

Chapter 1

Meet the Wisdom Tree and the Red Swing

There once was a meadow that had a curious hill right in its center. Because it stood all by itself, with no other hills around, most folks believed it was not a hill left there by nature, but rather one that was constructed by ancient peoples who once inhabited this part of the country.

It is said that the first people to roam the earth once lived here, but little is known about them, save that they were here because they left their dead carefully buried around the base of the hill. A few of their primitive stone tools have been turned up by farmers plowing their fields. The villagers had never wanted archaeologists to excavate the hill itself because they wanted it to remain a mystery.

The hill was very large. Its top was more or less flat even though the sides were quite steep. And, on top of this curious hill stood a single, solitary, massive oak tree. Some say the old oak was at least 100 years old; some say even older than that. It was so big around at its base that it took four adults with their arms stretched wide and only touching each other's fingertips to wrap around its entire circumference.

The bark of the tree was dark and etched with deep lines, almost like wrinkles very old people have when they have spent long hours in the sun. The limbs were huge and spread out wide. One was so long and heavy that, at some point as it grew in the past, the weight caused the limb to touch the earth and rest there a while, almost like an elbow resting before the limb could grow up toward the sky and sun once again.

Another of the tree's powerful arms was high enough off the ground that a swing could be hung, and someone had done just that. No one knows who hung that swing, but it had been there for as long as anyone could remember. When the ropes wore thin and broke, they were immediately replaced. No one in the village ever saw who did that. It just seemed to happen like magic.

The seat of this rope Swing was a plank of wood, painted a bright, fire engine red. Just like with the ropes, when the wood got too old or the paint too faded, the wood and the paint would be mysteriously replaced with new. It was a marvel and everyone in the nearby village knew it and accepted it.

But, aside from this, there was something even more miraculous about this great old Tree and its magical Swing. When anyone, child or adult, visited the Tree, leaned against its trunk or climbed onto its many arms, the Tree would speak. And any man or woman or boy or girl who climbed onto the swing would be flooded with inexplicable joy.

Children often climbed out on the Tree's long, thick limbs and just laid there on their stomachs, letting their arms and legs dangle down like a leopard napping after a big meal, feeling hidden and safe in the Tree's leafy canopy.

Sometimes adults visited the Tree. They'd sit with their backs against the trunk, trying to find some quiet in their busy and sometimes troubled lives. They, too, heard the Tree speak to them even if their questions and thoughts were spoken only within their own minds or hearts.

No one could explain this, but it seemed to happen to everyone who visited the Tree and its Swing.

This had been the way of it for as long as anyone could remember. Even the grandparents and great-grandparents of the village told the same story. The Tree was simply known as the Wisdom Tree and the Swing was called the Red Swing.