

CUT
A Medical Murder Mystery
By
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When Sarah went back to Amanda’s room, she could still hear a loud discussion going on between the security guards and Boy Toy down the hall as she closed the door. The combination of not having gotten much sleep the night before, her hangover, and her five consecutive twelve-hour shifts had left her exhausted, and her patience and compassion were on empty. She knew she had to muster up enough energy to get through this shift, but things hadn’t started out well.

Amanda was awake. “I need something right now for pain!” she cried out.
“Where is Sergio?”

Sarah watched Amanda thrashing back in forth in bed and could hear that Amanda’s breathing was shallow and rapid. She approached the head of the bed and gently put her fingers on Amanda’s wrist to check her pulse, which was steady and fast.

“Hi, Ms. Stein,” she said. “I’m Sarah Golden, and I’ll be your nurse. I can get you something for pain as soon as I take your vital signs and check your dressing. I read your chart, and you’re due for pain medication in about thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes! I can’t wait that long,” Amanda shrieked.

“Ms. Stein, please try to calm down. I need to be sure that everything is okay, and then I’ll go and get your medication from the narcotics cabinet.” Sarah quickly took Amanda’s blood pressure and temperature and counted her respirations. Her blood

pressure and pulse were slightly elevated, but everything else was fine. Her abdominal dressings were clean, and her intravenous lines were flowing well.

“Now!” Amanda screamed. “I need it *now!*”

“All right, I hear you, Ms. Stein. I’ll go get your medication right now.” Working on a transplant floor had made Sarah well aware that the first seven to ten days after a liver transplant was a painful time for most patients.

“Hurry.” Amanda was starting to cry.

“I’ll be right back.” Sarah left the room, got the keys to the narcotics cabinet, and asked another nurse to cosign for Amanda’s morphine, a highly regulated drug. She drew up the appropriate dose and promptly returned to Amanda’s bedside. “I’m here with your medication. Per hospital procedure, I’ll need to ask you for two patient identifiers before I administer it to you. Big mistakes had been made in the past when the wrong patient had gotten the wrong drug, so now, asking for two patient identifiers was a mandatory step for medical professionals everywhere in the United States.

“What is your full name?”

“For Christ’s sake, can’t you read? Amanda Stein.” Amanda was holding her abdomen with both hands.

Sarah checked the records. “Thank you. And your date of birth?”

“My birthday is none of your fucking business. Just give me the drugs!” Amanda tried to push herself up in bed but collapsed back onto the bed in pain.

“I am required to ask you these questions, Ms Stein. If you’re uncomfortable telling me your date of birth, then how about what city you were born in?”

“San Francisco, California.”

Sarah confirmed the information and administered the medication directly into Amanda’s IV.

Amanda let out a sigh of relief as the morphine immediately entered her bloodstream. Sarah could see her body visibly relax and her breathing slow down. She positioned Amanda’s pillows to ensure that she was comfortable. She reminded herself that a liver transplant was major surgery; they had to take out the entire diseased liver first, then transplant a healthy one. The patient was in the operating room for almost six hours from start to finish.

“I’ll make sure we stay ahead of that pain, Ms. Stein, so you don’t get to that place again. Can I get you anything else before I leave?”

Amanda gently shook her head back and forth. “No, I think I need to rest for a little while. Where did you say Sergio went?” She was starting to doze off, which happened when the morphine first kicked in.

Sarah didn’t think it was a good time to tell her that security had escorted him away. “He went downstairs.”

“Okay.” Amanda was slurring.

“I’ll be back in a little while to help you sit on the side of the bed, and then we’ll go for a walk. Dr. Santos would like you to walk up and down the hall at least three times before bed tonight.” Amanda acknowledged Sarah’s comments with a nod. Sarah left the room and headed to the nursing station to chart on Amanda’s status. After she completed the charting, she scrolled down to review Amanda’s history and physical while things

were quiet. The intern's notes on Amanda revealed that she was thirty-six. Only child. Both parents healthy, no preexisting diseases; died in a private-plane crash in France when Amanda was twenty. BA in history from Vassar; MBA from Columbia. Contracted hepatitis C when she was working in China for Cisco two years earlier. Single; no children. Kept hepatitis C in check for some time with the help of a hepatologist in San Francisco and new drugs. Had a history of using cocaine and alcohol but stopped when diagnosed with hepatitis C. Her disease had stopped responding to the drugs about six months before, so she had been listed for a liver in Miami.

Interesting, Sarah thought. She must know someone who knows the deal about waiting times for livers in the United States.

Before Sarah could dig any more deeply into Amanda's chart, she heard the patient call lights buzzing and had to log off. She wanted to check who was listed as Amanda's emergency contact but would have to do that later.

Sarah's head was spinning with the facts about Amanda as she walked into Mr. Grant's room. She could tell he was physically in pain from the grimace on his face.

"Looks like you need something for pain, Mr. Grant. Can you tell me what number you are, from one to ten, on the pain scale?"

"I'm at a nine. I think I waited too long to ask. Sorry about that." He put out his arm as Sarah quickly took his blood pressure and checked the rest of his vital signs. She reviewed his chart, then went to the medication room and drew up some morphine.

Sarah returned to Mr. Grant's room and administered the drug. "There—that should make you comfortable, Mr. Grant. You're one of our heroes, you know—donating

a lobe of your liver to your ten-year-old son is the most generous and brave thing you could have done. James is so lucky to have such a healthy and loving father.” Sarah checked his dressings and drainage tube; everything looked clean and dry. They would probably pull the drainage tube in the morning, as it didn’t seem to have anything coming out of it anymore.

Mr. Grant had visibly relaxed from the medication. “You’ll do anything to save your child’s life. Do you have little ones at home?”

Sarah was charting the medication in Mr. Grant’s record, using a portable computer on wheels, and glanced up at him. “No, no kids. Still happy and single,” she said, adding silently to herself, *Not having any kids. Never getting married.* Jackie’s son, Wyatt, was plenty for her to love up and then drop back home.

“Pretty girl like you, I bet you have plenty of these handsome doctors running after you, trying to put a ring on your finger.” Mr. Grant was sitting up in bed now.

Sarah ignored his comment and said, “Now, Mr. Grant, let’s get you moving around a bit. I know you want to walk over to the pediatric floor to see James. Maybe tonight, if you’re up for it. I did get a call from the unit he’s on, and the charge nurse said he’s doing great. What’s your pain level now?”

“It’s a two. And James *is* doing great. My wife stopped by this afternoon on her way back from the cafeteria and was going to take him for a walk. “

Sarah went to help Mr. Grant stand up and walk to the bathroom with his IV pole. “Your surgery is actually more complex than the liver transplant James had, so it’s normal for you to be in this much pain. We’ll get you moving around and off the IV fluids

by tonight if you hold your dinner down. I saw in your chart that you had a light lunch. Did that feel okay?"

"Yes, lunch was actually pretty tasty. Who knew hospital food could actually be good?" he said, as he shut the bathroom door.

Sarah straightened Mr. Grant's bed linens and placed a soft white blanket on the chair next to his bed so he could sit up for a while. She organized the beautiful assortment of roses and carnations on his bedside table and glanced at the card. It read: "Thanks for saving my life, Dad. Love, James." There was a red heart drawing under James's signature. Sarah sighed deeply and smiled. This was part of why she was addicted to transplant patients: their families' love and commitment were often so intense and emotional. She'd seen the other side of the coin, too, where time ran out and little kids died waiting for a deceased-donor organ. Even though the national sharing system favored kids, sometimes the right-size donor never came in time. Many transplant programs had even taken to splitting deceased-donor livers so two small recipients could benefit from a single liver. Still, the fact remained that there were far more patients waiting than there were organs available.

Mr. Grant came out of the bathroom, wheeled his IV pole over to the chair, and sat down. "How about I watch a little TV and then we take that walk to see James?"

"Sounds like a plan. I'll be back in about an hour. I put your call light and some water for you on your bedside table. If you need anything, just press the bell. You look much better. Got some color in your cheeks." Sarah did a quick visual assessment of the

room and, once she felt comfortable leaving Mr. Grant, gave him a thumbs-up. He returned the gesture, and she walked out.

Sarah was about to return to Amanda's room, when she heard Sergio Torres's voice. "Don't worry, honey, you're almost at the finish line. No problems with anything. You'll be back to your fabulous self, full of energy, in no time at all. All my planning has paid off."

Sarah wasn't quite sure what to make of his statement and needed to get Amanda up, per doctor's orders. She walked into the room, but before she could say anything, Sergio stood up.

"I want to apologize for my bad behavior earlier. I have turned off my cell phone and will not even take it out of my pocket until I'm outside. Please accept my apology."

Sarah watched him bend down to read her name tag.

"Sarah Golden."

"Thank you, Mr. Torres. I appreciate your understanding. I need to get Ms. Stein up for her walk. Could I ask you to step outside for a few moments?"

"You can call me Sergio, and yes, I was just going on an errand for her."

Sergio looked over Sarah's shoulder at Amanda, now propped up in bed. "I'll be back soon, if I don't get lost. Anything else I can get you from Saks, other than your face cream?"

Amanda was looking much better than she had when Sarah had left her half an hour earlier. "Yes, get me the Sisley night cream and their serum. Thanks, Sergio. Hurry up—Saks closes at nine. You're such a dear."

Sergio closed the door behind him on his way out, and Sarah coached Amanda on how to support her incision and move herself to the side of the bed.

“Take your hands and press them gently over your incision, as if you’re holding on to something fragile. One on top of the other,” Sarah instructed.

Amanda paid careful attention and did exactly as Sarah directed.

Sarah placed her hand on Amanda’s back and carefully helped her stand up.

“That really helped. I feel a little dizzy.” Amanda took a deep breath.

“Take a few more deep breaths, and then let me know when you’re ready to start walking. Do you have a robe, or would you like me to put a hospital gown around your back?”

“A hospital gown will do for now. My slippers are under the bed.” Amanda took another deep breath.

Sarah bent down and retrieved the fancy pink satin slippers and placed them in front of Amanda. Amanda slipped them onto her feet. Sarah took a clean, folded hospital gown off the chair beside Amanda’s bed and covered Amanda’s back.

This broad must be loaded, sending Sergio to Saks for million-dollar facial products and wearing these Gucci slippers. Must be nice, Sarah thought. “You’re doing great, Ms. Stein,” she said aloud. “How is your pain?”

Amanda responded, “I’m at about a three. And you can call me Amanda.”

Amazing how morphine makes people friendlier, Sarah thought.

“That’s good. I’ll be taking you on a slow, steady walk around the corridor three times if you can tolerate it. Then we’ll come back into your room and have you sit up in

the chair for a little while before you get ready to rest for the night. Does that sound okay?" Sarah had started to move Amanda toward the door.

"Yes, I think I can do it; I walked earlier today. I will definitely need something for sleep. It's so loud here at night, with all the beeping and the hall noise. I don't know how anyone can sleep. Thank goodness I have a private room."

Amanda's five-foot-eleven-inch frame towered over Sarah, who was only five foot six, as they walked slowly down the hall. Amanda's long blond hair was tied in a ponytail; she had high cheekbones and large blue eyes with bags under them—appropriate, given the major surgery she had just had. Her lips puffed out much more than normal lips should, so Sarah was pretty sure Amanda had had some work done on her face.

"Yes, I will be giving you something for sleep and possibly for pain, should you need it," she replied to Amanda's request.

"Oh, I'll need both. Just count on it."

As the two women slowly made their way around the nursing corridor, Amanda stopped and stared at a wall with handwritten notes and letters pinned on it, along with photographs of patients with their arms around some of the nursing staff and transplant doctors. Sarah had seen this type of wall created at many of the transplant programs she had worked for. She watched Amanda pause to read what looked like a letter with a big "thank you" written on it.

"What are all these thank-you letters?" Amanda asked.

Sarah moved in closer. “These are copies of notes the patients have written to their donor families. They also thank the staff and doctors for their wonderful care. You’re welcome to write a letter to your donor family, and we can send it along to the procurement program that recovered your liver. They will decide if and when it’s appropriate to pass it along to the donor family. It does take a while for the donor families, but they are truly comforted by knowing that the senseless death of their loved one helped others live. Some donor families actually want to meet the recipients.”

Sarah watched Amanda’s face, expecting her to offer to write a letter to her donor family, but Amanda remained expressionless as she started to move down the corridor again. *How odd*, thought Sarah; almost every recipient of a deceased-donor organ immediately thought of the person who died and wanted to thank the family.

The silence between the two of them was deafening as they finished the walk. Once they returned to Amanda’s room, Sarah helped her sit in a high-backed chair while she straightened Amanda’s bed and bedside table.

Sarah went by the nursing desk to let the charge nurse know she would be leaving the floor with Mr. Grant and then went to his room. He was already standing up, with his hospital robe around his shoulders.

He greeted Sarah with a smile. “I’m ready to go see my boy. Would you like to be my escort?” He bent his arm without the IV toward her. *What a change in energy*, Sarah thought; she needed to clear the toxic feelings she had from being with Amanda. She escorted Mr. Grant slowly to the pediatric unit several floors below, and her heart burst as his son saw his dad walk into his room. James’s big brown eyes were the size of half

dollars as he left his chair and went to gently hug his dad. After a few minutes, father and son walked to the playroom with Mom.

“I’ll be back in about thirty minutes to take you back to your room, Mr. Grant. Take it easy, now.” Sarah took the elevator down to the coffee shop on the first floor and sat down to have a quick cup. The strong aroma wafted up her nose, and she slowly sipped it after she added cream and sugar. It was just the boost she needed.

Mr. Grant was waiting in James’s room when Sarah got back. He looked tired. “I’ll see you tomorrow, James.” Mr. Grant embraced his son and winked at his wife as he and Sarah left the room. Sarah put her arm around his back and held on to the IV pole to help Mr. Grant navigate the hall and get into the elevator.

Sarah pressed the ninth-floor button. “Your son looks amazing, Mr. Grant. Did you have a nice visit with him?”

“Yes—he’s already back to his old self. He asked if he could play soccer again and wants to join the swim team this summer. I can’t tell you how happy we are that he’s doing so well. You have an amazing transplant team.”

“I will be sure to share that with team. You may want to tell them yourselves when they make rounds tomorrow morning. In the meantime, let’s get you back in bed and ready for a good night’s sleep.”

After finishing Mr. Grant’s care and getting him settled, Sarah charted his progress in his record, washed her hands, and headed back to Amanda’s room. As she got close, she saw Sergio walk in before her with a large Saks Fifth Avenue bag. A strong odor of alcohol trailed behind him.

As she walked into the room, Sarah saw Amanda give Sergio the evil eye as she asked him, “Where the hell have you been?” Then Amanda looked at Sarah and said, “You were gone too long, too. I need pain medication and a sleeping pill.”

“I was taking care of another patient, Amanda. I’ll get your nighttime medications and something for pain. What number are you at?” Sarah retorted.

“I’m at a ten at least. I’d appreciate it if you could get my medications immediately.”

Sarah finished adjusting Amanda’s various lines and walked toward the door. “I’ll give you two some privacy,” she said. Sarah closed the door and was about to walk to the nursing station, when she heard Amanda yelling at Sergio. “You reek of alcohol. What took you so long? Were you out with some Cuban whore while I was here, suffering?”

“I have worked hard to be sure you got everything you needed, so don’t start bitching at me for having a few drinks and relaxing. You shouldn’t be saying anything about a Cuban whore, when you have no idea where your liver came from.”

Amanda yelled, “I told you I didn’t want to know anything! No details! Your job was to get me a liver; now get the fuck out of my room!”

With that, Sergio came barreling through Amanda’s door and almost knocked Sarah over.

