

**BEYOND THE
DARKNESS**

BOOK III
BEYOND THOSE HILLS SERIES

BEYOND THE
DARKNESS

Vernal Lind



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PROLOGUE



“And darkness covered the face of the deep.”

The darkness tonight reminded Matthew Anderson of the darkness before the creation.

He switched off the last light in the barn after finishing the evening chores. The cattle were settling down for the night. The warmth of the barn caused him to pause a moment, and he stood by the barn door, completely enveloped in darkness. Fears of what lay ahead gripped him.

Matthew stepped outside into the crisp November air. Again darkness surrounded him. The yard light must have burned out. Clouds prevented any light from the sky to help guide his way back to the house. For a moment he shuddered, thinking of his sons in distant countries and a war that never seemed to end.

This Minnesota winter night reminded Matthew of his forty-four years—he was no longer young. His back ached from the lifting and bending of his chores. Standing alone outside the barn, he missed his sons. He wished all his children were safe at home.

As the present darkness surrounded him, he thought back to the morning of the New Year and the message his wife, Ellen, had read. He thought of the constant bombing in London and the dangers people faced. Those words Ellen had read from King George VI’s Christmas message to British citizens had new meaning now, even in America: “I said to the

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man who stood in the gate of the Year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than any known way.'"

Matthew turned toward the house where light showed through the kitchen window, beckoning him. "Lord," he prayed, "lead me beyond this darkness."

CHAPTER 1



November–December, 1944

The minute Matthew entered the kitchen on that last Wednesday of November, he knew something was wrong. Ellen's face was lined with sadness and concern.

"I have some bad news," she announced.

"It's not about Johnie or James . . . ?" Then he remembered Joe, who was almost like a son. "Or Joe?"

"No, it's Glenn Robertson's boy, Tim. He's missing in action, presumed dead."

Matthew slowly took off his coat. "When did you find out?"

"Just now. Mabel called. Glenn wanted you to know. They received the telegram only an hour ago."

"I should go over right away, but I don't know what to say."

"No, I think they're coming to church to the special prayer meeting. Mabel said Glenn wanted to be among friends at a time like this."

"I'm not sure how I'd feel if something happened to Johnie or James or Joe." He stopped himself as he became aware of the presence of his five-year-old son.

"Hi, Daddy," Michael called out. "When I'm bigger I'll fight those Japs and Germans." He stood on his tiptoes, stretching to his full height.

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“I’ll be big and strong like Johnie. Then you won’t have nothin’ to worry about.”

“Won’t have *anything* to worry about,” corrected Ellen.

Michael flexed his muscles. “I’ll fight. It doesn’t matter how I talk.”

Ellen motioned for Michael to wash his hands. “Let’s hope you won’t have to fight.”

Matthew slowly took off his jacket and boots. “I remember when Glenn’s boy first drove the tractor. I happened to stop by that day. Tim wasn’t more than six years old—about Michael’s age.”

Michael piped up. “Next summer I get to drive the tractor.”

Always cautious, Matthew put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “We’ll see about that.”

During supper Michael chatted on, asking questions about every conceivable subject. The constant questions wearied his father.

After supper, while Ellen washed dishes, Matthew read the daily paper. He thought the war should be ending soon, but it didn’t look that way from the details of the news. Glancing up, he couldn’t help noticing the letters on the dining room table, including one from their son James, stationed somewhere in England. At least James worked in a military office, making use of his skills as a typist and writer. Even so, he faced the dangers of terrible bombing raids in London. It was hard to picture him as a twenty-year-old army man.

Johnie wrote infrequently, so his letters were a real event. When Matthew thought of Johnie, he thought of the way he drove the tractor, loved animals, and enjoyed being in the outdoors. This son faced the greatest danger.

There was also a letter from Joe, now somewhere in the South Pacific. His last letter had arrived over a year ago, so they weren’t certain whether he was dead or alive—or in some Japanese prison camp.

Matthew turned to the funnies for escape. “The Neighborly Neighbors” and “Modest Maidens” were up to their usual antics. Comics brought a welcome relief.

“It’s time to go to church,” Ellen said as she handed him his coat.

Matthew looked lovingly at his wife. She was older now, but in his eyes she was still that beautiful, petite country teacher he had married twenty-one years ago.



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Seated at the prayer service, Matthew felt Michael's head on his lap. It was good to have one child at home, safe within the confines of the family. But he knew children grew up and moved away. Margaret, just seventeen, was attending normal school and would soon be a country schoolteacher. Carol, sixteen and a junior in high school, stayed with Matthew's sister Victoria in town. Their absence, along with the boys far away at war, caused him to feel lonely at times. He missed his children.

Matthew put down the hymnbook as they finished singing, and Pastor Strand began to speak. The congregation had decided to depart from their usual Bible study and prayer service and instead spend time in meditation and longer prayer. Pastor Strand made some introductory comments about prayer and the need for all to pray.

Matthew's mind wandered. Sometimes God seemed far away. *Somehow, if Tim Robertson has died, God must have withdrawn*, Matthew thought. Desperately he wanted to feel God's presence, but at this moment, he did not.

Pastor Strand's tone changed abruptly, bringing Matthew's mind to the present. He began to realize what his pastor was saying: "I have been deep in prayer for some time. I have prayed about my place in this Oak Ridge country church and community—and about my place in the world. Not since I felt God's call to the ministry have I felt such a burden. I don't quite know how to say what I have to say."

He stopped and the silence fell over the congregation. Matthew could sense that every person was listening intently.

Strand continued, "I have felt first a burden and then a call. And after much prayer and discussion with my wife, I have acted. In about six weeks, I will leave to become a chaplain in the military. With the war continuing as it is, there is a desperate need for chaplains to counsel and conduct services. I hate the thought of leaving the communities of Oak Ridge township and Lake View village, but I realize this is my time . . ."

The pastor paused again, but this time several voices spoke up simultaneously. "We'll miss you." "We hate to see you leave us." "What will we do?"

". . . but it is now time to leave this beautiful community," he continued. "I ask you, of course, to pray for me. And to continue these special prayer times as well." Changing the subject, he went on, "During this Advent season, we look forward to Christ's coming. We look forward to the arrival of Jesus, the light of the world." He went on to present

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examples of how the light of Christ enters and brightens lives and shows the way.

Matthew felt himself caught up in the imagery of Christ as light. He sensed God's presence, but at the same time God seemed far away. He couldn't explain why—except that tragedies such as the likely death of Glenn's son should not happen. Why would God permit a good boy like Tim Robertson to be killed in action?

Suddenly and without warning, the room went dark—no light whatsoever. This was another blackout, a drill in case the enemy should attack. These drills had become regular reminders of what happened often in Europe and England.

After a moment of silence, Strand picked up on the imagery of light and dark. "This black darkness that we now experience is the world without Christ. Without Christ's presence in our lives or in the world, everything is black. Blackness and darkness mean lack of direction, lack of hope. People wander, not knowing where to go or what to do."

Matthew thought of the darkness of death. He had looked around for Glenn Robertson, but his friend was not present. Death and blackness and darkness went together—unless God was in the picture.

He felt Michael move and awaken next to him. Then his young son cried out in fear as he found himself in darkness and a strange place. Ellen whispered to her son, "Michael, it's OK. You're in church. The lights are out; we've just had a blackout."

"I'm afraid," he cried.

Pastor Strand picked up on the young boy's words and used them as an example. "Yes, Michael, we are afraid. But we look forward to the light. We look to Jesus as our source to conquer the fears. Dear Michael, just as you looked to your mom and dad, we look to Christ."

As suddenly as the lights had gone out, they came back on. Several amused laughs could be heard because of the appropriate timing of the moment.

"Yes," Pastor Strand smiled, "the lights are back on. And that illustrates a point. We may find ourselves in darkness—in dark and frightening situations. And we do face darkness and uncertainty in the days ahead. But these lights came on. We can now see our way. In that same way, Christ will come to us, help us, and guide us."

Prayer time followed, but Matthew's mind moved elsewhere. What could he say to Glenn? Glenn had placed much hope in his son, knowing

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he would take over the farm. Now those hopes were dashed. How would Glenn go on living and working?

Matthew prayed silently a different kind of prayer, known only to him and God. "Lord, this isn't fair. Why did You take Glenn's son? If there was any young man who walked in Your ways, it was Tim. Lord, why do you let these things happen? Why is this awful war going on anyway? Can't You force people to stop fighting?" He tightened his fists as if he were about to fight the enemy. Deep within thought and prayer, he felt Ellen tug at his sleeve.

"It's time to go," she said.

Matthew knew this was the beginning of something. He must be ready to comfort his friend. He could not continue to question God. He needed to assure Glenn that God was ready to comfort him.



The images of the blackout were still vivid in Ellen's mind. She felt that darkness again as she thought of James and Johnie at unknown places in England and Europe. She gazed at the snow in the fields and walked up the steps to her mother-in-law's home. Elizabeth Anderson was a woman of prayer. The intense prayer of the community women must continue. Each woman usually prayed alone, but today they met together to feel the physical presence of one another as a community in prayer.

Ellen stood on the threshold and looked toward the new house that replaced the one she had lived in with Matthew as a young bride. "Lord, give me strength to face whatever I must face," she prayed silently. "I feel this emptiness because James and Johnie are far away. I miss Margaret, but I know she must continue her education to become a teacher. And I fear what Carol is facing in Lake View. Lord. Take care of my children. They need Your direction." She paused and looked toward the hills in the distance. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help," she quoted a beloved scripture. "Lord, I feel so weak and unbelieving. I fear that Matthew is at a breaking point. And I'm finding it hard to take care of little Michael, who becomes more active day by day . . ."

The door opened and Martha greeted her sister-in-law. "Ellen, why are you waiting out here? Is something wrong?"

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Ellen followed Martha into the kitchen. "I guess my heart is heavy. I'm thinking of my own little family as well as the Robertsons. I don't know how I could face what Mabel is facing."

"Mabel has decided to come with my sister. Mary's started to drive, and she's bringing her over."

Ellen greeted her mother-in-law and two other ladies from the community.

"We have some serious praying to do," said Nora, one of their close neighbors. "And we need to console Mabel."

At that moment Mary and Mabel entered the kitchen. The women immediately expressed their sadness about Tim. These usually reserved Scandinavian women gave rare hugs of affection.

Soon the women were seated around the kitchen table. Somehow it seemed the best place for good conversation and for prayer. They decided to have their coffee after the time of prayer, but an awkward moment of silence followed.

Finally Ellen broke the silence. "I think we should pray for Mabel and what she's facing."

Mabel, one of those women who rarely spoke in a group, began to talk. "I don't know how to say this, but I have the strongest feeling. Timothy isn't dead. I know he isn't. He's missing and will be found."

Ellen held her breath. She knew that "presumed dead" meant just that. It was unlikely that Tim would return.

"I read just the other day about a soldier who was thought to be dead. Somehow the tags were mixed. He was actually alive," Mabel continued

"Let's hope that's true," said one of the other women.

"I have this inner feeling that my son is alive. I dreamed about Tim last night. He said, 'Mother, I'll be home soon.' I believe that dream was a sign."

"Let's pray about him and the others," Ellen replied.

During the next half hour, the women prayed—about Tim Robertson and then James and Johnie and Joe, along with several others. Ellen found herself lost in the prayers. She felt herself transported to the battlefields of Europe, the remote areas of the South Pacific, and the dry regions of northern Africa. She experienced a new assurance that God was there with her boys. Suddenly, however, a disturbing thought entered her mind. Yes, God was there, but would her boys return? God hadn't promised an easy life. In this life she might have tribulation, Scripture taught.

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As the prayer time ended, Mabel announced, “I feel better. I wish Tim could be home for Christmas.”

Ellen chose her words carefully. “Yes, we pray and hope for the best. But I’m afraid we must also be prepared the worst.”

“I don’t think we can ever be prepared for bad things,” Martha responded. “When my husband died, I knew the time was coming. But I was not prepared.”

Ellen regretted her comment. “You’re right. God will answer our prayers.” However, she feared the worst.

Time passed quickly as the women drank coffee and tried to focus on happier times. Soon it was late morning, and Mary and Mabel and the other women went home. That left Ellen to wait for Matthew’s return.

“Why don’t you stay for dinner,” invited Elizabeth. “I’ve got some canned chicken, and we’ll peel a few extra potatoes.”

“And I brought a fresh-baked pie from the café,” added Martha.

“I don’t know what to say. Matthew doesn’t usually stay this late when he visits Glenn—not unless something’s wrong. I let Michael visit school and said we’d stop on the way home to see if he should stay the full day.”

“Don’t worry, Ellen,” comforted Martha, “Mrs. Peterson will have everything under control. She can handle children of any age.”

Martha began to peel potatoes. Ellen experienced peace and security as she visited with her sister-in-law and mother-in-law, but she kept remembering the blackout from the night before. That darkness seemed to signal more darkness to come.