

BEYOND THOSE  
HILLS



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*Vernal Lind*



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Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are taken from the King James Version of the Bible and are quoted by the characters in the story.

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# CHAPTER 1



September 1937

**M**atthew strained to open his eyes but couldn't. The nightmare continued. A dark figure stood over him and then became P.J., his handsome older brother, who seemed to have everything.

At the same time, Matthew sensed the reality of the storm. Lightning changed the bedroom from night to day. Thunder answered quickly. Matthew knew something was terribly wrong but didn't know what. Fear gripped him, but what was he afraid of? He stirred, aware on some semiconscious level that he didn't want to disturb his wife.

P.J.'s dark figure simply stood there. Suddenly Matthew began to run—it seemed endlessly. The dreadful fear he felt was joined by a hollow emptiness. He was leaving the home and farm he loved. He kept looking back, not wanting to leave. But something forced him to go on. He sweated profusely. He tried to scream but couldn't.

The nightmare faded into a more peaceful dream, enabling Matthew to see everything. He seemed to float above the ground and looked down on the land below. He saw himself transported above the farm he loved. The prairie and fields. The lakes and the splash of warm summer water. The woods and the gentle breeze after summer rain.

He loved the kaleidoscopic nature of the scenes passing before him. The scenes were unreal—yet very real. He saw the large two-story frame

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house where he lived. Ellen, his wife, was in the kitchen, always busy. Their four children played outside. Down the hill was the little house where Ma and Pa lived. He saw the barn, the granary, and the other buildings.

The fresh smells of autumn became intensely real. The lines between dream and reality blurred. He saw the cattle in the barnyard. He saw himself checking the newly born calf—life was wonderful. The boys were chasing the cows into the barn. It was milking time. He looked beyond the beautiful black of the plowed fields, so filled with hope for next year's crop. He loved this place, almost in a reverent way.

Matthew's brother and sisters passed before him. They should all be here tomorrow. Each brother and sister walked into his awareness. Other people began to appear, all those who had been a part of his life. He saw the one-room country school, then the green hills and fields and valleys. The white frame church with its tall bell tower looked down on the country below. Every scene was etched in his mind.

Matthew slowly slipped from the dream to consciousness of the new day. Today, Sunday, was the big day. Ma and Pa would celebrate fifty years of marriage. Fifty years! He began to think of all that would happen, including his many responsibilities. A lifetime! Hundreds of people would come to their home. He wanted everything to be just right.

Matthew felt a growing uneasiness. Something was terribly wrong. He remembered the dream—or was it a nightmare?

This farm. This land. He used to think of leaving to go beyond those hills. But would he find anything better than this place? He had everything necessary for the good life right here. A home. Ellen and the children. Ma and Pa nearby. His sister Mary and her family a few miles down the road. Big sister Victoria in town, teaching in the high school. Other relatives. A host of friends.

Matthew had a good life. He wouldn't exchange it for anyone's. Though he had always dreamed of other places, he had everything he could ever want right here.

A sharp pain suddenly cut through his stomach as the old feelings of inadequacy returned. He didn't quite measure up. His brother and sisters had done so much better than he. And now he shouldered so many responsibilities of family and farm. These all loomed before him like a giant.

And these dry years of the thirties. He could almost feel the dust blowing. Only recently had the rains returned. Even so, Matthew felt



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uneasy. Would the drought return? Was the Depression over? At the moment, the future looked dark and uncertain.

Matthew tried to lie still; he didn't want to waken Ellen. Then, once more, sleep closed in—and so did the nightmare.

PJ.'s dark shadow reappeared, walking toward him. Something felt ominous and frightening. Once more Matthew was six, PJ. was fifteen. PJ. was playing with him, tormenting him, as he often did, by keeping the ball just out of reach. Yet, sometimes PJ. could be good to him. Matthew had loved his brother and wanted to be big and strong like him. But he never knew when this brother would change from friend to tormentor.

"You can never do anything right!" PJ.'s taunting words echoed through Matthew's consciousness. The nightmare changed quickly and they were adults again. "You can't make it on your own." PJ.'s dark figure became the figure of a giant.

Matthew awakened fully, sweating as if he had been working in the fields. Why this terrible nightmare? The knot in his stomach tightened, converging into a sharp pain, reminding him that he was not so young. But then, as suddenly as it had come, the pain disappeared.

Wide-awake, Matthew tried to forget the dream and think pleasant thoughts. He loved September. The open window brought in the fresh smells of autumn and the rain. Harvesting was over, and he had finished the hardest work.

Matthew quietly got out of bed, hoping not to waken Ellen. He reached to the dresser for a comb and quickly smoothed his light brown hair, now beginning to thin. Walking to the window, he listened for the early morning sounds of life. Many of the birds of summer had left. Only a few birds sang. The mourning dove wailed its sad song. Matthew wondered whether this shouldn't be a "morning" dove since he always noticed it in the morning.

For the moment, a peace flooded Matthew's consciousness. He surveyed the yard below. The fall flowers showed their vivid colors. Today scores of friends and family members would fill this yard.

A rooster crowed. He heard the sound of cattle. It was just about time to do the morning chores.

Then a cloud darkened the predawn light. Darkness entered Matthew's mind once more. Something dreadful was about to happen. Of that, Matthew was certain.