



Serenity

by Harry Kraus

Excerpt provided courtesy of www.HarryKraus.com

Chapter 1

No one in Serenity, North Carolina, knew Adam Tyson was dead. So no one except Tilly Johnson even raised an eyebrow when he arrived in town that muggy August morning. But Tilly raised an eyebrow at every handsome man that passed her way, especially ones with impeccable dress, tall stature, and M.D. embroidered on the pocket of a long, white coat.

Adam lifted the lapels of his freshly starched coat, hoping he wouldn't arrive completely soaked from his own perspiration. He flapped the coat against the languid air. This was nothing like Southern California. No, the traffic, the wonderful climate, the night life, and the culture of funky trendsetters were a thing of the past, replaced by a single traffic light, a bowling alley, a drug store the color of Pepto-Bismol, and a population of oystermen who wouldn't know a fashion trend from a stock quote.

He arrived thirty minutes early for his hospital orientation, time enough to acquaint himself with the coastal town. After parking in the doctors' lot, he strolled leisurely to the end of the business district, a ten-minute walk at a relaxed pace. Then he returned to pass by Bob's Exxon and the Serenity Tackle Shop, which boasted of fresh crab and shrimp and smelled of something fishy and less than fresh. There was a bank, a four-lane bowling alley, two souvenir shops, a fruit stand, a hardware store, a drugstore, the Seagull Inn, a white clapboard church with a large adjoining cemetery and the county hospital, sitting back from the main road right next to the cemetery. Convenient, he thought, if any of my patients die.

He scolded himself for his pessimism and slowed to peer across the wrought-iron fence at the aging tombstones, monuments to crusty sailors of Serenity's past. He slipped off his white coat and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Grave markers always made him think of funerals, the graveside services that seemed to shape his destiny. He'd watched them lower Adam Tyson into the ground six months ago. It was a somber occasion as hundreds of patients came to bid him farewell, to pay homage to the surgeon's meticulous technique.

The operating room staff stood back, stayed respectfully quiet, and knew better.

Patty Bateman, an OR technician, gripped Andy's elbow as several other physicians took turns with a shovel, each saying good-bye with a scoop of dirt heaved upon the casket. "Closure," she whispered. "Everybody wants closure."

Andy squeezed her hand, now encircling his upper arm.

"Take your turn with the shovel," she prodded. "You're going to need help laying him to rest."

Andy nodded.

"How long were you with him--ten, fifteen years?"

"Eight."

Her eyes scanned the growing line of patients, some with solitary roses, others offering only a handful of the fill dirt they would drop into the fresh grave. "They will never know the truth," she said softly, inches from Andy's ear. "You kept that man out of trouble every day."

He knew she was right. Part of him wanted recognition, to shout the truth to these people who put their trust in a drug-impaired physician. But he knew he would stay quiet and preserve the dead surgeon's reputation. He had done enough damage already. He feigned a smile. "Someone had to do it."

The wail of a siren pierced the humidity and brought him back to the present in Serenity. A moment later a rescue unit passed, the pitch of the siren sliding downward as the green and white ambulance rushed toward the beachfront road. Two boys, looking no older than ten, scampered up the street behind the emergency vehicle. "Riptides," one panted. "I saw the red flags out this morning."

He watched them go, disappearing onto a side street lined with cottages, most of them second homes of people seeking solace and solitude. The siren faded, and the atmosphere for which the town was named returned.

He lifted the white coat and touched the name embroidered on the pocket: Adam Tyson, M.D. This was the realization of a dream, the fulfillment of a vow made years ago.

He checked his watch and smiled at a young lady pushing a stroller. An obvious tourist, her T-shirt was emblazoned with words lifted from a dictionary. In a dignified font, it stated, "Serenity: n. The state of calm, unruffled tranquility." He looked toward the hospital. He certainly hoped he would find the words to be true.

Serenity was a coastal town, sitting on an island that swelled in the summer months with people in love with the beach. In the winter only the locals remained, mostly those who made their living from the sea. The hospital was the largest employer, the only one on the barrier islands on the eastern coast of North Carolina.

Adam would be their only surgeon, replacing Dr. Mark Crawford, who had drowned in a sailing accident last spring. Doc Crawford was a town saint, a medical icon whose greatness had grown since his death. Though unconfirmed, the local rumors claimed he had fallen from his boat in a drunken stupor, as there being enough alcohol onboard to keep a fraternity happy for a month.

Adam would treat minor surgical problems, an occasional case of appendicitis, and skin cancers that proliferated after a life in the sun. Serious problems, major trauma cases, and the like would be flown down to Wilmington or further inland to Greenville or Durham. He had been promised that most of these cases would be handled in the emergency room by capable physicians who would refer the patients out before Adam would need to be involved.

Like most other buildings on the island, the hospital was built on stilts. Instead of wooden ones used in the local cottages, Broward County Hospital was supported by a series of huge concrete columns. On the side closest to the ocean, a cement platform, much like those seen in parking garages in the city, led from the emergency entrance down a long circular ramp to the street level below. In the front, pedestrians had the choice of walking up the steps or taking one of two wheelchair ramps that zigzagged symmetrically to the front portico. The building was sided with large cedar shingles, giving it more the appearance of a huge country inn than a hospital.

Adam ascended the front steps, pausing as his stomach tightened and the pattern of the siren in the distance changed from a rolling wail to a short-burst staccato. He squinted toward the sound. I thought Serenity was supposed to be a refuge for a surgeon seeking a practice free of emergencies. There aren't supposed to be sirens here. He reminded his racing heart to listen to reason. It's probably the unfortunate announcement of a drowning, or perhaps a cardiac arrest in a flabby tourist--a medical, but certainly not a surgical, emergency. This is Serenity, not Southern California.

"Dr. Tyson?"

He looked up to see two women, one short, her build solid, stocky, not soft--not overly fat, but with the frame of a fireplug and a leathery complexion; not kissed but smothered by the sun's adoration. She smiled and held out her hand. "I'm Doreen. We spoke on the phone." Her grip made his hand ache.

"Adam Tyson." There. The words were out. This wasn't so hard.

"This is Beth Carlson. She's our new director of nursing. She joins our team, coming from Richmond, Virginia where she was director of emergency services at MCV. I hope you don't mind if she joins our little tour."

Adam took the hand of the second woman as she offered it. "Of course not. I'm glad to meet you."

She smiled. Her hair was strawberry blonde, lifted from her neck in a french braid, knotted with clinical precision. Nurse Carlson looked like she'd stepped from a Land's End catalog--not a drop-dead, stunningly beautiful model, but a fair-complected, slender gentlewoman he could easily picture kneeling beside a child or standing by a window watering a flowering plant. Adam inhaled the delicate scent of a perfume that reminded him of fresh honeysuckle. No, he wouldn't mind her tagging along at all.

They sat for a few minutes on the expansive covered porch and sipped lemonade as Doreen expounded on the history of the County Hospital and highlighted the latest technology available within. Adam knew all of this but nodded with feigned interest as he cast secretive glances at Beth and wondered why this sharply dressed professional would choose Serenity over the big city. On more than one occasion their eyes connected for a brief moment before Adam looked away and focused on the drone of Doreen's presentation.

They progressed from the porch through the areas of patient registration to the hospital paging operator where Adam was handed a shiny black pager that he flipped on with ceremonial formality. "There," he said. "I'm officially on duty."

"Don't worry," Doreen chided. "That thing should be pretty quiet today. We haven't been admitting general surgery patients at County since Dr. Crawford retired."

They toured medical records, X-ray, and the lab and were about to take the elevator to the patient floors when a shrill, electronic chirp sounded from Adam's pager. He lifted it from his belt, holding it out as if it were hot. "Whoa," he said, forcing a chuckle. "I thought you said this thing would behave."

"Here," Doreen offered, reaching for the beeper. "Press this gray button to see the message."

He obeyed and looked at the display. "111-5000."

He held it up for Doreen, whose face tightened.

Adam could taste stomach acid. He should have had more than black coffee for breakfast. "What is it?"

"The 111 is a code for emergency. 5000 is the extension for the emergency room. Sounds like you've got business already." She shrugged and nodded with her head away from the

elevators. "We might as well continue our tour in the ER and see what they want."

Beth's eyes brightened, and her pace quickened as they stepped down the pale green hallway after Doreen. With her background in trauma, she liked this kind of excitement. Adam sped up, not wanting to lag too far behind. First days aren't supposed to start this way.

Doreen pressed a small silver panel on the wall to activate an automatic door leading into the small emergency department, which at the moment appeared to be in chaos. A patient could be heard yelling obscenities. A young man in scrubs pushed past the trio carrying two units of blood and disappeared behind a curtain beyond a central nursing station. A phone rang unanswered. A petite woman with gray hair advanced toward a group of men and women in bathing suits. She had both hands in the air as if she was directing traffic. "You'll have to wait out there! The doctor will be out as soon as he can."

Adam peeked behind the curtain. Instantly he wished he hadn't. Six people were crouched over a chubby little boy. His skin was antique white, not vibrant but pale, very pale with thin purple lips and gums the color of Concord grapes. There was blood on the floor, the stretcher, even the wall, and blood stood stagnant in the pool of his belly button, like a blob of currant jelly smeared between rolls of white bread.

A man about Adam's same age of thirty-eight looked up. "Are you the new surgeon?"

Adam nodded, his mouth suddenly dry. "A-adam Tyson." There, he'd said it again, but not as easily this time.

The man shook his head and emitted a forced chuckle. "Heh, heh. I'm Dr. Seavers. This your first day? Heh, heh. I'm gonna need your help."

"What do you have?"

"This is a four-year-old. Victim of a shark attack. Nearly took his arm off," he said before punctuating his sentence with another chuckle. "We haven't had a shark attack in these waters since 1969, heh."

Adam found Dr. Seavers's chuckling habit far from endearing. Adam took a step forward and asked for a pair of gloves.

"Oh, I don't need you here," Dr. Seavers countered. "I'm sending this one by helicopter up to Duke." He paused. "Unless you've got an interest in doing microvascular reimplantation, heh-heh."

Adam held up his hands. "No!" He softened. "I mean, no, Duke is the proper place for a complex case like this."

Seavers pointed behind Adam. "Hear that kid screamin'? That's where I need you. Some drug-crazy kid tried to jump through a sliding glass door." He chuckled. "And the door won, heh-heh."

The gray-haired nurse pulled open the curtain, having successfully herded the beach crowd back into the waiting area.

Adam looked across the room at a young man with a large bandage on his forehead, tied in four-point restraints with an orderly the size of a moose standing guard along with several others.

The nurse held out her hand. "Dr. Tyson, I'm Karen Pebworth. Jake over there will help you find what you need. As you can see, the doctor and I will be tied up for a little while until we get this boy in the air."

Adam looked behind the counter where a huge man was stocking a cart with supplies. He appeared to be no older than twenty and the extra-large scrub-top he wore strained against the flesh pressed beneath its drab blue surface. His head was topped with a Duke baseball cap that snapped forward as Jake nodded his salutation.

Adam lifted his hand in a weak wave and hoped Jake was as smart as he was large.

Beth Carlson stepped forward. "I'll help you. I've done ER work for ten years." She slipped off her suit jacket.

Adam looked twice. She was even prettier than he'd thought. Forget Land's End. She could model swimwear.

He walked to the cubicle that contained the writhing young man. His eyes were wide open with a look Adam had seen before: sheer terror.

Adam cleared his throat. "I'm Doctor Tyson."

The patient's head jerked around and for a long second his eyes locked with Adam's until the doctor looked away. A young girl sat on a chair next to the stretcher. She tried desperately to cling to the wild man's hand, but even with the restraints, he nearly pulled her off the chair.

"What's he been taking?" Adam questioned.

The girl looked up. "I don't know. He won't say." She looked back at the man and tried to capture his eyes, now locked on Adam. "Oh, Timmy," she cried.

Adam shook his head. "What does he usually take?"

"I don't know! I told you." She paused and looked back at Timmy. "He bought some stuff off a GI up at Camp Lejune. I'm not sure what was in it. He took it this morning. We tried to keep him at the motel, but then he got like this and jumped through the glass door."

"I'm going to need to look at his head."

"He won't let you." She pointed at the crowd around the little boy. "They already tried."

"Great," Adam muttered. He looked at Beth. "We'll just have to paralyze him and put him on a ventilator." She nodded. Then, to Jake, he raised his voice. "Call respiratory therapy. I'm going to need to put him out just to look at his scalp."

Jake clapped two meaty hands together, and a grin broke his tough-guy façade. "Sure thing, Dr. Tyson." He turned to leave. "By the way, welcome to Serenity."

Adam was about to make a sarcastic reply when the patient strained against his restraints and caught Adam's eye again. "You're no doctor! You're trying to kill me! YOU'RE NO DOCTOR!"

Adam froze. His stomach seemed to flood with cold water. What did this patient know? Adam looked away as the patient resumed shouting obscenities.

Adam relaxed a notch, back to a controllable level--feeling physically weak. Ease up. It's only a drug-induced paranoia.

Adam hoped Beth didn't see him cringe when the patient started up again. "I want a real doctor!" He locked eyes on the surgeon like a deer in headlights.

Dr. Tyson looked away. The patient could see right through him. His charade was a failure. Careful, don't let him scare you. It's just the drugs.

His heart caught in his throat.

"YOU'RE NO DOCTOR! You kill your patients and put them in the freezer!"

Adam turned and looked at Beth. What was she thinking?

He took a deep breath. This wasn't what he'd signed up to do. He walked to the nursing station and touched Karen Pebworth's arm. "I need some Pavulon."

"What are you going to do?"

He smiled. "I'm going to make sure Timmy over there doesn't keep yelling bad words."

Her eyes widened. "You want him paralyzed?"

"If you can't move, you can't talk." He waited while she retrieved the syringe. He then walked back to the patient's stretcher and looked at Beth. "Let's wait a minute for the respiratory therapist. We'll have to be ready to breathe for him as soon as this is in."

"We'll need an IV."

He nodded. "Jake, hold him down. This isn't going to be fun."

Jake smiled again. "Fun? We haven't had this much fun in Serenity for months!"

Adam frowned and picked up an IV needle.

The patient squirmed and spat. His girlfriend cried. Adam thought his own heart would burst from his chest. Jake just kept smiling.

And Timmy kept right on yelling. "You're no doctor! You're trying to kill me."

Adam hurried through his work at getting an IV in the moving target. "Hold him still!"

He didn't care if the guy was off his rocker. He just wanted to make him shut up.

And the sooner the better. He lifted the syringe of clear liquid and stabbed it into an IV port. "There," he muttered. "You like drugs," he added under his breath. "Have fun with this."