

PART ONE

A Book in the Desert

Fight nonviolently for a better world,

but do not expect to find it easy;

you shall not walk on roses. . . .

Pilgrims of justice and peace

must expect the desert.

Dom Hélder Câmara

ONE

A shower of leaves in the gray dawn drew my gaze out the rain-spattered window of my motel room on the island of Oahu. Dark clouds matched my mood as I floated between heaven and earth, rootless, drifting through the in-between. My summer on Molokai with Mama Chia had raced by. Now I had a nine-month leave of absence before resuming my teaching duties.

Walking across the carpeted floor, clad only in my underwear, I stopped and glanced at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. *Have I changed?* I wondered. My muscular frame, a carryover from my college gymnastics days and recent labors on Molokai, looked the same. So did my tanned face, long jaw, and customary crew cut from the day before. Only the eyes gazing back at me seemed different. *Will I one day resemble my old mentor, Socrates?*

As soon as I'd arrived on Oahu a few days before, I'd called my seven-year-old daughter, who excitedly told me, "I'm going to travel like you, Daddy!" She and her mom were going to Texas to visit with relatives for a few months, maybe longer. Once again I dialed the number she'd given me, but no one answered. So I sat down and wrote her a note on the back of a picture

postcard, punctuating it with *Xs* and *Os*, acutely aware of their inadequacy during my absence. I missed my daughter; the decision to travel all these months was not one I took lightly. I slipped the postcard into a leather-bound journal I'd purchased a few days before to record notes of my travels. I could mail the card later from the airport.

Now it was time to pack once again. I pulled my well-traveled knapsack from the closet and dumped my belongings onto the bed: two pairs of pants and T-shirts, underwear and socks, a light jacket, a collared sports shirt for special occasions. My running shoes rounded out the minimalist wardrobe.

I picked up the ten-inch bronze samurai statuette that I'd found off the coast of Molokai—a sign pointing me toward Japan, a long-sought destination where I might gain insight into Zen arts and *bushido*, the way of the warrior. I would also search for the hidden school that Socrates had challenged me to find. My flight to Japan was scheduled to depart the next day. As I repacked the knapsack, inserting my journal, the samurai, and then my clothes, I could still detect a faint scent of the rich red soil of the Hawaiian rain forest.

A few minutes later, realizing how easy it would be to forget the postcard I'd slid into my journal, I unzipped the pack and tugged at the journal, trying to extract it without dislodging all my neatly folded clothing. It wouldn't budge. Frustrated, I pulled harder. As the journal came loose, its clasp must have caught the lining; I heard and felt a rip in the pack's fabric. Reaching inside, I felt a slight bulge where the piece of lining had pulled away from the outer canvas shell. Then my hand found and drew out a thick envelope with a short message from Mama Chia written on the outside.

Socrates asked me to give you this letter when I thought you were ready.

Ready for what? I wondered, picturing my Hawaiian teacher's silver hair, open smile, and large body draped in a floral muumuu. Intrigued, I opened the envelope and began to read a letter from Socrates.

Dan, there's no cure for youth except time and perspective. When we first met, my words flew past you like leaves in the wind. You were willing to listen but not yet ready to hear. I sensed that you'd face frustration made more difficult by the belief that you were wiser than your peers.

Since Chia gave you this letter, you're probably looking to the East for answers. But if you go east as a seeker, begging alms of insight, you'll receive only a pittance. Go only when you can bring value to the table of wisdom. I'm not just waxing poetic here. First you need to find a book I lost in the desert decades ago.

This has got to be one of Soc's pranks, I thought, imagining his poker face, the twinkle in his eye. Instead of going to Japan, he wants me to find a book in a desert? Which desert? A sigh died in my throat as I read on.

I have a feeling that what I wrote in that journal may provide a bridge between death and rebirth, even a gateway to eternal life—insights you're going to need before this is over. I can't be sure of any of this, since its precise contents and location are veiled in my memory. . .

Continued in THE HIDDEN SCHOOL: Return of the Peaceful Warrior