

EPISODE 625

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:35.9]

FT: Ever wonder what it's like to be a top news anchor on — I don't know, CNN? Someone who has to report on what's happening in the world right now live, and someone who, by the way, has been blacklisted by Donald Trump.

You're listening to So Money everyone. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Welcome to the show. A great, great guest for us today, Alisyn Camerota. She's a CNN anchor and the author of the new exciting fun book, *Amanda Wakes Up*.

Maybe you're listening and you're an aspiring news reporter curious about the path ahead, had to strike out on your own, stand out from the crowd. Alisyn's book, and Alisyn's own this story offer incredible insights and wonderful advice. Alisyn is an American television journalist and she is currently co-anchoring CNN's New Day with Chris Cuomo. She has co-anchored CNN Tonight and she served in many roles during a 16-year career at Fox News.

Alisyn's new book is called *Amanda Wakes Up*, and, as I said, it's very entertaining. It's a book about the rise and fall and rise of a young reporter working at fair news. It's not exactly an biography, but Alisyn does say that her own life did offer some inspiration which does make the behind-the-scenes stuff of what happens at this news network and all the drama all the more interesting. She admits there are parallels, but the book is ultimately fiction.

Alisyn is a true role model for women and for all news journalists out there, and her career has not been immune to some setbacks. How has she navigated the winds and the losses and how does she manage her money?

Her we go. Here is Alisyn Camerota

[INTERVIEW]

FT: Alisyn Camerota, welcome to So Money. Congratulations on your book, *Amanda Wakes Up*.

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AC: Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to talk with you, Farnoosh.

[0:02:28.5]

FT: Many of us, all of us know you from CNN, and prior to that, Fox News. You are just a wonderful, wonderful news reporter and anchor. We love watching you right now, especially. Got to say, this is an interesting and fun — Can I say fun time to be reporting on the world, and particularly US politics?

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AC: It's certainly a frothy frenetic time in keeping with the F fame. There are other people who would you other F words.

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FT: Yeah, other F words.

[0:03:02.6]

AC: Look. It is on some level what we always dreamed of as journalists in terms of the big story, but it just never lets up. This new cycle is unlike anything that I've ever seen in 25 years. There's no respite from the big story. It's amazing how it can be sustained every single day.

[0:03:23.6]

FT: I want to talk about your new book, since we're on the topic of news and because you're in it every day and you're reporting on this live, I believe the president has banned you from

interviewing him. I read this. I don't know if this is still true. Has he lifted the ban? I don't understand it. How does that make you feel, first of all, as a journalist, and how do you work around that?

[0:03:47.1]

AC: Well, I guess the word is blacklisted. At least what the word used to be. That happened was I used to interview him regularly when I was at Fox, and then when I was at CNN I also interviewed him several times, but by that time he had become a candidate. At some point, during the beginning of my tenure here, he became a presidential candidate, and then the rules of engagement changed and it wasn't just a sort of funny, yuck-yuck, interview anymore where he could just opine on world events. Then he kind of had to be held accountable. That's our job.

Then he started to like talking to me less. There were a couple of interviews where I asked him tough questions. I played some of his old thoughts back to him and got him to try to explain if there was some sort of discrepancy, and then he didn't like it, and then he didn't want to come on anymore and he didn't want to be interviewed by me anymore. He tweeted out Alisyn Camerota is a disaster. Not going to watch anymore.

[0:04:53.0]

FT: Sad.

[0:04:56.4]

AC: Sad. We have spoken off-camera, he and I, since. I've tried to mend defenses, because I don't believe in having unresolved business with people, but he has not wanted to come on our show.

[0:05:13.7]

FT: Well, we thank you for the program that you and Chris Cuomo cohost on CNN, New Day with Chris Cuomo. Is it New Day with Alisyn Camerota and Chris Cuomo?

[0:05:22.7]

AC: Yes, and I think that you could say Chris Cuomo and Alisyn Camerota, or if you prefer Alisyn Camerota and Chris Cuomo. Really, we answer to both.

[0:05:32.3]

FT: Alisyn, you also have time to write a book. By the way, you're also a mom and a wife I don't even have time to eat dinner, let alone take a shower. Oh, by the way, write a book too. Tell us how this came about and how you embarked on and actually made time for it. I don't want to dive into it because I think it's such an interesting book. I wish I had this book when I was starting out in news.

[0:05:55.4]

AC: Thank you. I appreciate that. Yes, let Amanda's struggles pave the way for all of us.

[0:06:00.3]

FT: Live vicariously through Amanda.

[0:06:01.3]

AC: Yes. As I say, it took me 25 years to figure out some of the things that Amanda figures out in 322 pages. I really appreciate that, Farnoosh. Yeah, listen. Writing a book is really hard. It is really time-consuming. I find that it's easier if you just stop showering altogether. That saves time. Also, if you stop working out, then you never have to shower. Try those two things. That's what I'd recommend.

The truth is, because everybody asks me this, "How on earth with your demanding job could you ever write a book?" I wrote it years ago when I was at Fox, when I was a weekend anchor,

and that's also a demanding job, but it's not as demanding a job as I have now. I could never have embarked on this undertaking with this current news cycle where I work five days a week.

Back then I was sometimes working five days a week. I would often fill in on the morning show, but sometimes I was working three days a week and in that case you really can attempt to write a book, and I really liked writing. It helps me collect my thoughts. It helps me process things. I started writing it back in 2012 during a different crazy presidential race, because I was having really, frankly, so many frustrations with the way we were covering some of that presidential race and with my interviews with, then, candidate. I was trying to process what is news. What is the role and the purpose of journalists? What happens if your boss sees things in a very different light than you do you and sees the purpose of your show in a very different light than you do, and how do you deal with all those ethical dilemmas?

I assigned those who Amanda, and in the book people will read that every day she's kind of duking it out. She's she trying to figure out how to be a good journalist while at the same time having all of the other pressures and demands from her boyfriend, from her mom, from her best friend, from her boss, from the ratings, from all of the social media craziness. I just kind of wanted to let my real viewers and readers in on a little peek on how all those things intersect and complicate a journalist's life.

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FT: Little self-autobiographical, right?

[0:08:19.5]

AC: Definitely. For sure. It's not an autobiography, again, because I was able to use a lot of poetic license. I was able to use composite character. I was able to play with the chronology. All the things that you wish you could do in your own life.

Look. In my real job, every day, on new day, I am so fact-based. I don't say anything unless I believe it to be true. I get statistics. I have data. I make sure that I'm quoting somebody verbatim. I am so fact-based, and that is a real challenge. It's freeing to be able to deal with all

of these issues in fiction, but it's also informed by my life and my life as a journalist and a reporter and an anchor and all of my friends in the business. All of that is captured in *Amanda Wakes Up*.

[0:09:10.9]

FT: Your career, it's been so sort of volatile ride and it's such an exciting, but also I know I read that you are on this NBC morning show that you were doing so well. You were actually filling in as anchor, and then it got canceled so you not only face a career challenge, but also a financial challenge. How are you going to make money?

Let's go back to that moment if we can, because this show is about money and we want to talk through people's experiences. How did you work through that time in your life from all angles, from the money piece, but also, I would imagine that something like that would really break you in some ways, your confidence and not knowing what going to be next, what's going to happen next.

[0:09:53.9]

AC: Oh, yeah. I had a real essential crisis. That was the year that I turned 30, and I loved my NBC show. It was called Real Life. There were 50 of us. We had all come from around the country to work on this new show. It was going to third hour of the Today's Show. We all sort of fell in love with each other. We were working in the trenches together. We were all kids, most of us unmarried. We had a real bond, and it only lasted a year and when it was canceled I was thrust into a depression.

In fact, there's a scene in *Amanda Wakes Up* that I lifted directly from my real life. Amanda, during the book, or some of her dream and her plan and her trajectory hits a major pothole and she too is thrust into an existential crisis and trying to figure out what's next for her. She sort of mopes around in her pajamas and lies on her sofa for many days in a row, and that is lifted directly from my life, because when my show was canceled I was really despondent. I don't use these terms lively. I was really, really sad and I didn't know what would be next.

In terms of money, part of Amanda's story, and I think that this is maybe a universal story. You choose your dream job because it lights you on fire and you love it and you're thrilled, but for Amanda, she didn't come from a lot of money. Her parents were divorced. She saw her mom struggling. I can relate to this. Amanda and I have some similarities on this front, and so she also chose a career that she thought would make her good money. To me, in my life, I find money means freedom. Having money gives you the freedom to do things that when in my life when I didn't have money I didn't have choices and I didn't have the ability to have as much freedom.

As Amanda find out, in the book, whenever you work for a boss and when you start to make money, there is also — It is true that the golden handcuffs are a real thing, because then you do start sacrificing maybe some of your on convictions and you do have start to compromise beyond your level of comfort. What is your breaking point and what are you willing to sacrifice before you say enough is enough? Money does play into all of that, because in some ways the more you make the harder it is to walk away from that if you feel like a job isn't the right fit for you. All of that plays out.

When she has her existential crisis, in *Amanda Wakes Up*, she's wrestling with how will she leave that paycheck and what will she do next and is she making just a huge mistake even though things are starting to make her feel ethically really challenged?

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FT: We talk often on this show about our financial context. What money was like growing up? How that fed our money relationship as an adult? What was your biggest money memory as a child growing up?

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AC: I have a lot of these stories, because money was a big part of my life growing up. As I said, my parents were divorced. I was an only child. I lived with my mom. She was a schoolteacher. School teachers obviously don't make a lot of money, and then she became a part-time

schoolteacher, so she could go back and earn her Ph.D. because she wanted to change fields and become a therapist. So then money was even tighter.

We never bounced a check. I always had a roof over my head. My mom made delicious meals every night. There was that level of comfort, but there was also a level of precariousness of not knowing what would happen next and knowing that there wasn't a big cushion. I do think that that motivated my life choices.

I happened to have found to have fastened on a career. When I was 15 I figured out what I wanted to do, and that I thought that being a journalist and being a TV reporter would be a really cool great job. From that moment, that was my North Star and I did everything I could. I applied to colleges that had TV stations. In high school, I went to volunteer as a local radio station down the street. I just set my sights on becoming a broadcast journalist, because I thought that would be really exciting.

I can't deny that I also thought it would help me make money. Wanting to make money and have freedom, have my own financial freedom, was a big part of the career that I chose. That was just really important to me from childhood and teenage years on, and I'm happy to say I made the right choice. I think that it can, again, be a bit of a prison if you only work for your paycheck, if you're not really gratified by what you do and you're just working for money. I don't know what that feels like, because that's not my experience. I happen to have chosen something that I really love and is able to give me a good life. I thank my lucky stars and God above every day because it worked out that way.

[0:15:19.3]

FT: That's so interesting, because when I was first telling people, sharing with people when I was in my teens and in college, I wanted to pursue media and reporting. People said, "Good luck with that. You'll never make any money," because no one ever thinks you're going to become like the morning anchor on CNN, right?

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AC: That's right. That is exactly right, Farnoosh. It's so funny that you say that, because there the scene in *Amanda Wakes Up* where she's in college and it's the first day she wants to be a newscaster and a morning anchor and the dean of the college says, "Forget all the —" Basically, like, "Don't set your sights on that. There'll only be two kids in this entire school that make it to network anchor," and Amanda turns around and says like, "Where is the other one?" because she's convinced that that's her path, and that's how I felt.

Believe me, there were lean years. I mean there were lean decade. Becoming a broadcast journalist is not a moneymaking scheme, or I should say this. It's not a get rich quick scheme at all, but I happened to love it and I would've paid them to let me do it. I also did believe that at some point I would make it to that echelon that I dreamed of where you do start to make money.

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FT: I was talking to a life coach yesterday and she said, "When you believe something and you have the intention to do that thing, that's when magic happens. That's when actually something transpires," because a lot of times we have the intention to do something or be someone, but our belief system holds us back. We have these mental blocks for these barriers, like, "Yes, I have the intention to become a journalist, but my belief says, "Oh, but it's such a competitive field. I'm not good enough or I don't know the right people." In your case it sounds like you not only believed it, but you also pursued it and intended it to happen and that is, I think — That is all the is all the stars aligning.

[0:17:22.9]

AC: Yeah. Thank you for that, and I do see it that way. I do see my own trajectory that way and I just wasn't going to take no for an answer. It wasn't like I started out and I graduated I said, "Okay. What network anchor job am I going to get?" I just said, "I am going to be a broadcast journalist and I don't know what market I'll be working in. I don't know who I'll work for. I don't know what TV station. I'll work for free for the first — If somebody will let me volunteer, because I assume that I'll get a job somewhere. That's all I was going to do. I was going to find a job by hook or by crook and then I was going to work my way up. Once I found the job, I was just going

to keep climbing that rope, ladder, up until I was able to make a comfortable living. There was just no other choice. I was driven to do it.

In other words, sometimes I think that when you're compelled like that, I just don't know — I don't even know where choice comes in anymore.

[0:18:23.8]

FT: Failure is not an option.

[0:18:25.3]

AC: Right. Failure was not an option. I was going to do this, and it wasn't easy and I had lots and lots of really long years of working around the clock and having a hard time paying my bills. I remember there's a scene in *Amanda Wakes Up* where at first she's paid so little that by the end of the month after she pays all of her rent and her car, she had exactly \$1 to her name, and luckily the hot pretzel sold by the street vendor out on the street is \$1, and she rations it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Let me just say, I didn't have to use my imagination to write that thing.

[0:19:04.7]

FT: Yeah. I know. I believe it was Mariah Carey — She talks about how in her early, early career, before she was anybody, but she was trying to make that first records. She would ration out two bagels a day.

[0:19:19.5]

AC: Right. I've been there. I've been there.

[0:19:22.7]

FT: Now, the rest is history. Two bagels a day to — Well, I don't have to tell you.

[0:19:28.9]

AC: Not. That's exactly — I often liken my trajectory to Mariah Carey. We're very, very similar.

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FT: As we all should.

[0:19:35.9]

AC: Yes, particularly in my diva demands that I make of my staff. Yes.

[0:19:40.6]

FT: Back when you were about to turn 30 and the show got canceled. What did do — What happened next and what happened in the interim and what did you do to basically get out there again in a big way? Was that when you — I'll ride at Fox News Channel?

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AC: No. There was a year before I got the job at Fox News Channel. My show Real Life was canceled. I was despondent, but I had done really well on Real Life and I had performed well and my bosses really liked me and thought that I was a really good worker and talented. They mentioned me to a news director in Boston, a local news director, that the local news director should use me and the local director had a lot of respect for my boss, who is named Joel Cheatwood. He's still on the TV business. She said, "I would love to be able to use you."

Now, I did not mention to that local news director that I didn't really have experience before with these longer tape pieces, these human interest pieces. I was traveling around. There were no live shots. I could have many days to edit together a beautiful piece. It's a completely different skillset than local news where you're like chasing a fire or a water main break and doing a lot of shots.

I didn't mention that part, because I knew I needed local live news experience. I went and did it and it was baptism by fire, but I was freelancing and that means that you just are at the mercy of the boss. If they like you that day they hire you, if they don't like you, you don't get hired. That's no way to — That's no long-term strategy in terms of paying your bills. I knew that I needed a job. I needed the money. I needed the experience, and so I went and did that, but I was looking for a full-time job and I was also at the same time filling in in Providence. I was living in Boston, working whenever they'd have me at the local station. Then I was driving an hour to Providence many days, because I had also gotten a freelance job there.

I was cobbling it together. Again, because it was giving me a skillset that I wanted, I was okay that the money wasn't necessarily dependable and I just knew — I prayed that it would be short-term, and so I did that for a year and then the Fox News Channel called.

[0:22:07.7]

FT: Wow! You were investing in yourself. That's what you were doing. Some people might have gone to graduate school. I did that and it served me, but I think you can argue, it's not worth it, and you could just go out there and get that freelance gig that's going to send you out into the field and covering floods and whatever they'll throw at you and then you probably are actually making a little bit of money while you're doing that instead.

[0:22:31.3]

AC: Yeah. Exactly what you're talking about, which is that it's like going to school. I knew that I could just go to like reporting school. In other words I could go learn these skills that I needed by doing it, and broadcast journalism is one of the things that you can do that. You don't necessarily have to get a graduate degree, because you just got to get out there with a microphone and a camera and do it.

Yes, I totally agree with you. That year, that was like a year basically of going back to school, because I needed to learn those skills that I didn't have.

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FT: What your advice for women you want to earn their worth and advocate for themselves when it comes to salary. I know often people at your level, in news works with agents, to negotiate their deals, but certainly you're involved as well. Any advice? Anything that you have learned as far as making sure that you're getting paid what you deserve?

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AC: I think this is a really tough one, and I think that I get to cheat a little bit, because I do have an agent. I think that it's very easy for me to say to my agent, "And don't take no for an answer," and hang up on my agent who I'm paying. It's much harder to do that to your boss. I have a lot of sympathy for people who have to negotiate on their own with their boss. I think that's a really intimidating situation.

What I have found to be true, and this is just the hardest thing in the world, but in life this is true. I find this to be true in every aspect of life, from relationships, to jobs and your career. You just have to be willing to walk away. The thing that has worked best for me, that past jobs, is when I've said, "Well, thank you for that offer. That's not terribly exciting to me, but if that's the best you can do, then we're going to go our marry ways."

I was bluffing, often, but it was effective. At times people would come back with more, tend to come back with much more. That's the hardest thing to do in the world. I, again, because I have the buffer of an agent, it's easier for me to do it, but you never know how that one is going to play out. All I can say is that that's — Look. Obviously doing well and being a really hard worker also pays off. People want to keep you around and they want to pay you more. In terms of negotiations, in everything, you just have to not be so wed to it that you're not willing to walk away. Of course, when you desperately need your paycheck, as I did for most of my life, it's just much harder to take that hard-line stance.

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FT: Yeah, you want to care, but not that much.

[0:25:22.4]

AC: Right. I guess you have to believe that you will get another job somewhere else. You just have to have that faith and you have to believe, because that's the only way you have power, I think, otherwise your employer, "Look. They hold most of the cards." So you have to believe in your own skillset and that it's portable and that you will take it away.

What I've come to realize is that they really do want to keep you around. They don't like to have to hire somebody new who's a stranger, start over, have all the question marks whether that person will work. You actually do have more power than you feel like you do in the moment, but the ultimate power is being able to say you'll walk away.

[0:26:01.9]

FT: Well, like I told you before we were recording, I wish I had had your book when I was starting out in news. This book to, *Amanda Wakes Up*, while it's fiction, it is very true life. We could all benefit from it.

Thank you so much, Alisyn, for coming on So Money and talking about not just the book, but really sharing some memorable stories about your life growing up, the money influences you had, and this advice about being able to walk away is so invaluable. Thank you so much.

[0:26:29.1]

AC: My pleasure, Farnoosh. Great to talk to you.

[END]