

Chapter 1

Wanted - A New Start

I've trained myself to concentrate on my driving. Have to, chasing crooks. But this trip, unlike most, gave me time to think, especially about that night when I decided I must change my lifestyle or else.

I was working graveyard shift. Three calls came in, back to back. Burglary in progress, a fight, a stabbing at a bar. I was running wide open, skipping along around 115 miles an hour. 'Twas late at night, not much traffic, but I had to watch the side streets. One can't be too careful driving at that speed. Suddenly I noticed an awful tightening in my chest, so I slowed down to 70 or 80. The horrible feeling began to go away.

Got those calls settled. Was cruising around about 3:00 a.m. when another hot call came in. Again I kicked the car way up to over 100 miles an hour. The tightness returned. This time I slowed down right away, and it began to lessen. Didn't take much to figure out the pain had something to do with being so tense. About 4:00 a.m. I dropped in at Kaiser. Hospital and explained my problem to the doc on emergency. Right away he laid me down for an EKG. What he said scared the daylights out of me - stress-related heart disease, angina pectoris. Gave me nitroglycerin. I left wondering if my time as deputy sheriff in Washington State's Clark County would terminate soon with a heart attack.

But when the shock wore off, I drifted back into my old lifestyle with the guys - drinking coffee, smoking heavily, enjoying a couple of beers as we watched football on TV. Sundays I spent with Bev, lying on the beach, getting a tan, watching others throw Frisbees, while I munched potato chips and sipped colas. But fear haunted me. Things seem mighty nice at home. I kinda would like to stick around for a while.

I'd hardly settled back into my old routine when my mother, who had suffered with lung cancer for two years, died. To add to my fears and mental exhaustion, just a month later a close friend, who was a heavy smoker, also died from cancer.

Bev - she's a great wife - must have sensed my fears. Several weeks later she handed me a magazine called Impact.

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“Sid, read this. It’s fantastic! At this place people not only learn how to change their lifestyles, but also begin to be healthy again. Looks like this may be the reinforcement you wanted.”

What I read sounded neat, like the promise of a miracle. Seems I can handle law enforcement problems; the guys on the job think I’m strong. But deep down inside I know I’m weak. Maybe this place will be my panacea. Immediately I dialed long distance and asked for more information. That was several months ago.

A freeway sign brought me back to the here and now. My heart skipped a beat when I realized I was almost there. Picking up the sheet of paper on the car seat beside me, I reread the directions: “Continue west on highway 12 from Yakima toward Naches. Turn right at Eschbach Road.”

Good thing I looked. Moments later I saw the road sign. In about a mile Eschbach dead ended at the stop sign, Old Naches Road. And there it was, written in bold, black letters.

“TOTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION, 1 1/2 miles.”

I glanced at my watch. One o’clock. Might as well check out the location, then go back to Yakima for a decent lunch before I go on a nuts-and-berries diet. I drove slowly down the country road. Orchards stretched to the hills, loaded with fruit, mostly red and golden delicious apples, though large pears bent many branches almost to the ground. A row of tall poplars had begun to turn golden. A few more turns and I saw the second sign. This must be it.

I didn’t turn in at the driveway but parked near the hedge. Beyond a large expanse of lawn I saw this Total Health place. I’d read that the estate had been owned by a fruit rancher who harvested the impressive acres of cherries and apples that surrounded it.

So this would be my hangout for twenty-four days. Sure wasn’t my style. Looked too peaceful, this large three-story mansion of yesteryear. Must have at least twenty-five rooms. I had to admit the grounds looked as if someone gave it tender loving care. The roses that surrounded the porch entrance reminded me of a third-grader’s drawings, crayon dots of red, yellow, pink, and white flower gardens. Around the perimeter of the lawn, huge evergreen trees contrasted their dark hue with the light green of the grass. Several weeping birch trees looked as if they were seventy-five to a hundred years old.

Just then someone opened the front door. Time for me to head back to town.

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Strange that when you are just driving around you see restaurants all over the place. I must have taken the wrong exit, because all I could find was a twenty-four hour market that sold cold sandwiches and coffee. Real solid food for my last good meal! I choked that down, smoked about half a pack of cigarettes and proceeded on. Just before I left the freeway, I slowed my pickup down, took out one more cigarette, and flipped the rest of my smokes out the window. I felt real good, like a climber who leaves the foothills and starts up the steep trails toward the mountain peak.

I stopped at the driveway to Total Health, took one last puff on my cigarette, and snuffed out the butt in the ashtray on the dash. In the stillness I felt my heart beating fast. Why was I so nervous? Me - who didn't flinch at grabbing an armed robber and slapping handcuffs on his wrists, who could knock down the toughest drunk and haul him into the paddy wagon. Nonsense. I couldn't be afraid. But, well, something strange inside made me feel like a little boy being left off by his mother for his first day at school. Screwing up my courage, I started the pickup and drove into the circular driveway, past the swimming pool. Might as well get it over with, like the first plunge into cold water.

I parked my pickup next to the cherry orchard and walked across the lawn to the front porch. I wished I were a kid so I could peer into the three large windows on each side of the center doorway. Instead, I forced myself up the cement steps. I hesitated before the open door. Just a screen door now between me and the unknown.

But as I stepped into the entryway, I felt a bit of warmth in the wide, graceful stairway that led to the second floor. I looked to the right into an office. My eyes met the pale blue ones of a slender girl who stood up, walked around her desk, and came toward me. Her broad smile would have given a dentist detailed information on the condition of her molars.

"Please come in," she said. "My name's Charlene. I'm the secretary here at Total Health Foundation. May I help you?"

"I guess so. I'm Sid Larrabee."

"Oh, yes." She flashed another toothpaste smile. "We've been waiting for you."

Now that was too much. Waiting for what? Was this a gag for all the inmates? Had they concocted some gruesome initiation ceremony and could hardly wait to begin the torture?

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“Please sit down so we can check you in.” The tone of her voice made me think of the guard inviting a death-row convict to sit down in the electric chair.

“We have two forms here,” she continued. “The first is your application for admittance. You filled this out when you sent in your down payment. The second is the informed consent for the exercise stress test. Please read the blue sheet carefully and sign your name on both blanks.”

I began to read: “I understand that this test will be administered as safely as possible and with a minimum of discomfort. I understand there is a minimum risk of heart attack and that the laboratory is properly equipped for emergency care - “

I felt a cold sweat all over my body. Me being tortured with whatever “cardio-pulmonary resuscitation” meant. Probably just jump on my chest, break a few ribs, pound me to pulp. Then call my family to come and get the remains. I read on:

“I understand the risks involved and do hereby release the sponsoring organization and all associated personnel from any responsibility due to physical harm or complications that may be incurred due to the testing program.”

So this was their game! First, they put me on a motor-driven treadmill, and when they get the thing all cranked up, I pass out, they beat me up, and then, in the name of medical science, go scot-free.

She must have noticed my hand shaking, for she spoke up, “You need not worry. Out of 10,000 tests only one or two persons have ever had a heart attack.”

“Do I have to do this?” I tried to keep my voice steady and act nonchalant.

“Only through this procedure can the doctors uncover any abnormalities.”

She sounded like the unfeeling tape-recorded voice at airport terminals, just waiting to fine you for parking illegally. “Everything will be all right, Mr. Larrabee. You can stop the test if you feel your fatigue has reached the tolerance level.”

I sensed fake reassurance as she handed me the pen. I thought of Bev and the kids. Would I ever see them again? I didn’t know what kind of health problem they’d uncover. Talk about inner conflict! Was I signing my death warrant, or could this be a promise of the beginning of a new life? Either way, my future looked pretty bad. Should I stay and tough it out, or go home and die by inches? Could these Total

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Health people live up to their claims, or was I a gullible fool? I'd thrown away my cigarettes, and I knew I needed help to live without them. Afraid to waver any longer, I quickly scribbled my name. She added her name on the blank marked "witness" along with the date and time. To the guillotine I would go. This time her smile reminded me of the grinning skulls at Halloween.

"Would you like to give me your check now," she asked, "or would another time be better?"

I tried not to groan audibly. First, they make you sign away your life, and then, they close in on your bank account.

"How much?" I muttered.

She passed the receipt my direction, and I wrote a check for the balance. Now I was committed. There was no turning back. "May I show you to your room? It's on the second floor." She started up the stairs with me behind her. I remembered taking handcuffed criminals to their cells. So this is how they feel. She turned at the top of the stairs toward the front of the building.

"Notice this pleasant blue room following the original decor of the twenties," she pointed to the right. "Eleanor, one of our former guests, will stay here. You'll have the room across the hall and will share it with Glenn, a young man twenty-six years old, who's also been here for a previous session. Glenn hasn't arrived yet." She turned to leave and added, "If there's anything we can do to make your stay more pleasant, please call on us."

So far nothing had been pleasant. I hoped it wouldn't be more so? Well, at least I'd be surrounded by two old-timers, inmates who had to return for a second term. They could clue me in.

I glanced out the front windows to the vast expanse of lawn and trees below. The beauty of the gardenlike atmosphere was lost on me. I dreaded lugging my heavy suitcases up those stairs, for I felt winded just climbing them empty-handed. But they offered no valet service, so I guess I had to be the Red Cap without the cap.

Turning to go downstairs, I glanced into the mirror. Looking myself in the eye, I thought, "Get yourself together, Sid. You're the tough cop that can handle every situation. Don't let these namby-pambies unnerve you."

As I reached for my luggage in the back of the pickup, I noticed small white things strewn all over the truck bed. "Oh, no," I groaned, "those smokes are still here to tempt me."

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I'd wanted so badly to get rid of them. How could those cigarettes have blown back? Funny thing. I'd chucked stuff out that window many times, and the chances of anything blowing back into the bed of the truck was just short of nil. I felt happy and sick at the same time, dreading to face the struggle all over again - like trying to diet, setting the date, and receiving a box of chocolates in the mail from a well-meaning friend. Only I had a sneaking suspicion that no "friend" had made them land where they did.

I had an overwhelming desire to smoke one right then. Angry at my weakness, I dragged both suitcases and almost ran across the lawn. But I couldn't hack it. I was puffing so hard that I had to stop and rest on the porch. I dreaded the next flight of stairs, which had three times as many steps. Those five packs a day I'd smoked for twenty-five years had taken their toll.

Right then I decided I'd hurry up the stairs, dump the suitcases, sneak back to the pickup, and ditch out beyond the hedge for another smoke. With that incentive I started up with my load. But I had to stop half way to catch my breath and ease my leg cramps. That was my undoing. A young nurse came from nowhere and looked up at me.

"I'll be up to your room in just a minute to take your vital signs, Mr. Larrabee," she said cheerily.

Vital signs! Did I look that bad? Did she think I might die just lugging two heavy suitcases up a flight of stairs? That gave me the impetus I needed to dash to my room. I'd rather collapse on a bed than fall down the stairs.

I had just started to unlock my first suitcase when she walked in.

"Welcome. We're so glad you chose to be our guest at Total Health. I'd like to take your blood pressure and pulse rate, if you don't mind. Would you please sit down while I do it?"

She had a stethoscope around her neck, and her hand held that apparatus with all the tubing and the little bulb to squeeze. Nothing to do but cooperate, so I sat down. Besides, 'twas a good excuse to rest. After she had written down some numbers - I hoped they weren't dangerously high - she said, "My name's Janie. I just love being a nurse here. We have a great family at Total Health, and we're glad you've chosen to become part of it. I need to know what medications you are taking and if you have any food or medicine allergies."

"I'm not taking any medicine, and I don't think I have any allergies." I wished she'd leave so I could go light up a cigarette.

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“Well then, would you mind telling me why you came to Total Health?” she asked.

So she wanted to stay and talk. But I didn’t feel like baring my soul to this kid who looked to be in her early twenties. Still she seemed so naive, so trusting. Why not? It would be fun to scare her. Then there’d be two of us. Besides, right then I needed to impress someone with my importance.

“As a deputy sheriff, my lifestyle isn’t all that healthful. I stay up most of the night, catching burglars, dodging bullets. High stress level. Can’t sleep when I do come home about 1:00 or 2:00 a.m. Usually drink from eight to ten cups of coffee a day and smoke anywhere from three to five packs. Don’t get much exercise riding around in the car. Grab my food at fast-food places, mostly meat, french fries, and malts. Guess you’d call me one of the bad guys.”

“But why did you come?” she interrupted. I could see I hadn’t shocked her one bit.

“I guess it’s because of Bev, my wife. We’ve been married only a few years. She’s so different from my first wife, not goody-goody, but good. Seems like she enjoys a special relationship with God. But me, the way I live, I just don’t have time for God. Guess I’m here because I want to change.”

She looked at me for several seconds before she spoke. “Mr. Larrabee, you’ve come to the right place to get such a big order filled. You’ll see great things happen here at Total Health.”

She handed me several pieces of paper.

“Here. Please fill out your past medical history, so that the doctor can give you the very best care. On the blank sheet, write out your personal health goals. We want to work together so you can receive the benefits for which you came.”

She started for the door.

“Oh, yes, please come to the parlor at 5:15 for a short welcome and orientation before supper. See you then.”

I looked at my watch. I’d never have time to unpack, fill out the medical-history sheet, and sneak out for a smoke - all in twenty minutes.

They’d trapped me. Could I endure another hour before lighting a cigarette?