

8.4.2021 / Who owns Amanda Knox?

[2 seconds of silence]

SEAN: Before we begin, today's episode features some descriptions of sexual violence and murder. Protect the children.

[THEME]

AMANDA: My name is Amanda Knox and I am a person. In 2007, I was living with three other young women in a house in Perugia, Italy—Meredith, a British exchange student, and two Italian roommates.

SCORING IN - A SONG TO BRING THE SUN BACK

AMANDA: On the night of November 1st, Meredith was home alone and our apartment was broken into by a local burglar named Rudy Guede, who then raped and killed her and then fled the country to Germany.

SCORING BUMP

AMANDA: In the initial days after the crime was discovered, I was suspected by the police. I was pinpointed as a character who might have special knowledge of this crime. I'm still, to this day, not entirely sure why, but I was subjected to 53 hours of interrogation over four days and I was arrested after falsely confessing to having witnessed the crime and then having amnesia and not remembering it, because that was what the police suggested to me.

MINI BUMP

AMANDA: I immediately retracted those statements, but I was arrested. My boyfriend of five days was arrested and my boss was arrested. We were imprisoned. And it wasn't until the actual evidence came back that showed that there were fingerprints and footprints left in Meredith's blood by the actual killer, Rudy Guede, that my boss was released from custody. But instead of admitting that they had made a mistake, that the police had arrested the wrong people, they instead decided to reframe the whole story as 'Amanda Knox is jealous of her roommate and so she got this random burglar and her boyfriend to rape her roommate for her and then she stabbed her in the neck with a knife. This story captivated the world and became an international sensation.

SCORING BUMP

<CLIPS>

ITALIAN NEWS ANCHOR: *Amanda Knox se die...*

ABC NEWS: Her story has captivated the world, for many reasons. Because she's a bright-eyed all-American girl it seems. Because she was convicted of a horrid crime in a foreign land.

CBS NEWS: The claim that the victim, British student Meredith Kercher died in a drug-fuel sex game was, the lawyer said, born in the police station.

AMANDA: It was not based on any evidence, but largely on character assassination.

<CLIP>ABC NEWS: With the white-hot glare of reporters and cameras from around the world trained on her, Amanda was led away in a black van, just moments after the verdict was read.

AMANDA: And I spent four years in prison and eight years on trial until I was definitively acquitted by the Italian Court of Cassation.

MINI BUMP

AMANDA: Meanwhile, the actual killer, Rudy Guede, was convicted prior to my trial ever happening. And, it's interesting, for all the international attention that this case has received, very few people have ever heard of the actual killer, Rudy Guede. His name is not the name associated with the headlines, but where the Italian court found that there was a stunning lack of evidence and, and horrible flaws in the investigation against me. It is my name that is forever associated with the death of my roommate.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And 14 years later...

AMANDA: ... And 14 years later, they're making, they're making films. <laughs>

<CLIP>

WOMAN: You're in Marseille for vacation?

MATT DAMON: Um, to visit my daughter.

WOMAN: You're the father of the girl? The American student?

MATT DAMON: Yes ma'am. Alison came here for college, and that's where she met this girl, Lina. One night she found Lina dead and called the police. All they cared about was Alison was sleeping with some Arab girl.

ALLISON: I loved her.

MATT DAMON: I know you did.

ALLISON: But everybody thinks that I killed her.

SEAN: Amanda Knox, person. I saw a trailer for a movie recently, and you were the first person I thought of. The trailer never speaks your name, but I was like, 'Oh, this trailer for this movie

called *Stillwater* with Matt Damon is like based on Amanda Knox's life, kind of?' How did you find out about this movie that seems to sort of be based around events that transpired in your life, maybe.

AMANDA: Exactly the same way as you did. So no special treatment in regards to finding out about this story. I just happened to see the trailer and people were sending me a few little, like, tweets saying, 'Hey, did you do a movie with Matt Damon?'

SEAN: Sounds cool.

AMANDA: <chuckles> Cool. Yeah. Wow, cool. Matt Damon's my dad now.

SEAN: <chuckles>

AMANDA: I thought, wow, they're telling the story of my dad. And my dad has an incredible journey that he went through to try to save me from wrongful imprisonment over in Italy. Once again, art is turning reality into art. That's just what art does. And fingers crossed, they do a good job. But at the same time, I thought, well, how are they going to be doing this story? And then I did some research and found out that they were not doing it in the most ethically responsible way.

SEAN: So no disrespect to Matt Damon, but we're going to spoil his movie a little bit here.

AMANDA: Yeah, I feel, I feel I'm allowed to spoil his movie a little bit. <laughs> Like, I'm sorry, but, like, I feel a little entitled to that at this point.

SEAN: Sure.

AMANDA: <laughs>

SEAN: So, so unlike the reality of what happened with your story, this movie has the sort of Amanda Knox character, Matt Damon's character's daughter ...

AMANDA: Mh-hmm.

SEAN: ... actually hire someone to do something bad to her roommate? Is that accurate?

AMANDA: So, yeah, the way that they present it in the film is that she, first of all, had a sexual relationship with her roommate, which was, you know, I was accused of having a sexual at least, you know, forcing a sexual relationship upon my roommate, of raping her. I did not do that. And I had no sexual relationship with her. And furthermore, in the *Stillwater* story, she asked some guy to get rid of her roommate for her, but did not intend murder. But that person took it upon himself to commit a murder. So she, in a way, is indirectly responsible for this crime that

happened to her roommate and what they have done in that process of fictionalizing my story. You know, they say we decided to take the premise of the Amanda Knox story, but then, you know, change it in a whole new direction. It's like, well, that whole new direction fictionalized away my innocence and furthermore was not a new imagining of this story. That is just the case that the prosecution brought to court.

SEAN: Hmm.

AMANDA: And it's the same sort of story that I encounter in the real world where people go, you know what, there's just something about her. I bet she's guilty kind of sort of somehow. I bet she knows something. She was somehow involved. Even if she didn't plunge the knife, even if she's technically innocent, she's probably in some way responsible somehow for this crime. And that's what is presented in the film. And that is to the detriment of my character and my reputation. And that has a consequence. It's not a new imagination. It's it's not like they decided to, like, go off in a completely new direction. They didn't. They reinforced a false narrative that I have been battling for over a decade now.

SEAN: Tom McCarthy, who co-wrote and directed this movie, told *Vanity Fair*, I believe in an interview that he was inspired by your story and that, quote, "He couldn't help but imagine how it would feel to be in Knox's shoes."

AMANDA: Mm-hmm.

SEAN: That being said, he did not try to contact you to find out what it is like to be you. Is that right?

AMANDA: Yes. So and in no way was I ever approached to better understand what it was like to be in my shoes or to be in my father's shoes. And that, I think, speaks a little bit to the problem of true crime, where there's a sense of kind of entitlement to sit back and do this like armchair not just detective work, but also empathy work where we just say, 'Oh, I've heard of this person in this context and I don't really remember them as a person. They were just kind of this character.' I feel a little bit like Dracula where everyone gets to have their own spin on it.
<chuckles>

SEAN: Hmm.

AMANDA: And I'm just like an idea of a person that everyone just, like, gets to have their own take. And what's odd about that is if I were completely off the grid, say, like if I came back from my wrongful conviction and totally disappeared and rebuked any opportunity to speak to my experience, I would better understand that they're the creatives not thinking, oh, maybe Amanda Knox is going to have something to say about the fact that we're like taking her story as like the kernel and that in the heart of our story. But I've actually been very, very vocal since I came back about, like I said, how my own narrative was stolen from me, how this story has been

misrepresented in the media, how the very fact that this is like when people think of the Amanda Knox saga and there's been a lot of recycling of this mistaken misappropriation of the story in even reviews of still water as people and people refer to the Amanda Knox saga. They're referring to the murder of my roommate, Meredith Kercher, by this other person, Rudy Guede. And yet my name is the name that is associated with that story. And my own story is one that sort of is like pushed off to the side as not being as important as that story. Like, my own story is a very different story. It's tangential, but it's me being an innocent person who is trying to fight for my innocence and get and get my life back for what I am accused of, something that I didn't do. But I had nothing to do with my roommate's murder. I did not incentivize it. I did not have prior knowledge or any special knowledge of it. I did not participate in it. And the way that Stillwater has chosen to represent my story in their story is that the Amanda Knox character has special knowledge and was at the very least indirectly involved in the killing of the Meredith Kercher character, which is a myth. It is the false narrative that was presented by the prosecution that has been debunked by evidence and yet is the ongoing myth that is an obstacle towards me reintegrating into society in a successful way and, and being taken seriously as a person.

SEAN: And this is not the first time this has happened to you.

AMANDA: No, no, no, no. And, you know, to their ... I guess it's weird to say to their credit, but I suppose I wouldn't say that I'm sitting here thinking like, 'Oh, yeah, Matt Damon and Tom McCarthy were sitting in a room coming up with a story like cackling behind, you know, they're wriggling fingers going like, "Ha, we're going to like do a story at the expense of this innocent person.'" No, of course not. I don't think that they even thought that what they were producing was ever going to have to be at my expense. And that's the real heart of the issue, is that theirs is not the first time that there has been a sort of basing of a story upon my story and also an imagining of it that reinforces that false narrative. So I'm thinking about this *Proven Innocent* show, which is a show that imagines what if Amanda Knox became a lawyer?

<CLIP>*PROVEN INNOCENT TRAILER: When someone goes to prison for a murder they didn't commit. That means the real murderer is still out there.*

AMANDA: Well, she's innocent in that story. But, of course, there's that intrigue. And of course, they did not ask me if they could promote their, their show and based their show upon my identity. There's the *Guilt* show that came out in in Britain.

<CLIP>*GUILT TRAILER: We found blood on the American girl's feet.*

AMANDA: There's these novels called *Cartwheel* and and so, like, it's not the first time this has happened and it's not the first time that I've spoke out about this.

SEAN: Hmm.

AMANDA: And if people want to claim that they are just inspired by my story, but that they are

taking it in a new direction, then why is it that my name is perpetually used to promote these new imaginings? Like if your, if your story really rests on its own merits, then let it rest on its own merits. And also, like, I think that the *Stillwater* is so, so close to my own story that anyone who watched it ... if Tom McCarthy didn't own up to the fact that it was based on my story, people would call him out on it. So he's in this interesting position where he kind of wants his cake and he wants to eat it too.

SCORING IN - MONO PLANET 8

AMANDA: Where it's not Amanda Knox's story, but it is Amanda Knox's story. It's Amanda Knox's story when I'm selling it and when it's recognizably Amanda Knox's story and takes all those elements that we think are super fascinating and, like, the sex and the and the mystery and the twist. But it's not Amanda Knox's story when it has to do with what Amanda Knox feels about it.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: More with Amanda in a minute.

[MIDROLL]

<CLIP-From "Amanda Knox: Murder on Trial in Italy">

MAN: Amanda Knox will be tried for murder. We suspect that it started as some sort of sex game.

<scream>

AMANDA: That's not true!

MAN: Who are you trying to protect?

MAN2: I believe Amanda orchestrated the attack.

SEAN: Amanda -- your story has been turned into entertainment over and over and over again. I'm guessing you've probably asked yourself and or a lawyer whether or not that's legal?

AMANDA: I have asked myself that, particularly when the Lifetime biopic came out which came out while I was still on trial and depicted scenes of me killing Meredith that they ultimately took out because I sued the crap out of them. I have seen it and I've wondered how is it possible? And the reason is because public figure laws do not protect people like myself from having a stake in their own story.

SEAN: Hmm.

AMANDA: At this point, it's less of a legal issue and it's more of an ethical human conversation that we need to have because it has been overlooked. We should be asking those questions. And what is the impact of our art? The measure of art should be whether or not it's a good story and it makes us feel things and whether or not it resonates as truthful to the human experience.

You know, we're having a cultural moment where we're acknowledging cultural appropriation, where we're acknowledging how broad swaths of people have been represented by others in art, right? And whether or not that has been done in a morally humanizing, ethical, responsible way that's based in reality. And ultimately, like my position on that kind of thing is anyone should be allowed to tell a story. It just needs to be real and human and not at the expense of those people that you are representing. And what we haven't had yet is a conversation about individuals and whether or not individual identities like my own are being appropriated or misappropriated. And at whose expense are they? Is that it? Is that identity that you are recasting, being humanized and ethically reimagined? Or are you just once again resting upon stereotype or mythology that is ultimately false and irresponsible?

SEAN: And you wrote about this. First on Twitter. Subsequently for *The Atlantic*. Have you had a chance to speak to, say, I dunno, Matt Damon or Tom McCarthy -- the co-writer and director of *Stillwater* about this?

AMANDA: Uh, no. But I have extended the invitation for a conversation because ultimately that was my goal. My goal was not to, like, celebrity bashing or like, if anything, I wanted to point out something that I felt was overlooked and extend the invitation to have a conversation about something that a lot of people have just taken for granted.

SEAN: Has that approach ever worked for you before?

AMANDA: Umm, <chuckles> I will say that when Malcolm Gladwell wrote about me in his latest book, he reached out to me to ask permission to use parts of my audio book in his book. And I said, well, can I read your chapter first? And he said, Sure, sure. So he sent it to me. I read it.

<CLIP> MALCOLM GLADWELL: *It's this really interesting case study in how we jump to conclusions about people.*

AMANDA: I had some critiques of it and I sent him those critiques. He, you know, didn't change the narrative that he wrote. He had already written it. And I told him, you know, it would have been awesome if you had interviewed me before, you know, writing your book or your chapter about me. But I extended the invitation to him to come on my podcast *Labyrinths* to talk, and he did.

<CLIP>

AMANDA KNOX (on *Labyrinths* podcast): *When you reached out to me to ask permission to use parts of my audiobook, my first thought was, "I've been Glad-welled!"*

<Both laugh>

MALCOLM GLADWELL: *"What does that mean?"*

<Amanda laughs>

SEAN: Did he apologize? Was that the point of it?

AMANDA: That wasn't even really the point. The point was just to reach out to him and make a human connection. In this case, I would love to have the conversation very directly with especially with Tom McCarthy, because he was the one who was inspired. And I'm not in the business of vilifying anyone, not after everything I've been through.

SEAN: <chortles>

AMANDA: If anything, I genuinely want to talk to him about if, first of all, what was his intention in telling this story? What was his intention in how he decided to fictionalize it? But also, now that I've pointed out something that I think he overlooked, what are his ... what are his thoughts? And what is, what is it in the industry that, that makes us feel entitled to tell individual people's stories whether or not they are involved or not? <sighs> You know, it's one thing to take your aunt's alcoholism and write a character who is alcoholic in your novel. And it's another thing to be like, hey, headline *Stillwater* inspired by Amanda Knox, you should go see it! <laughs> There's a big gap between how much, how much appropriation and profit is ethical.

SEAN: What is it about the quote unquote Amanda Knox story?

AMANDA: Mm.

SEAN: The ... the untruthful version of what happened that is so appealing to ...

AMANDA: <sighs>

SEAN: ... to Lifetime, to Malcolm Gladwell, to Matt Damon. Why do people want to keep telling a fictional version of something that didn't happen to you and didn't happen to Meredith?

AMANDA: Yeah, I mean, I think part of it is the girl on girl crime aspect.

SEAN: Hm.

AMANDA: It's something which almost never happens. It's salacious. It was tinged with ideas of a cult and drugs and sex and all of that. But I think ultimately it comes down to this idea, which is so rare and so horrifying of women attacking and, and assaulting other women. We both fetishize that because that idea of a female monster is so rare and yet so compelling. It's both sexy and disturbing at the same time, and it is the thing that I find I'm constantly battling -- is this perception of me as being a femme fatale, a person who craves male attention so much that I'm willing to, like, murder another woman for it. I think another part of that story is the idea of just being that innocent girl next door who is caught up in some drug fueled bluh bluh blah -- and like it's and that's also not true. <laughs> So it's everyone has their own sort of sexy vision of it. And really, it's, <sighs> I mean, I'm thinking of how the the one of the police officers initially just described me as someone who reeked of sex and I don't know why he thought that. There's a

lot of projection that was happening to me. And I think a lot of it just had to do with a misunderstanding of female sexuality.

SEAN: Hmm.

AMANDA: What do you think, though? What do you think?

SEAN: I mean, you're a lot closer to it than I am.

AMANDA: I am. But maybe that means that I can't see it very well because I'm like in the weeds. From above, like, from how do you see what is this obsession about? Tell me.

SEAN: Well, what I was grateful for, at least when I read your Twitter thread about this experience you had with *Stillwater* specifically was: I saw that trailer, I thought, 'Weird. They're making a movie kind of about Amanda Knox way after everything happened to Amanda Knox.'

AMANDA: Mm-hmm.

SEAN: But I didn't ask myself in that moment: Did Amanda Knox approve of this?

AMANDA: Mmm.

SEAN: And reading your Twitter thread connected with me because I felt like, 'Wow, that's the first question I'm going to ask the next time I see something like this.'

AMANDA: Well, I'm glad. I'm glad. Yeah.

SEAN: And I'm kind of, I'm kind of embarrassed that I didn't ask that question in the moment, you know what I mean?

AMANDA: Yeah. So I've seen two different responses or at least two assumptions prior that sort of motivated me to write this Twitter thread, which is one: people see a film like *Stillwater* coming out and they automatically think, 'Of course, Amanda was consulted. How else could this possibly go? Like, of course she did. And I bet she got a million dollars for it. Good on her!' Or the other is 'Well, her story doesn't belong to her. Of course, anyone can have their own take on it because she's a public figure.' And both of those things I felt were problematic on the one hand, one is not true and on the other hand, one is deeply unethical, I believe. So I wanted to point out that we have a blind spot, especially in Hollywood, where there's so much money and so much power that's being thrown around by people who get, who get to tell stories, right? Like not everyone gets to tell a story. And in ... by being the conduit for a certain for those stories, you have a certain amount of responsibility, I think, that people haven't really thought about. And it's not because they're bad people who just are refusing to think about it, but maybe it's because no one's really pointed it out to them before. Maybe I'm like benefit of the doubt. Like, I

thought maybe I can have a conversation with them and let them know that if they hadn't considered before that their portrayal of me might have consequences. Let me just let them know that these are the consequences that I'm facing and see what they say.

SEAN: Meredith Kercher was murdered in, I think, 2007 and shortly thereafter your life was turned upside down by what became this global headline grabbing scandal and one positive development between then and now, I feel like is that you didn't have a voice in that international scandal. It was perpetuated by a media that was drawn to a seemingly salacious story, but now you do. If Matt Damon or Tom McCarthy or Malcolm Gladwell or Lifetime had come to you and said, Amanda, we want to tell your story. What would that story be?

AMANDA: Hmm, that's a really great question, because there are lots of different entry points. One of the things that I felt like has not happened since the beginning of all of this is there hasn't really been a story where I'm actually the peripheral figure in all of these events. Of, of all the people who were involved in the, the events and the actions that took place. I was one of the most peripheral people with the least amount of agency. So whatever I did ultimately didn't matter. Things were just happening to me. And a story that really hasn't been told yet is one that centers on the people who had the most agency. So the person who did murder Meredith Kercher and the Italian authorities who made decisions about who to arrest and when and how and what story to tell to the media, like these are all people who are making choices that have lasting consequences for innocent people. Meredith and myself and my codefendant included, like I'm totally peripheral to the murder. And I really had very, very little say in what happened to me. I'm kind of a boring character when it all comes down to it.

SEAN: So what you're saying is if all of these people came to you to tell your story, you'd say, like, there's probably a better story to tell.

AMANDA: Or if you're going to tell my story, it's the story of someone who is processing the experience of going through something. It is not you know, it's not me making things happen, right? Like, my, a lot of my story is just me sitting in a prison cell reading a book hoping that <laughs> that stuff is going to get worked out. Or, you know, one of the stories that I, I would love to tell, because it's an interesting one that a lot of exonerated face is the "Now what?" after you get out of prison after spending time in prison for something you didn't do. How do you reintegrate into society again after you're processing the sort of collapse in not just in, you know, your own life, but also your faith in society, your faith that like society has your back and that what you're going to do is going to matter and that you can plant roots. How do you carry on to do even just, like, the, the, the really simple things of, like, meeting people and going on a date and getting a job? These are all challenges that exonerees have a really interesting, sort of surreal twist as they enter into the world. And that's been a deep challenge for me of trying to reestablish my identity after it was stolen and after I couldn't ever, ever get it back, because it's not like I came back to a world where I got to be just Amanda Knox again.

SCORING IN - SUNLIT RHOADES

AMANDA: That world doesn't exist. And I'm also deeply changed from the experience of infamy and accusation and blame. How do I process that experience going forward when I finally do have agency again? That is a story.

SEAN: Amanda Knox. She's the author of "Waiting to Be Heard." It's a memoir. As she mentioned, she's also the co-host of a podcast called *Labyrinths*. It's all about getting lost, and then getting found.

We reached out to the people behind the movie *Stillwater* for this episode but they didn't reach back. I'm Sean Rameswaram. This is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]