call him to say it was finished.”

“Dad?”

“What?”

“Do you think you could read history with me tonight?” As tired as he looked, I figured he didn’t need to add schoolwork to his evening plan, but it didn’t hurt to ask.

“Of course.” He sat up slowly to avoid bonking his head. “I’ll go call

Ray while you get your book.”

My brand new book, which was still parked beside the barn door, was soaked. I brought it in anyway. We sat at the very clean kitchen table while Dad read to me like he usually does because I’m no good at reading. Afterwards, we shook the book and hung it over a hanger on the kitchen doorknob, hoping the pages would dry out before school tomorrow.

Then we went to Stevie, who lay asleep on the living room floor surrounded by crackers and toy trucks. Sure enough, there were two left shoes on his feet. I pulled one off.

“Dad, I know he had a left and a right shoe this morning. Look, this isn’t even our shoe. I’ve never seen it before in my life.”

He took it from my hand. “Me either.” He put the other one beside it, then hoisted my seven-year-old brother over his shoulder and walked quietly up the stairs, returning in a couple of minutes. “The lady is snoring like Uncle Ned’s old lawnmower.”

I walked into Dad’s bedroom and stared at the two suitcases sitting on the bare mattress. When the lady put her stuff in his dresser, where would Dad’s clothes go?

I went back out to the hall and stood beside him, wedged into his new tiny sleeping space under the steps, squinting as he tried to read his Today’s Farm Equipment Newsletter by the hall light.

“What am I supposed to do?” I asked. “She’s in my bed.”

He set the newsletter on his chest and glanced at the living room. “The couch worked for me last night.”

“Okay.” At least I’d be close to my dad, this being a strange situation and all.

“I’m leaving the light on by the steps in case she needs to come downstairs,” he said.

“Okay.”

“Luke, why are you just standing there?”

“Dunno.”

“Do you know what I think?” he asked.

“What?”

“She’s only been here a few hours, and we’ve washed sheets and

hung them out to dry. We've absolutely made our kitchen cleaner than it was the day after the fire-flood." He chuckled. "Now I'm sleeping in something that isn't even a closet, and you're a couch worm."

"So, what does that mean, Dad?"

"It means that in just one evening, she's whipped us into shape."

She whipped us into shape by doing nothing. Now that was scary.