

HIDDEN SECRETS OF
The Knob
A NOVEL

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The Knob
A N O V E L

WANDA OTTE



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Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptures are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Preface

The author spent her grade school years on a farm in northwest Arkansas. Events that took place there in the 1950s have been kept alive through stories and are the heart and soul of the book.

The important stone that was found there was treasured by the family, and the main characters of the book are the family itself. Names have been changed.

Characters, other than family, are based upon neighbors in the area. The character, Annabelle, was derived from a neighbor with a different name and circumstance. The culture of the woodsman was researched, even though he is fictitious.

Pictures of the family and other characters, as well as the farm, appear at the back of the book.



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Hidden Secrets of the Knob

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Chapter One

Mr. Gresham's Medicine

Sarah Elder was swinging on a chain swing under the branches of her favorite oak tree. The lively rustling of the leaves matched her cheerful mood. She thought about the many quiet and happy moments she had spent in this shady spot on the Arkansas farm. *I'll be turning thirteen in a few months, she thought, but I'll always love this swing.*

It was late afternoon and her daily chores were finished. She was enjoying this freedom to swing high in the air and back down again—back and forth while the breeze swept her face. Gazing across the road, she watched the white puffy clouds beginning to turn pink as they drifted in the sky. A hawk circled above the forest skyline. She wondered what kind of food it would find in the woods that stretched as far as her eyes could see.

Sarah's thoughts turned to the faint drumming of hoof beats coming from the narrow dirt road that led to the neighbor's farm. Soon she saw Annabelle Ketchum's dark hair flying in the wind as she galloped toward Sarah.

There was a look of distress on the young widow's face as she cried from her horse across the road.

"Sarah, help! Grace is deathly sick. Can ya get Mr. Gresham?"

Sarah slowed the swing and started to answer, but as quickly as she had come, Annabelle disappeared back down the hill.

Sarah knew that Annabelle's baby had been sick with a fever, but this call indicated it was a matter of life or death. Sarah ran to the flagstone farmhouse where her mother, Darlene, was fixing supper. The radio announcer was talking about whether or not President Eisenhower would win re-election, while Sarah's youngest sister, Kathy, was setting the table. Debbie, who was nine, smiled at Sarah as she poured milk, but her grin quickly faded when she saw Sarah's expression.

"Mom, Grace is really sick! Annabelle asked me to go get Mr. Gresham!"

Mom's eyes flashed with concern. "The baby must be worse. Yes, Sarah, go quickly!"

Sarah dashed back down to the front gate, ran past the old oak tree, and on up the dusty road that divided her family's farm. She could see her dad working in the field some distance away with her two older brothers, Dennis and Josiah. Sarah was the oldest girl, and Mom counted on her to help with farm chores and even with emergencies, such as this one.

Annabelle's urgent plea was ringing in Sarah's ears. She must hurry to get Mr. Gresham who kept a supply of herbal medicine on hand. When her younger sister, Debbie, had pneumonia, Mr. Gresham's medicine helped save her life.

The pebbles on the dusty road bruised Sarah's bare feet as she ran faster and faster. Her green-print skirt flapped in

the breeze. Breathing ever so hard, she continued the climb up the hill called "The Knob."

The early-evening shadows of the forest were already dimming the road. She dared not think what would happen to the sick baby girl if she failed to get Mr. Gresham in time. Annabelle had already lost her husband in a storm, and now she might lose her only child.

Racing on, Sarah soon saw Mr. Gresham's humble home. The older man was just getting out of his old chair on the porch.

She was out of breath as she called, "Mr. Gresham, HELP! Annabelle's baby is sick!"

He jerked his head in her direction.

Sarah yelled, "She needs you!"

Immediately he took his hat and grabbed a bottle of herb medicine, shoving it in his pocket. Stiffly but quickly, he headed toward his old mare. "Come on, Sarah. You can ride, too."

The jolting ride down the hill was frightening. The trees in the forest were a blur to Sarah as the horse galloped along. Sarah held tight to Mr. Gresham's bony waist. She was glad Mr. Gresham understood how much he was needed now. He was a neighbor—one who was helping keep watch over Annabelle Ketchum and her baby.

Sarah wondered how Annabelle must feel. Sixteen was such a young age to have the responsibility of a child. In four years, Sarah, herself, would be sixteen.

The trees swishing by made her feel dizzy. "Oh, please, God, let little Grace live," she prayed.

Tearing down the hill, they slowed to a more careful pace, and turned off onto a bumpy, washed-out road. Soon they arrived at the sagging front gate of the cottage.

They found the teen-age widow nearly in tears. Her dark, uncombed hair fell over her shoulders as she struggled with

her crying baby. Cradling the infant in her arms, she wiped the drops of moisture from the baby's forehead.

Mr. Gresham towered over the baby, tenderly pressing the medicine to the baby's lips as if he were a trained doctor. Startled, baby Grace opened her eyes widely and began to kick in resistance—crying, choking and sputtering as she swallowed the medicine.

Mr. Gresham took the hands of the two young ladies. "Let's pray now," he said in a creaky voice. "Father up above, we ask ya to take pity 'pon this mama and her little 'un, and make this baby well."

Annabelle and Sarah solemnly joined in saying "Amen." Little Grace's weak cries and difficult breathing continued until finally she began to relax...and then fell asleep.

The hands of the old wooden clock on the wall slowly made their circles. The constant ticking was the only sound in the room. Mr. Gresham began to quietly nod and doze in his chair. Finally, Annabelle lit a lantern and excused herself to go to the outhouse. "Would ya keep an eye on her?" she asked Sarah, hesitant to leave her baby.

"Sure," Sarah whispered, moving her chair closer to the cradle. A kerosene lamp on the table by the window cast faint light around the room, and the moon began to rise as darkness covered the valley.

Sarah's heart was heavy with concern for the baby as she looked around through the dim light. The wooden walls were covered with catalog pages. She studied this unusual wallpaper. There were bicycles, red wagons and cute little baby dolls. The price of one doll was only ninety-eight cents. *Kathy would like that doll*, Sarah imagined. She pictured her sister's sweet face and her bouncy, blond curls, and was so glad that Kathy was well and happy. Sarah took another peek at the sleeping baby. Would Annabelle's baby get well?

Sarah continued gazing around the room until she noticed a shelf in the far corner. There on the shelf was an old Bible and a picture of Johnny, Annabelle's husband who had died. Sarah, squinting in the faint light, looked at the picture and remembered how Johnny adored the baby.

She also remembered the day Dad brought Annabelle and the baby to their home. Annabelle had cried and cried as she told the story.

She said Johnny had been out hunting when a violent storm appeared. Annabelle was able to get to the storm cellar with the baby, but Johnny's horse came back without him. He never made it home.

Dad and Mr. Gresham went looking for Johnny after the storm. They found him sprawled on the rocks near a tree that was split in two. They assumed that Johnny had been thrown from the horse during the powerful storm.

Sarah was so deep in thought about Annabelle and Johnny that she did not notice Annabelle return to the room.

"That's my Johnny," Annabelle said when she saw Sarah staring at the picture. Her voice held an air of pride and, yet, deep sadness.

"He was really nice," Sarah mumbled.

"He did everything he could fer me," Annabelle said tearfully. "I know he wuz comin' through the storm to make sure we got to tha cellar. I wish he wuz here now. It sounded like the animals wuz spooked when I wuz in the outhouse. When I came out, I walked down toward tha barn, and I seen somethin' runnin' toward tha woods."

Sarah looked at Annabelle's tired, worried expression, and she tried to sound brave in order to ease her friend's fears. "Maybe it was a dog or something. The baby is resting now. We can be thankful for that."

“Yes,” Annabelle replied. “She’s helped me find courage. The good Lord gave me this new little life. If’n I cry, don’t pay me no mind. She’s all I got now.”

Sarah noticed car lights coming down the hill toward the house. She felt relieved when she saw her Dad and her older brother, Dennis, jump out of the car, carrying three plates of food. Now they would help share the concern for Grace and for Annabelle.

“How’s the baby?” Dad asked.

Annabelle breathed a tired sigh. “She’s restin’.”

“Thought ya might be hungry,” 18-year-old Dennis said softly, holding two plates, and glancing over at the sleeping infant.

Annabelle received the plates gratefully and took them to the kitchen. “That’s real good of ya,” she told Dennis as she returned.

Dennis grinned awkwardly, “Aw, it was nothin’. Mom insisted.”

Sarah, Annabelle, and Mr. Gresham eagerly ate their supper. Annabelle spoke up. “Have you heard of any bears around here? Somethin’ spooked my animals a while ago.”

Dennis spoke calmly to the exhausted girl, “I haven’t heard of any bears around. The cattle seem quiet now.”

Sarah looked at her older brother. His tender blue eyes held a lot of concern not only for Annabelle, but for herself. She realized that he was protective of her any time she needed him. He was the oldest of the five children, and he seemed very big right now. Over the past few years, he and Dad had worked side-by-side taming the Arkansas land by cutting trees and pulling stumps. He was a lot like Dad, she thought.

When Dad seemed assured that things were under control, he stood up. “We’d better get back up the hill. We’ll

be back to check on you and the baby tomorrow morning, but if you need us, we'll be here at the drop of a hat. Now, you remember that, Annabelle."

Annabelle thanked them, and then Sarah rode back up to their home with her dad and brother where the rest of their family was waiting for news. Sarah's mom glanced at the three with questioning eyes as her worn-out daughter entered the house with Dennis and Dad. "How is she?"

Sarah answered, "Mr. Gresham gave her the medicine, and we prayed. The baby is sleeping now."

Mom smoothed Sarah's long hair and hugged the 12-year-old with a sense of pride. Sarah felt relief as Mom gently and lovingly encouraged her to go upstairs and get some rest.

Sarah took her pajamas out from under her pillow and got ready for bed. She slipped over to the three-cornered cupboard, got her diary, and opened it up to August, 1956. There she wrote about her experience with Annabelle and the baby, while the bright moonlight streamed across her shoulders. It had been quite a day, she thought, putting her diary back in its special nook in the cupboard.

When she reached to close the window, she looked out over the meadow which was bright and beautiful. Suddenly she saw a moving figure. It looked like a ghostly shadow gliding along the road. Was it just her imagination, or did she also hear a faint, moaning sound? Sarah took another look, headed toward the stairway, and yelled, "Dad!"

The family came running from all directions.

"What's the matter?" her mother inquired in a shrill voice.

"There's something walking on the Knob," she cried, continuing down the stairs. "It's white and spooky," she added.

Dennis demanded: "Where'd ya see it?"

“Out the window next to the cupboard,” she explained weakly.

Dennis and Josiah were up the stairs in a flash, looking out in all directions. Sarah followed, taking another look, and then Dad joined them.

“I don’t see anything,” Dennis said. “Maybe Annabelle is right. There could be a bear around here.”

Josiah’s head was slowly moving back and forth, “I don’t see anything white,” he said. “Dennis, you know there are no polar bears in Arkansas! We might as well say it’s an abominable snowman!”

Dad stood at the window with a puzzled look on his face. Sarah thought there was a bit of worry in his voice as he spoke, “I don’t know what you saw, Sarah, but there’s nothing there now.”

Mom was steeping chamomile tea for Sarah when they finally came downstairs.

“What’s going on?” Sarah’s mother asked.

Josiah grinned and teased, “Sarah saw something white. Maybe it was a ghost!”

Sarah’s younger sister, Debbie, piped up with wide eyes and an unsteady voice. “There’s no such thing as ghosts...is there?”

Mom responded, “You’re right, Debbie. I’m sure there’s some explanation for this.”

Dad put his hand on Sarah’s shoulder. “We all have fear. Sometimes there are good reasons to be afraid. There are dangers we should not ignore. At other times, we may fear something that we only imagine to be dangerous. Let me read this verse from the Bible. Psalm thirty-seven, verse four says, ‘The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them.’ You see, Sarah, if we are walking with the Lord, He looks out for us.”

Then Dad reached in his front pocket and brought out his harmonica. “What song would you like to hear?” he asked her.

The music of her favorite song was soothing as she sat quietly sipping her tea. She thought about the white figure she had seen. *If it wasn't a bear or a ghost, then what was it? Could it have been an angel?* She was getting very sleepy. Gradually, her thoughts and worries trailed off, and the next morning she couldn't even remember climbing the stairs and crawling into bed.