

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE 1: THE BLACK WEST

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Hey, it's Ben here. Just wanted to let you know before we begin that this episode contains depictions of sexual violence.

PAM GRIER: (sings) I'm a long time woman. And I feel no pain. I'm a long time woman. And I lost my game.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam Grier does not sound like she's 73 years old. She's sitting across from me in a hotel in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I mean, you sound like somebody who sings every day.

PAM GRIER: I do.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam first sang that song in the early 1970s. Just months before she became famous as an action hero in the movies *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*.

By the end of the decade, while little boys were playing Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, young black girls were playing Pam Grier, beating up pretend bad guys.

Pam mattered to the culture in a way not many movie stars can claim. For 75 years, black audiences rarely saw themselves on screen. Pam was the face of an era that changed that.

But then... she all but disappeared. Two decades later, she showed up in one of my favorite movies of all time, Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*.

JACKIE BROWN CLIP: How you doing Miss Jackie? If I tell on you, I walk. If I don't, I go to jail.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I wanted to understand what happened to her.

PAM GRIER: Preparation for this. It bothered me.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: We were about to spend three days together talking about her life.

PAM GRIER: I have to get it out, so I don't have that moment here.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: So let me ask you this. It sounds like you talk about preparation and preparation for this. Are you afraid in this conversation of getting emotional?

PAM GRIER: No, not afraid. You're here for, my sincerity. You know, you're here for my composure. And if I let it go, we're not going to get through this. And I want to.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam Grier is ready to talk. About her relationships with famous men, about being a black woman in Hollywood and a black woman in America.

So get ready... because here comes Pam.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz. You're listening to season four of The Plot Thickens, a podcast from Turner Classic Movies. Each season, we bring you an in-depth story about the movies and the people who make them.

This season - Pam Grier. And how she rose to become the queen of Blaxploitation films and Hollywood's first female action hero.

FOXY BROWN TRAILER: Have no fear, Pam Grier is here.

RACQUEL GATES: She was just this total badass on film.

JACQUELINE STEWART: that moment in Foxy Brown where she kind of like touches the back of her afro and pulls a pistol right out from her hair.

FOXY BROWN CLIP: Death is too easy for you, bitch!

BOB MINOR: Guys and gals were going crazy over her. And she tore the movie industry up.

DONALD BOGLE: She used her body as a weapon.

ODIE HENDERSON: She did her own stunts. She didn't mind nudity. She was a powerful force on the screen, even when she wasn't saying anything.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam Grier did not plan on becoming a star. She didn't grow up with money or connections. And she'd never acted before. But in the early 1970s, when Pam was just 24 years old, she became a box office sensation in a genre known as Blaxploitation films.

SUPER FLY TRAILER: He's super hood, super high, Super Fly.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: These were action movies that studios made on the cheap. The casts were nearly entirely Black, which was unheard of. It had only happened a couple of times in the history of the movies. And because these films used violence and sex, music and fashion, and because black characters were always driving the action... audiences loved them.

JACQUELINE STEWART: Some people were just so thrilled, especially young black audiences, young black male audiences.

SHAFT TRAILER: Shaft! Hotter than Bond, cooler than Bullitt.

RACQUEL GATES: It proved to Hollywood that Black audiences go to the movies and the black films make money.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But from the moment they arrived in theaters in 1971, Blaxploitation movies were controversial. Critics felt they leaned into, even-glamourized negative stereotypes.

HASIRA WATSON: Black exploitation dealt with certain caricatures of Black people, the way that white people saw Black people

DONALD BOGLE: There is vulgarity in the film, which a lot of people didn't particularly like.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam became famous in the 70s when Hollywood went wild.

PAM GRIER: I couldn't walk on the street. It'd be 5000 people

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She fell in love with some of the most extraordinary men of the decade. The biggest basketball star in the world... and the most famous comedian in the country.

PAM GRIER: I didn't have a level of trust, it was broken. I was so hopeful that he would say yes, I'll take care of you. And he chose not to.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But things changed as the 70s came to an end. Pam's career was in shambles. She either left Hollywood, or Hollywood left her. I wanted to know which of these was true. And I wanted to know why.

So I talked to her friends and colleagues. And most importantly, I talked to Pam.

PAM GRIER: This is real. This is the truth. And this is all I have left.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: We started at the beginning, in an area of the country where Pam returned to time and again. This is Episode One: The Black West.

Pam Grier's dad grew up in North Carolina.

PAM GRIER: His name was Clarence Ransom Grier.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Her mom is Gwendolyn Davis. She grew up on a farm in Cheyenne, Wyoming. She went by Gwen. In 1949, They were living in Denver, Colorado. Gwen was pregnant.

PAM GRIER: My mom was about to give birth, and for some reason at that time, they felt it convenient to go meet my dad's parents in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Clarence and Gwen drove from Denver to North Carolina in two days. They used the Green Book. It's official title at the time was the "Negro Motorist Green Book."

PAM GRIER: And at the time, the book was so early it said Negroes. Negroes aren't advised to go there. Negroes don't stay. Negroes get gas here and not there. Don't make mistakes. Be careful. Don't get gas after dark, and here are the hotels for African-Americans.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: A few days after they arrived safely in North Carolina, in the early morning of May 26th, a Thursday, Gwen went into labor.

Pam was born into a military family. And like most military families, they moved around a lot. One of Pam's earliest memories takes place in Ohio when she was five.

It was a hot day. Pam and her mother were taking the bus home after getting groceries.

PAM GRIER: we went from tree to tree to get shade and rest. Then the bus would come and we would go out, and they wouldn't stop. They'd keep going. So we go back to a tree and keep walking.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The buses kept passing them, even though there was plenty of room. Finally, an empty bus stopped for them.

PAM GRIER: And he stopped and he opened the door. He opened the door for us. I'll never forget that. I remember when, the sound of the door opening and my mom said, you know, she was hesitant. If she's seen in the bus, will he get in trouble? Will they get in trouble? Will we get in trouble? And she walked with such hesitancy towards this man, and he was looking at her and then as soon as you got close, he just looked ahead as if, OK, the door was open, you got on the bus. I didn't tell you, you know. He looked ahead. My mom said, Come on. OK. I remember putting the bags up on the stairs and she'd climb up and he didn't get up to help her. Like he would help other people and we went to the back. You just don't want any problems.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They rode home that day, in the back of an empty bus.

A year later, Pam's dad was transferred to Lowry Air Force Base in Denver. That's where Gwen's family lived. Denver would become Pam's truest home.

TERRY NELSON: I am Charleszine "Terry" Nelson. Terry is my nickname.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Terry Nelson works at the Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library in Denver. She says people are still surprised to hear about Black families living in Colorado.

TERRY NELSON: We're a small but powerful. About nine percent of the population here in Colorado.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam's grandparents lived in East Denver, in a one-story home on Vine Street. In a neighborhood where most Black Denverites lived.

TERRY NELSON: The laws actually were put together saying that African Americans could only inhabit, buy property and live in this part of the city.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: These were tight-knit communities in the 1950s. They had Black-owned restaurants, barbershops. Everyone looked out for one another.

TERRY NELSON: If you were naughty going down the street and somebody's Mommy saw you and they say you shouldn't be doing that, I'm going to tell your mother by the time you get home, you're in trouble, big trouble.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam spent a lot of time at her grandparent's house. She called her grandmother Marky, short for Marguerite. Her grandfather, Raymundo Parrilla, was Daddy Ray. They had the most manicured home on their block. And the front yard was Daddy's Ray's pride and joy.

PAM GRIER: The whole yard was Daddy Ray's garden. We grew strawberries on this side and then peas, greens, tomatoes, peppers, carrots, everything.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Daddy Ray grew up on a 211-acre farm in Wyoming. It was in his family for generations. He brought Pam and her cousins there on the weekends. He taught Pam how to hunt and fly fish. Daddy Ray wanted Pam to believe she could do anything.

PAM GRIER: It was always the girls had to be self-sufficient and be able to take care of themselves, you know, change the tire, sparkplugs, oil in a car, truck, get firewood, save the farm, bring the boat in, he wanted us to that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But Daddy Ray couldn't prepare Pam for everything, and certainly not for what happened in the summer of 1955.

It was shortly after Pam turned six. And it would change her in ways she couldn't possibly understand at the time.

PAM GRIER: We were at my aunt's in the projects.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam's talking about her mom's sister, Mennon. Pam's family lived with her sometimes while Clarence was working on base. Aunt Mennon had four children of her own. She lived in public housing in the Five Points neighborhood.

PAM GRIER: And she was working. My mom was working. My dad was away on another air base. And there's a lot of kids in the room and the older kids watch the younger kids. So there really wasn't any supervision.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Three boys were playing in the house upstairs. They were somewhere between ten and twelve years old. Pam was alone downstairs, drawing in her coloring book. One of the boys came to the top of the stairs and yelled down to Pam.

PAM GRIER: They said, Come up, Pammy, come upstairs we're having a sock fight. We had sock fights all the time playing games and stuff. I was like, Oh yeah, I'm running up the stairs.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Pam entered the room, the boys told her to lie down on the bed. They wanted to show her something.

PAM GRIER: I was just lying there because I was told what to do. I was an obedient child, you know? And they were at least. I don't know, five or six years older than me.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Two of the boys sexually assaulted Pam, while the other held down her arms.

PAM GRIER: It was painful, and I didn't know where that pain was coming from.-I remember their striped t shirts that was on my face, you know, and I remember those I hated those kind of shirts that little boys wore all the time

BEN MANKIEWICZ: As this was happening a telephone repairman entered the house. Aunt Mennon had scheduled an appointment and forgot to cancel it. The door was unlocked. He must have heard crying or some noise that alarmed him because he came running up the stairs.

PAM GRIER: And the telephone repairman came in the room and he was enraged at what they were doing to me, and I thought I was doing something wrong and he was nuts. And they were, the boys ran out and I was crying.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The repairman told Pam to go into the bathroom. She could hear him yell at the boys and kick them out of the house. And then she heard him leave.

When Pam saw the boys later that day, they threatened her, said if she told anyone, they'd beat her up.

PAM GRIER: But they didn't beat me up. They told me not to tell. They said they promised they would, and I believe them, but I said, Okay, just all I know is I felt I had done something wrong when the man came in. Get out of here. What are your kids doing? What do you think? Think I caused it, or I was a part of it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam didn't tell her family for years. But they all knew something was wrong.

PAM GRIER: I was not my precocious, bright, you know, all over the place, into everything, inquisitive child. I just completely changed

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This wasn't the only time Pam was sexually assaulted. It happened two more times in her twenties. She didn't talk about it for more than two decades, and then she decided to share her story as a way to heal.

After that day at her aunt's house, Pam withdrew. She developed a stutter, one she would have off and on for years to come.

Daddy Ray worried about Pam.

PAM GRIER: My grandfather kind of took me under his wing to try to help me get through life.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: He took her up to the family farm in Wyoming more often. Pam's Uncle Daniel lived on the farm, too. He helped take care of the property and the animals, including a very tall horse who Pam called Big Horse. Pam remembers one of those visits especially well.

PAM GRIER: And it's the day that he and my uncle went to a juke joint. It would be like a bar and it might have a pool table, but buckets of beer and Coca-Cola-- Royal RC Cola, not Coca-Cola, but RC, bottles are different. Chunks of ice for drinking, and they'd play dominoes or bones.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The juke joint was right next to the farm. Daddy Ray and Uncle Daniel told Pam to wait in the car while they ran inside.

PAM GRIER: And they opened the door to let me breathe, get air in the car. But Pammy, don't you leave. you just stay there. We'll be right back. And when they left and it was getting late and I was like, ahh. And then the horse came over to the fence and I remember getting out and walking over to the horse.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was Big Horse, roaming through the pasture. Pam had always been afraid of him. But curious too. When she'd ask if she could ride Big Horse, the answer was always no.

PAM GRIER: I heard Daddy Ray's voice: don't get on that horse. Don't climb the fence.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam climbed the fence and touched the soft spot on Big Horse's muzzle.

PAM GRIER: I got to the top rail and the horse is like, OK, you know, and and I climbed, pulled his mane and pulled myself on top and just slid on is like sliding across a car he is so huge And as soon as I pulled up and tried to get my other leg around it because I'd seen people ride, he started moving away from the fence. I was on his back, my little skinny legs spread out and my braids are flopping and my barrettes are falling out as he started walking away and giving me a tour from his elevation. And there was this connection of I'm going to take you where I go. I want to show you around. I choose you, today. I choose you. We go down to this livestock pond, cottonwood trees around, and he goes to drink and he falls asleep and I'm like, I'm trying to get back. I need to get back. And I'm so I kind of like, lay down, you know, on top of him and look around and see everything. The barrenness of the land. I'm asleep. Next thing I know. Pammy! My grandfather, my uncle, had been looking for me. He grabbed me by the waist. Where you've been!? We've been looking for you! They were so upset, I have lost their child. They aint coming home, the women gonna kill them!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Daddy Ray and Uncle Daniel led Pam and Big Horse back to the farm. And they noticed something.

PAM GRIER: And they realized that my speech had changed. That I wasn't stuttering or stammering, I was different. And from that day on, I realize how important that my grandfather was so proud of what I did. He became like, another dad to me. I started talking more, and he started bringing me up every weekend because the city kids didn't want to come, but I wanted to go see Big Horse. That horse saved my life.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Coming up on The Plot Thickens, Pam finds her voice

PAM GRIER: And all the guys thought they were The Falcons. (sings) I only have eyes for you.

-----AD BREAK-----

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One day when Pam was 13, she came home from school to her parents yelling in their bedroom. Gwen, her mom, had been working as a nurse and Clarence retired from the Air Force. He couldn't find work and that put a strain on their relationship.

PAM GRIER: Growing up. We'd see them get dressed to go out with friends and they'd be dancing dressed beautifully. Music is going on finger pop and gumshoe and drinking. You know, jack and cutty and stuff. And, you know, dancing. They could boogie woogie. I mean, serious dance. You know, Fred Astaire, with a beat, you know. And then they when they retired, I think what set in was the reality of homemaking, and he'll have to learn skills because mom's work and she's at the ER, she's a nurse. He didn't have enough to do.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Pam walked by the bedroom where they were fighting, she caught a glimpse of her dad packing a suitcase.

PAM GRIER: He left that day and never saw him again. He moved out, got an apartment, a car and that was it. We were just we're estranged, but I don't know. He just didn't want to be around us. We didn't make plans to do anything. Or maybe we'd see him at a funeral.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam's dad was in the same town, just a couple miles away, and she never saw him. That feeling of rejection, it would haunt Pam. She learned to push it aside, to distract herself. And for Pam, music became the ultimate distraction.

PAM GRIER: Denver could sing. There's one thing, they could do nothing else, they gonna sing.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam sang in choirs. She took piano lessons. Kids from the neighborhood even sang on street corners. Pam showed us on a tour of Denver.

PAM GRIER: And here they had streetlights. This was a Doo-wop corner, and these corners, we would they would have Doo-wop contests. The best singers in the world.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: A Doo-wop corner was a spot where four singers would stand under the streetlight and harmonize. These quartets would have battles with the quartets across the street. Philip Bailey was in one of them.

PHILIP BAILEY: I'm Phillip Bailey from Denver, Colorado. I am the lead singer of the group Earth, Wind & Fire for 50 years now. And went to the same high school as Pam Grier.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: So just to be clear, this is that Philip Bailey - the man responsible for hits like this [Earth, Wind & Fire snippet] grew up singing on Pam's neighborhood street corner. His Doo-wop group was called the Soul Brothers.

PHILIP BAILEY: There's a song that goes (sings) In the shadows of the night, Doo doo doo, doo doo doo. I see two loves kissing in the moonlight. Shadows. And they would harmonize right there. Two loves, da dad da da. You know, we used to sing all that stuff, man, it was a lot of fun.

PAM GRIER: And in the heat of summer, everyone would sit on their their benches or porches and listen to the doo wop groups and all the guys thought they were the Falcons (sings) I only have eyes for you. And they'd be singing in and have these little contests and there'd be four and then there'd be a Puerto Rican group and then there'd be a mixed group and then there'd be the light-skinned group. You thought it was a Spike Lee movie, but you hear by singing on the street corners, everybody be sitting outside like mmmm hmmm, we got money on ya, whatcha gonna sing tonight?

PHILIP BAILEY: You know, I was a huge fan of The Impressions. Curtis Mayfield and the impressions. And so. Yes, so I had a lot of success singing that kind of stuff with Curtis Mayfield in the falsetto and, of course, my falsetto.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam didn't sing in the Doo-wop battles, but she and Philip Bailey both sang in a youth gospel choir called the Echoes of Youth. Henry and Joanne Ryan started the choir. They lived down the street from Pam.

PHILIP BAILEY: It was very disciplined. These young folks, they were, you know, they would be on their P's and Q's to actually participate in the in the Echoes of Youth.

PAM GRIER: We made sure wherever we sang, the kids would come in our robes, pressed. Our sashes, pressed, hair curled. Everything done.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam sang second soprano. The choir performed at various churches and made money from donations. Mr. Ryan bought the choir burgundy choral robes with yellow sashes.

PAM GRIER: When we walked in with our robes on saying (sings) We're crossing over, one by one, we're fast approaching life setting sun. I'm not going to have a voice, though. (sings again) Don't let it happen till our work is done. We're crossing over, one by one. And having 50 children sing a capella in tune. No, no pitch pipe. Walk in like, you know. Everybody's getting up. Go to a white church, they jammin. Because their music is like, Ooooh ooh ooh. Ours is haaay, (laughs) we jammin for our God tonight.

SOUNDS OF HOBBS PLAYING

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: I've played for the church all of my life.. So almost 70 years.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Rev. Hayward Hobbs playing the keyboard. He is the minister of music at the St. Stephen Missionary Baptist Church in Denver.

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: I'm Reverend Hobbs, I'm Hayward. Everybody calls me Uncle Butch.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Back in 1965, Reverend Hobbs was the musical director for the Echoes of Youth. He was just a few years older than Pam when they were in the choir together.

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: I happen to have met Pam even before high school. Her mother was a very beautiful woman, and she and my aunt and my mother were very good friends. And so I knew her as a youngster and she was very bright young lady.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Echoes of Youth had made a name for themselves outside of Denver. So much so, the Reverend James Cleveland invited the choir to come to Los Angeles to perform.

VINTAGE TV PROGRAM: James Cleveland!

PAM GRIER: Just we were so excited. James, Cleveland, James Cleveland, we have arrived. We DIDN'T think we're going to go anywhere afterwards, but we have arrived.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Reverend Cleveland was known as the King of Gospel. Getting invited to perform in his gospel celebration was a big deal.

The choir didn't have the money to rent a bus or buy plane tickets. But they were determined to get to Los Angeles one way or another.

When *The Plot Thickens* returns, Pam and the Echoes of Youth Choir arrive in Los Angeles as the city becomes a war zone.

-----AD BREAK-----

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Henry and Joanne Ryan, the couple who founded the Echoes of Youth, had to figure out how to get the choir to Los Angeles.

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: So they kind of moved around and bought an old army bus. Ugly, dark green bus (laughs).

PAM GRIER: It was, oh, it's like we're going to have to push today, aren't we? Where's that Lord? He over round the corner having a beer. Well, get him out here to push this big ass bus.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Finally, on August 8th, 35 teenagers got on that old army bus and headed to James Cleveland's gospel celebration. The Ryans were the chaperones. Philip Bailey - one of the choir's most talented singers, who'd go on to be part of Earth Wind & Fire, couldn't go. His mother was a domestic worker.

PHILIP BAILEY: I don't think my mother could afford it. I definitely wanted to go, but my mom was a single mom. And, you know, we didn't have it like that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Rev. Hobbs remembers they left early in the morning and traveled overnight.

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: I do believe I remember we had some bus trouble on the way, but we got that taken care of.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It took a day and half to get to Los Angeles. Their first performance in Compton went well. On the second day, they headed to Watts, a working-class Black neighborhood in south Los Angeles. They were scheduled to perform that evening. August 11th, 1965. What they couldn't know was that at 7:00 that night, on the corner of Avalon Blvd. and 116th street in Watts, years of frustration were coming to a head.

NEWS REPORT: Two negroes were stopped by California Highway Patrolmen and charged with drunk driving. There was a scuffle and crowd gathered.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Brothers Ronald and Marquette Frye were pulled over by two white police officers for reckless driving. One of them, Marquette Frye, who was 21, failed a sobriety test. As the police questioned the two men, a crowd started to gather around them.

NEWS REPORT: The mother of the two, they're brothers, joined in. She - and another woman the crowd thought was pregnant - were pushed and shoved.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: A fight broke out — and a white police officer struck Marquette Frye in the face with his baton. Frye was arrested along with his mother and brother. The crowd grew angrier, and more officers came in for back-up. By 7:45, there were more than 1000 Watts residents gathered around the scene.

That green army bus carrying Pam and the Echoes of Youth choir drove right into the middle of it.

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: when we got to that area we saw people on the street fighting. Of course, coming from here, we'd never seen anything like that. So we didn't actually know what was going on until we were in the midst of it.

PAM GRIER: We're on the bus and gunshots were flying across the top of the bus through the windows, I think some hit the side of the bus. And we had to take shelter.

NEWS REPORT: Flames burning quickly through a number of buildings. A number of buildings are on fire at one time. Police had to force a path through rioters to get hoses onto the scenes.

PAM GRIER: We had never seen a war in our city before we knew it was serious because it was smoke, cars being turned over, streets blocked.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Watts Rebellion spread quickly. The city of Los Angeles was in open revolt.

NEWS REPORT: Authorities are increasingly concerned about the number of fires and handguns known to be in the hands of the rioters.

WATTS RESIDENT: We decided to burn this store because we felt this man was doing nothing but gaming on us anyway.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: What the young choir members saw that night had been brewing for decades. In 25 years, the population in South LA ballooned from 65,000 to more than 300,000. Those living in the mostly Black neighborhood of Watts had outdated housing, few grocery stores, and underfunded schools. Police brutality was a part of life.

LEO BRANTON: I've tried them all and I can say to you that there is no question that under the present machinery a complaint of police brutality by any negro citizen goes almost completely unheeded.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: By the weekend, the city imposed a curfew and set up a blockade. The Echoes of Youth choir was stuck in LA. A church member from a congregation where they were scheduled to perform took them in. All the kids camped out together in two small apartments.

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: My mother was just frantic when she heard about it and I was like, I'm OK, everybody's OK and you know.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Ryans made a plan to get everyone out. This is Philip Bailey.

PHILIP BAILEY: They asked for a police escort to get them back to the freeway. And they were denied. They just said, you have to do it at your own risk

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: On the way back, it was more subtle than on the way there. On the way there, we were laughing and joking and carrying on. But by the time we got on the way back home, we were just grateful that we made it through and nobody got hurt because there were several people that got killed in that riot.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Watts Rebellion lasted six days. 34 people died. More than 1,000 were injured. By 1968, Pam had graduated from high school and finished her first semester at Metropolitan State College in Denver. She wanted to become a doctor. To help pay for school, Pam worked at a record store and as a receptionist at a radio station close to campus.

Later that year, on April 4th, Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis Tennessee to support a strike by the city's Black sanitation workers.

NEWS REPORT: Good evening, Dr. Martin Luther King, the apostle of non-violence in the Civil Rights Movement, has been shot to death in Memphis, Tennessee.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After King's murder, uprisings broke out in cities across the country. Protests were a way of life on college campuses. But Pam was too busy trying to afford college to even think about protesting.

Pam's mom worked to support the whole family, so Pam had to pay for her own tuition.

One day, as Pam worked at the radio station, one of the DJs had an idea – one that could earn Pam an extra \$100. He suggested she compete in the station's beauty pageant.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Was that like your first time on a stage?

PAM GRIER: I was terrified, but my mom felt it was good for me because I wasn't speaking as much.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She ended up winning the whole thing, including the \$100 prize, which went straight into her college fund. Again, Rev. Hobbs.

REV. HAYWARD HOBBS: I personally was not really that surprised. She was such a beautiful girl and by seventeen she was glamorous. And I will say probably a lot of the girls didn't like her, little teenage jealousies, you know, and so. But she was a very smart, very intelligent young lady

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Not long after, Pam was a contestant in another beauty pageant. Miss Colorado Universe, held at a mall in Englewood, Colorado. Pam's family turned out to root her on, including her younger sister Gina.

GINA GRIER: And I remember going and I remember seeing her perform. You know the talent section, the dance and all that. The swimsuit. And I remember that she was just so beautiful. And she won the two side events.

PAM GRIER: And that's why I entered the beauty pageant, to make money. You're making \$500 for winning. You know, first runner up in the formal gown competition, the bathing suit competition. And I won the runner up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: You won both the gown and the bathing suit, but you were runner up.

PAM GRIER: Yeah. And it almost started a riot

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam lost the title to a white contestant named Ann Bell, who won an all-expense paid trip to Miami to compete in the Miss USA pageant. 51 women — one from each state plus DC — participated in the Miss USA pageant. Not a single one of them was a woman of color.

One of the prizes in 1968 was a movie contract. Turns out, Pam didn't need to win a beauty contest for that. David Baumgarten was a talent agent from Hollywood. He saw Pam compete in the Denver pageant. David told Pam there were a lot of opportunities for Black actors in Hollywood. It would be the perfect time for her to come to Los Angeles.

As she drove home that day, Pam went over the whole idea. It was nonsense, she thought. She wanted to be a doctor, not an actor. But she needed money for school. Movies, she thought, must pay more than working at a radio station.

Pam did what she would do so often in her life - she said yes to an opportunity. She would head to Hollywood, not to follow a dream, but to take a chance. There were only so many chances for someone like her, and Pam Grier was not about to let this one go by.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On the next episode of The Plot Thickens - Pam moves to Hollywood and ends up in an all-night jam session with some of the most famous rock stars in the world.

PAM GRIER: Next thing you know, there is a big ass bowl of cocaine that comes out of from somewhere.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And Pam falls in love with one of the greatest basketball players in history.

PAM GRIER: And I was watching everyone, and there was this tall person with sunglasses on in a dark club and a cane, and I was like, God, he's tall.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Angela Carone is our Director of Podcasts. Story Editors are Joanne Faryon and Shari Okeke. Audio Editing and Sound Design by Mike Voulgaris. Scriptwriting by Yacov Freedman, Rachel Pilgrim,

Angela Carone and me. Yacov Freedman is our Senior Producer. James Sheridan is our Researcher and Fact Checker. Mixing by Glenn Matullo and Tim Pelletier. Production support from Julie Bitton, Mario Rials, Susana Zepeda, Liz Winter, Allison Firor, Phil Richards and Reid Hall. Web support by Betsy Gooch.

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Our executive producer is Charlie Tabesh.

TCM's general manager is Pola Changnon.

Check out our website at tcm.com/theplotthickens. It has info about each episode and photos from throughout Pam's life. Again, that's tcm.com/theplotthickens.

I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz, thanks for listening. See you next time.