

FINDING NIMRA

THE QUEST

BY

KINGSWOOD

FENIX PUBLISHER

Imprint

First edition 2026

© 2026 text: Kingswood

© 2026 cover design: Fenix Publisher

Book design: Fenix Publisher

Published by Fenix Publisher | <https://fenixpublisher.com>

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ISBN 978 90 836 6836 9 / NUR 334

<https://fenixpublisher.com>

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Preface

This book was born out of a passion for writing adventurous tales that offer readers an escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Written in an engaging and fluid style, the story chronicles a quest where friendship takes centre stage and thrilling adventures unfold.

The process of writing and publishing this book has been an adventure in its own right. A special word of thanks goes to those who shared in this journey with great enthusiasm and encouragement. Without their unwavering support, this adventure would not have been possible, for which heartfelt gratitude is extended.

‘To all the adventures that lie ahead’

THE BEGINNING

These are the darkest of times. Somewhere, in a small village far away, a piercing cry resounds, muffled by the rising, tempestuous forces of the weather gods. Sight is reduced to no more than a few paces ahead, shivers creep along the spine, urging one to bury themselves deeper into one's coat in a desperate search for warmth.

The moon reveals herself as a bearer of light amidst the darkness, while heavy clouds gather and lay claim to the heavens. Thunder reigns as the loudest of all presences, whilst lightning grants only fleeting glimpses of the world below. A chestnut tree, struggling valiantly against the storm's fury, compels one to cover one's ears as it finally yields and crashes to the ground.

The ferocity of thunder and lightning heralds an announcement, an omen that something of great consequence is about to unfold. They foretell that a soul is to enter this world, and that change shall follow in its wake. The planets seek their rightful alignment just before the small being is brought forth. The sea grows restless, all is in turmoil, horses rear and bolt in agitation.

The midwife labours with all her strength to ensure a safe arrival. She is the wise woman of the village, and through her knowledge she has welcomed many a child into the world. The villagers believe she possesses uncommon gifts, though she herself speaks not a word of them. Their trust in her is absolute, and so she is entrusted with the grave task of delivering this child safely. She knows there will be aid, aid unseen by the naked eye, perceptible only to the chosen.

It is a Sunday in the first month of the new year. The father paces with long, anxious strides before the chamber in which the scene unfolds. Branches claw relentlessly at

the cottage, while the windows groan beneath the ever-strengthening wind. In the distance, the mournful howl of a wild dog echoes through the night.

At last, after a difficult labour, the child sees the light of the chamber and greets the world. As the midwife takes the infant into her arms to tend to her, she draws in her breath sharply. Her eyes widen.

She sees the mark...

Her gaze fixes upon the newborn, and she realises that she shall likely never behold such a sign again.

In silence, she places the girl in her mother's arms. 'It is a daughter. You have been given a most extraordinary child. See that no harm befalls her', is all she says.

Yet within her mind, the visions return. The child's eyes had met her own, had reached straight into her very soul, effortlessly penetrating the deepest recesses of her being.

It moves her profoundly, stirring within her an emotion unlike any she has ever known. For the first time in her life, she feels truly seen, completely, wholly. It is an experience she will carry with her, wherever her path may lead.

That the newborn has perceived all of her, her entire essence, leaves its mark. A stillness overcomes her: an inner calm, a quiet knowing, the realisation that she is enough. A serenity settles within her, the peace of being allowed to exist as one is, in all one's splendour and imperfection alike.

This child, this infant, sees beyond what is apparent, marking her already as a great seer. It is a most extraordinary phenomenon, for the youngest perceive nothing in the first moments after their arrival, which renders this occurrence all the more remarkable.

A complete acceptance of all that is, light and darkness alike. A perception of something beyond words. A revelation.

It casts light upon all the midwife thought she knew, her knowledge, her beliefs, her understanding drawn from books and life itself. And now she must reckon with the truth that another surpasses her, in insight, in being, without the slightest pretence.

Utter acceptance. Without judgement. That is what it is.

The midwife's gaze falls upon the darkened placenta. She knows what it signifies. She has seen it in her dreams. Never before has she witnessed it. Not once, in all her years.

And now it has come to pass.

This little child, this fragile, tender child, has already fulfilled her first task in this world. Before she was born, she has battled evil itself. She has forced it out of her small body, expelled it from this form before ever seeing the light of day.

It can mean but one thing. This child has been brought into the world to oppose darkness, to confront absolute evil.

The midwife is roused from her thoughts when she is interrupted:

'We shall call her Gwendolyn'.

The parents gaze upon their firstborn with quiet pride. The child appears to be rosy and healthy, her limbs moving gently, her small hands reaching, grasping her father's finger firmly as she looks upon her mother.

There is immediate connection. Pure. Unbroken. There is trust.

The parents seem wholly unaware. The child finds the eyes of those present as though by instinct, without hearing a single sound of their voices or any other sign of their presence.

The midwife, in her wisdom, chooses silence. Her words must remain unspoken.

She will not burden the young parents, but allow them to revel in their child.

It is too soon. Far too soon.

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE FOREST

These are troubled times. It is the era of the Middle Ages, when magic once flourished in abundance. Yet it is also an age in which the use of magic has been most strictly forbidden. Any soul who engages in arcane rituals or enchantments shall be punished without mercy. Deeds that unfold in shadow are no longer tolerated.

An unbridled chaos arose, born of clashing forces entangled in ceaseless struggle. To restore order, harsh measures were taken. Wizards, witches, warlocks, and all who meddled, or were thought to meddle, in impure arts, were hunted down and punished. Thus, magic receded ever further into obscurity, threatened even with extinction. And so, a fragile peace returned to the land.

And so it came to pass: the days when the impossible seemed within reach have all but faded from memory.

Sixteen years have passed since the birth of the little child. The midwife who brought the child, named Gwendolyn, into this world died shortly thereafter and was laid to rest, carrying the memory of that extraordinary moment with her into the grave.

Gwendolyn has since grown into a young maiden, though she prefers to think of herself as a young woman. She already feels mature beyond her years, for she possesses a rare sensitivity, an uncanny intuition that often leaves the adults around her in quiet astonishment.

‘An old soul, wise beyond her time’, so those closest to her describe her. When truths are withheld, Gwendolyn senses them nonetheless. She perceives people with unerring clarity and reflects them back to themselves. Since childhood, she has also been visited by prophetic dreams, a gift that renders her dealings with others no easy matter. Time and again, she is told that not every truth she sees, she feels, may be spoken aloud.

When she was but a child, her visions were dismissed as idle fancies. Yet in time, they proved to be nothing less than truth itself. Now that she has grown older, however, the voicing of such truths has become perilous. She could be accused of divination, an accusation that might well cost her life.

It weighs heavily upon Gwendolyn, this need to conceal her feelings and to veil her true self. Yet she knows all too well that she has no choice in the matter.

Gwendolyn lives with her parents near the village where she was born, though their home lies somewhat apart from the others. A winding country road leads the way, branching into smaller paths that trace the course of a gentle river, until at last one reaches a meadow filled with ancient fruit-bearing trees. Beyond the meadow a hill rises. Behind that hill a small cottage stands, almost hidden amidst tall, leafy trees.

The cottage roof is thatched, and its windows are shuttered in a hue akin to the sky on a fair summer's day. A deep stillness lingers here, as though time itself has chosen to rest. In the distance, sheep graze peacefully, their woollen forms mirroring the clouds above. White and brown hens scratch contentedly at the earth, while the rooster's crow heralds the dawn. The cottage basks in the gentle warmth of the morning sun.

Within this humble dwelling a family with two daughters lives. One year after Gwendolyn's birth, another girl was born. Gwendolyn rejoiced at the arrival of her sister, and throughout their childhood they shared countless adventures, fuelled by Gwendolyn's boundless imagination. She would draw her sister into endless tales of her own making, of castles and sprawling meadows, of wildflowers and daring quests, and of a boy who had captured her attention, whom she kept close within her heart.

This day is a fine one. One must tilt one's head far back and narrow one's eyes to behold the sun. It is the season of golden fields, of the sweetest strawberries, and of the scent of freshly cut grass. That very morning, their mother baked bread for the day, rich with sunflower seeds.

Gwendolyn seizes the moment to speak of something important, for her mother is in good spirits. At the kitchen table, she declares her belief that she deserves greater freedom. She withholds the truth, that she recently caught sight of a young man at the village market who stirred something within her, and that she longs to go there alone because of him. Instead, she simply asks permission to visit the market by herself.

Her mother's answer is a firm 'no'. She deems Gwendolyn too young, and what began as a calm exchange swiftly escalates into a heated quarrel. Gwendolyn feels unheard. Her face flushed, she turns away and storms out, slamming the door behind her. Her strides grow longer, faster, until she breaks into a run. The wind whips through her hair, and her body trembles with uncontainable emotion.

Of late, she scarcely knows what to do with herself. She feels misunderstood more often than not. At times, she runs into the meadow simply to cry out her anguish. She longs to be heard, to be seen, to be understood. Not to be different.

She has known many difficult moments, yet at the age of fourteen she reached her first true nadir, one of many yet to come, though she could not then foresee it. She felt hollow, as though life itself had drained from her. No one understood. No one saw. There was no one to whom she could speak, and so she remained silent. To be different bore a heavy toll. What purpose could there be in it? Life became a burden, near impossible to endure.

So many feelings, and so few ways to express them, that at times crying out into the void seemed the only means of easing the weight she carried. Behind her smile lay a well of sorrow. Why could she not be like others? Why could she not see the world through their eyes, carefree, untroubled?

Nightmares have plagued her since childhood. Why, she never knew. No answer was ever given. 'It is simply part of growing up', they told her. Empty words, to her ears. They brought no comfort. And yet she endured, for there was but one path in front of her, and it led ever onwards.

Gwendolyn slips off her shoes upon reaching the meadow and casts them aside, realising too late that she shall, at some point, have to gather them again.

Leaving all haste behind, she wanders through the tall grass and gathers a bouquet of sweetly scented wildflowers. One of them she tucks behind her ear, unable to resist its delicate fragrance. The grass tickles beneath her feet, whilst the sunlight warms and gently embraces her.

Revelling in the freshness of the air, Gwendolyn gazes across the swaying sea of grass, her eyes travelling far over the meadow into the distance. Her emotions gradually begin to settle. She knows her mother means well and wishes only the best for her. As far as she can see, there is naught but open pasture.

She delights in the feeling of freedom. Though she loves her parents dearly, a yearning for independence stirs within her, a need for space of her own. Space to shape her own being. To discover herself. Gwendolyn hears the gentle, inviting whisper of the forest, now rising in front of her, and she cannot resist the temptation to run towards it.

There is an allure she cannot fully comprehend. Her father has strictly forbidden her to enter the woods. 'One never knows what sort of rabble lingers there these days', is what he said, yet this very prohibition only deepens her wonder. Why seek out danger once warned? And yet, the forest feels safe, familiar, as though it were in quiet harmony with her very soul.

Still, the undeniable truth remains: the forest has, more than once, become the domain of brigands, outlaws, and those who have fled for practising magic. Gwendolyn is a comely young maiden, with long, dark-brown wavy hair, moss-green eyes, and a beauty often remarked upon.

In but two seasons' time, she shall celebrate her seventeenth year. She is a bright and spirited young woman, choosing time and again to rise anew and make the best of all

things. Thus, she has continued to see the world as a place of beauty and inspiration, a realm in which to thrive, to breathe, to love, to be.

Curious, yet above all driven by her desire to walk her own path, she ventures forth alone into the forest, despite her father's command and her own reservations. 'If I do not venture too far, surely it cannot be so perilous', Gwendolyn thinks to herself, seeing no harm in her actions.

She walks upon the soft, leaf-strewn earth, which yields beneath her steps and gently cushions each footfall with tender resilience. Small birds who noticed her presence early flutter about her, accompanying her along her path and often darting ahead like tiny guides.

Gwendolyn has always held a fondness for birds. These particular creatures are light brown in hue. Their modest appearance gives no hint of their lively chatter. Their cheerful song and gentle nature quickly capture her attention. She feels almost compelled to follow them.

After some time, her legs grow heavy from wandering. She finds a tree stump, which kindly offers support to her weary back. The pine needles upon the forest floor feel so soft and yielding that she decides to lie down for a while, soon drifting into a deep and dream-laden sleep.

From afar, she hears her name being called in a fairylike, almost lyrical manner:

'...Gwendolyn... Gwendolyn... Gwendolyn...'

Drawn by the sound of her own name, she follows the voice until she comes upon a small clearing bathed in sunlight. At its centre a well stands. An ancient stone well, overgrown with ivy and cloaked in moss. Beautiful blue-purple flowers wind their way around the stone. The place is encircled by oak trees that have stood steadfast for at least a century.

Gwendolyn climbs upon the moss-slick stones and peers over the edge, gazing down as far as the bottom of the well may be seen. It holds no water; it no longer provides.

At its depths lies a grey stone, upon which words have been carved. Leaning further forward, she strains to read the weathered letters.

With narrowed eyes, she reads:

WHEN YOU FEEL BURDENED AND ALONE
THEN MIND THE MESSAGE WRITTEN ON THIS STONE
WHEN YOU WANT IT TO SET YOU FREE
THEN SEEK NO FURTHER THIS IS HOW IT SHOULD BE
THERE IS SOMETHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
THERE IS SOMETHING YOU NEED TO SHOW
SEEKING ME MEANS BEING LOYAL TO ME
THUS SHALL YOU FIND NIMRA WITH THIS MOST IMPORTANT
KEY

Gwendolyn cannot quite discern the meaning of the words upon the stone and decides it is time to return home. Already, the blue sky is fading and falling into darkness, and she would not have her parents or sister grow concerned. Nor does she wish to speak of her adventure and the disobedience that accompanied it.

For now, it shall remain a secret of her own.