

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE 5: LOOKING GOOD

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Hey, it's Ben here. Just a warning: we talk about suicide in this episode. Please take care as you listen.

Pam was riding a wave. Audiences were packing theaters to see Coffy. Fans recognized her on the street. And she often found herself surrounded by some of the most famous people in the world. Like the night she ended up at an LA music club called The Troubadour.

PAM GRIER: Walking in with John Lennon and Harry Nilsson and all the bigwigs are behind me. And here's this sister, you know, red beans and rice don't miss her, with these white men walking into this club. And of course, heads turn.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They were there to see the comedy duo The Smothers Brothers. Pam and John Lennon had never met before. He started asked her questions while they waited for The Smothers Brothers to take the stage.

PAM GRIER: Well love, are there- are there black people in the West? The Wild West, yes. In the Wild Wild West. Hmmm.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: While Pam explained Black cowboys to John, the energy in the club shifted.

PAM GRIER: The whole audience was waiting for them. Overly long amount of time, people were getting becoming impatient. And John said, Pam? Yes, yes, John. I love American music and I love the gospel. And there's certain songs that just stick with me. And I heard this song called, something about rain on my windowpane. And I go, Oh, I think I know that song, it's by Ann Peebles. And I said (singing) I can't stand the rain on my window. Brings back those memories. He said, That's it. That's it. He started jumping up and down and I said "Shhh! Let me finish, okay" So as I'm beating and singing, he joins in and he performs a harmony with me. And we kept singing and singing and the audience turned around and they saw us singing and harmonizing and they were like! And they started singing along with us. They knew the chorus, and he kept egging them on. Come on. One more time! And so the Smothers Brothers came out to the stage and people were still wanting the concert from John. They had a few drinks. They were ready to see John Lennon and the sister singing with him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Smothers Brothers started their act. Or tried to. John had done coke that night. And he was drunk.

JOHN LENNON: I got drunk and shouted. It was the first night I had drunk Brandy Alexanders, which is brandy and milk folks.

PAM GRIER: And John, I was like, uh oh. He turned to me. He said Pam, let's continue. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. And so he said, come on, come on. So he started banging on the table, the song.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Smothers Brothers' manager came over and asked John to quiet down. It went poorly.

PAM GRIER: That manager of The Smothers Brothers grabbed his collar, pulled John over the table. We tried to hang on to his legs. It was. It was on! It was the biggest white boy brawl you ever seen at the Troubadour with me right there in the middle of it

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The next morning, news of what happened at the Troubadour was everywhere. John Lennon sent Pam flowers to apologize. It was one of those wild nights that could only happen in Hollywood. And during the 1970s, Pam Grier would have a lot of those nights.

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.

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

This is Episode Five: Looking Good.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In April 1974, Pam was 24 years old and on the road promoting Coffy. She was in Chicago, in the greenroom for a talk show called The Irv Kupciner show.

KUP'S SHOW: From Chicago, Kup's Show, with Irv Kupciner.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Millions of people watched Irv's show. Pam was booked alongside a promising new talent. Comedian Freddie Prinze.

PAM GRIER: He walked into the green room, and that's when I saw this young man who is very mature, but once he walked into the room, he was like a bright light.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie was only 19, but he'd already made a name for himself doing stand up at The Comedy Store on Sunset Blvd. The club had only been open two years but it helped change stand-up comedy. In the 1970s comics became cool, almost like pop stars. David Letterman did stand up at the club when he was 28. This is from a Showtime documentary on The Comedy Store.

DAVID LETTERMAN: Last week in the Enquirer, big story, how to lose weight without diet or exercise. Pretty much leaves disease.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jimmy JJ Walker performed there before going on to sitcom stardom in Good Times.

JIMMY WALKER: I met a cat outside the club and he said Jim, I only got \$3 to my name. What should I do? I said change your name!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And Freddie Prinze was a regular on the stage.

FREDDIE PRINZE: Yeah, New York was serious. I had a yellow Plymouth once. I stopped for red light. A guy jumped in. What you mean you ain't a cab, sucker? Don't be stopping at the traffic light then!

PAM GRIER: That's where all the new comedians would go to work. And after they had the shows, after it would close, everyone would work, help each other get their standup after hours.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie was raised in Washington Heights, a neighborhood in upper Manhattan. He started doing standup at 18 and eventually moved to Hollywood.

FREDDIE PRINZE: Other things that give people the wrong impression of Puerto Ricans is movies. Like, West Side Story set up back a hundred years. 'Cause if you saw the movie all it did was make people think that we stand in the streets going [whistles].
[crowd laughs]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It didn't take long for Freddie to get the big break every comic wanted. A slot on The Tonight Show.

FREDDIE PRINZE: I come from two backgrounds, Hungarian and Puerto Rican. I'm a Hungarian.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Before the Irv Kupcinet interview, Pam and Freddie chatted in the green room. He was charming. He had dimples and shaggy hair.

PAM GRIER: He was so well-dressed and he just had on a shirt and slacks. And his hair, and his skin. He was just, he was ready to go on this show.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie told Pam he'd seen Black Mama White Mama and Coffy. He liked both. When Irv began the interview, Pam watched Freddie.

PAM GRIER: And he's brilliant. And he's observing everything and everybody just making you laugh at yourself. And I said, he's got it and he's going to be in demand. And Irv was trying to be this matchmaker, you know, for us. He said, he's a cute kid, I said that's the wrong thing to say. I'm not into kids, OK?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was five years older than Freddie. But that didn't intimidate him.

PAM GRIER: He had given me his number on a napkin. First time on the date, we went to Greenblatt's. It was a deli. He loved deli food.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie invited Pam back to his one-bedroom apartment in downtown LA.

PAM GRIER: And he said, I want you to meet my friend, Jay. And we go up the stairs. And Jay's on the sofa sleeping.

JAY LENO: You came in and I was sleeping on his couch at the time.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Jay Leno. In 1974, he was 24 and had just moved to LA. He was doing standup at The Comedy Store too.

JAY LENO: This guy said that the average male has 10,000 orgasms in his lifetime. I called my doctor Thursday. I have nine left.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jay was crashing at Freddie's place.

PAM GRIER: And so Jay was under the blanket wrapped up and he says, Jay, Jay, I want you to meet Pam, Pam Grier and Jay, he sticks his toe out for me to shake. And I shook his big toe. And that was Jay.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam and Freddie talked for hours that night.

PAM GRIER: That was it. Then I didn't see him again for a while till he came back into town.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Did you kiss or anything?

PAM GRIER: No, we'd eaten onions.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Pam and Freddie found time together, they took long drives in her used corvette. Quickly, they became close. They were young and famous. And starting to make real money. It was overwhelming and they leaned on each other.

PAM GRIER: We'd call each other Mami and Papi. And he'd say, Mami! I always called him Freddito. My little Freddie.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In August 1974, Pam headed to Louisville, Kentucky to shoot another movie for American International Pictures, AIP. This one was called Sheba Baby.

SHEBA BABY TRAILER: Pam Grier, that Foxy Brown, Coffy Gal is Sheba, Baby.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was a 30-day shoot. Pam was up at 4 each morning to go over the script. She worked 16-hour days. Her character was a private detective named Sheba Shayne.

SHEBA BABY TRAILER: Before I turn you in, you better tell me about your operation. And you better tell me fast before you lose your head!

ODIE HENDERSON: Sheba Baby has the vengeance element of her defending her father and the people that are out to kind of ruin his business.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's film critic Odie Henderson. He saw Sheba Baby when it first came out. It was his introduction to Pam Grier.

ODIE HENDERSON: I was in love with her. I come from a family of very, very outspoken women. I have a lot of aunts. So in a lot of ways, it reminded me that there were powerful women, not just in my life, but I got to see them on the screen. My female cousins were empowered by her. They would play Pam Grier when we play games.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After shooting Sheba Baby, Pam bought a house in LA's Brentwood neighborhood. It's an upscale part of town. The house cost \$180,000. Pam wanted Hollywood to take her more seriously. She even tried to change her name to Pamela Grier. She told a reporter: "Pam was fine for all those action movies, but I can't spend my whole life wrestling."

"Pamela" didn't catch on. "Pam" Grier was too famous now. Too popular. And too locked into a certain kind of role.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When The Plot Thickens returns, Pam has to face up to Freddie's demons.

PAM GRIER: He never did it in front of me. He never did it in front of me.

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

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie was working on a new sitcom called Chico and the Man. He was the lead. It debuted on NBC in September 1974.

CHICO AND THE MAN CLIP: Looking good!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: "Looking good" became Freddie's catchphrase. Chico and the Man was the first sitcom set in a Mexican-American neighborhood. The show was a hit.

Freddie was on the cover of Tiger Beat and Rolling Stone. Plus he was touring the country doing standup.

FREDDIE PRINZE: My people recognize me too. Hey, Freddie Prinze! You made it, you making money now! Stick 'em up.

GERALDO RIVERA: What about in Las Vegas and show business and all that, you going to be the next Lenny Bruce, I guess?

FREDDIE PRINZE: I don't want people to say I'm the next Lenny Bruce, the next Richard Pryor, the next Bill Cosby. I want people to say Freddie Prinze, the voice of the Puerto Ricans.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie had a hard time with sudden fame. He was doing drugs, cocaine. He repeatedly asked Pam to do coke with him. She always refused.

PAM GRIER: He never did it in front of me. He never did it in front of me. I just didn't want to know because I just knew of the culture and how many musicians and people like, you know, people big, big, big stars, you hear them busting and buying you know, just large amounts of cocaine. And it's an upper. And many people need that that upper, that energy to sustain not sleeping or rehearsing or playing for hours. Who am I to say anything or judge.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie used so much cocaine he developed an "eroded nasal septum." The cartilage and bone separating his nostrils had become worn down and thin. He saw a doctor for it, who ended up prescribing Freddie quaaludes, valium, and Ritalin for depression and anxiety.

Freddie knew he had a problem. He thought Pam could save him.

PAM GRIER: he wanted me to take him home to Colorado so he could have a normal environment. He said, I'm dying to quit. I'm dying to see where you came from because you're so grounded, you're not crazy.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But Pam didn't want to quit. She had two more pictures lined up after Sheba Baby. Freddie kept pushing. He wanted to get married. He wanted to have a baby.

PAM GRIER: He didn't want to use birth control or anything like that, and I was like, No. And he kept trying to do that. And I just said, That's not cool. But he started that, you know, trying to, You want children! I said, Yeah, but not now, not tomorrow. You know, that's a decision. That's a big decision. And I said, you haven't started your career yet. It's just barely starting and you want to start a family? And I'll have to give mine up to, you know, be with our children, take care of them.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam couldn't help Freddie with his escape plan. She wasn't ready to get married or have kids. She tried to convince him to slow down. Find different friends who weren't using drugs. But he didn't, or couldn't, listen.

In January of 1975, Pam asked Freddie to be her date to the 8th Annual NAACP Awards.

PAM GRIER: I said, You should go. People are going to love you. You should go. You're my date!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The night of the ceremony, Freddie showed up at Pam's house wearing a tuxedo. He'd given Pam a fur coat as a gift and wanted her to wear it. But Pam hated the coat. She was an animal lover.

PAM GRIER: I'm not kidding when I said I can't wear it. No, I'm not going to try. No. I crushed him. That coat was \$299, and he saved every penny. He said, you know how many shows it took him to be able to pay for it? And he paid cash. It wasn't on the layaway plan for Christmas. He was so proud. And sometimes when you don't accept a gift. You're not accepting that person as well. I can see it in his face.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: So the compromise was, I'll take it and I'll wear it over my shoulder.

PAM GRIER: And I'll wear it when we're together, but when you're not around, it's under the bed with the fur balls and the dust.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam and Freddie dated for a year. They were often apart because of work.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But somewhere along the lines, you fell in love with Freddie.

PAM GRIER: I did. And you know what? I didn't tell him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: You didn't tell him.

PAM GRIER: I liked him a lot, but I didn't tell him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie started to become unpredictable. Moody. He was borrowing money. Frustrated, Pam decided to break up with him.

PAM GRIER: There's certain things that make me feel safe that a person can show, display, exhibit. And if they don't, I feel that I'm on my own and I'm not going to let them in. I don't know how much I can love them. Take care of them. What's going to happen with children they're going to bring to this. Are they going to go to work, what drugs are they on, are they lying to me or what? That's a lot, and I had come that way by myself with such difficulty and chance and risk. I can't get let someone tear that down.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam wanted to remain friends, but Freddie took the break-up hard.

PAM GRIER: He would call me a lot and I wouldn't answer. He felt absolutely alone.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Once again Pam threw herself into work. In 1975, she was on the cover of Jet magazine. Then Ebony. Her photo was alongside Cicely Tyson, Sidney Poitier, Diana Ross and Diahann Carroll. The headline read "Have Blacks Really Made It In Hollywood?"

New York Magazine put her on the cover of their May issue. That headline read "Sex Goddess of the Seventies."

Then in the summer, Pam got a call. Another magazine, another cover offer. This magazine didn't want a sexy cover shot. They didn't even want to highlight what she was wearing. The call was from Ms. Magazine.

GLORIA STEINEM: She was clearly a great story and pioneer because she seemed to be the first action hero, female action hero.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Gloria Steinem.

GLORIA STEINEM: And, you know, that was a big change from women who were only present on the screen because they were the love interest of the guy who was the action hero.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Gloria Steinem is arguably the most recognizable feminist in the world. She co-founded Ms. Magazine in 1971. It was obvious to Gloria that Pam should be in the magazine.

GLORIA STEINEM: She may have been sexualized, but she was nobody's victim. I mean, unlike the romantic female leads of the time, who at a certain point in the story were always conquered in some way, symbolically. You know, you could see there was

usually a classic scene of a man kissing a slightly resistant woman. And then finally you see her hand creeping around his neck as a sign of acquiescence, and submission. I mean, she was the great relief from that.

PAM GRIER: Ms. Magazine was a bible to me to follow because it had articles, research of women who were doing things in the political arena in our society. You know, you guide yourself by these women who were thinking of our future, as I had as a little girl, thinking who are the women that are going to going out to let the world know we're equals? We can do anything a man can do.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was featured in the August issue. One of the first Black women on the cover of Ms. Magazine. The story was by Jamaica Kincaid, a writer who later became an award-winning Caribbean novelist.

Putting Pam on the cover in 1975 was also strategic.

GLORIA STEINEM: In a general way, Black women were about twice as likely to support in public opinion polls what was then called the Women's Liberation Movement, as were white women. I mean, that's a huge difference. Also it was a difference that the popular media generally ignored. So the media treated the leadership of the civil rights movement as Black male and the leadership of the feminist movement as white female. And this was not accurate on either hand.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This time, the magazine headline celebrated Pam's position of power. It read: "The Mocha Mogul of Hollywood."

Gloria and her team fought to make sure the issue would be treated fairly by newsstands and advertisers. She says sometimes in the South they would segregate the magazines with a Black woman on the cover. Or not even sell them at all.

GLORIA STEINEM: Well, there was external resistance because we understood that we would not be put on some newsstands or we would be grouped with magazines for Black readers only as opposed to general interest women's magazines. We were aware of that because our newsstand distributors made us aware of that. But you know, you have to go against the grain in order to change the grain.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the Ms. article, Pam discussed her new company, Brown Sun Productions. She wanted to start making her own movies. She didn't see a future for Blaxploitation films.

PAM GRIER: Well, I wasn't upset, I was grateful and enjoyed them, but they were being redundant to the audience. And I'm the one that goes home to Colorado and then to communities. And I will hear the same, comment is that they're redundant and they're becoming boring.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam had an interest in Black women's history and she wanted to tell those stories. She started sharing her ideas with the independent studios she worked with.

PAM GRIER: I pitched them and they loved them. They were saying, Okay, let's get the writers, let's get them. Well, sometimes I couldn't find the writers. So I was trying to do all of that because we didn't have a lot of, you know, Black writers then. And I needed to do that, but there just weren't any around. And I go, Oh my God, this is hard.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam did get to pitch her ideas to a few major studios, but they dismissed her.

PAM GRIER: I said, well, you know, they haven't believed a lot of stories. I was used to that. I was used to hearing that. And I would say I'd have to make it myself. You know, we're invisible.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam's agent told her he would try to get her more mainstream roles so that her ideas would be taken seriously. Maybe mainstream success would open more doors.

Pam needed a change. Because the genre that made her famous was coming to an end.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When *The Plot Thickens* returns, Blaxploitation fizzles.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: What you think Steven Spielberg's going to see *Coffy*? No. You know, you think Scorsese is saying *Sheba Baby*? No. De Niro is seeing *Sheba Baby*. But Scorsese is not.

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

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In September of 1975, Pam started working on a new movie for AIP called *Friday Foster*. She played Friday, a former model turned photojournalist.

FRIDAY FOSTER TRAILER: Fancy there's nothing you have that I want. And I don't hustle for nobody.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: *Friday Foster* was still considered a blaxploitation film, but it had a bigger budget. It was based on the first popular comic strip with a Black female lead.

ODIE HENDERSON: And *Friday Foster* seems almost like a cotton candy kind of movie.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's film critic Odie Henderson.

ODIE HENDERSON: And again, I think it goes back to the roots of she's a photographer and she's going to take these pictures in exotic locations. And it almost becomes kind of like a glamor kind of fantasy that you didn't really get to see Black people do.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The poster for Friday Foster showed Pam with a camera around her neck and a pistol in her hand. The tagline, it was one for the ages. "Wham! Bam! Here Comes Pam!"

The studio brought in a cast of other established actors. Yaphet Kotto. Carl Weathers. Paul Benjamin. And Eartha Kitt, who plays fashion designer Madame Rena. Film historian Donald Bogle says Pam looked different.

DONALD BOGLE: They try to sort of clean up the image and some of the rawness is gone. And that rawness was very important for the audiences who first saw her and felt, indeed, that they were discovering her.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Friday Foster hit theaters on Christmas Day, 1975. The critics weren't kind. Here's Donald Bogle reading from Variety's review, which singles out Pam.

DONALD BOGLE: "Still, one can't blame shoddy plot elements on her, since she so far transcends the silliness of her vehicles. Far more active than any other film star in the last few years, she just needs a breakthrough major role to come into her own."

PAM GRIER: I'm just going to start being redundant. Coffy. Foxy Brown. Sheba was a little lighter than both of them. And then Friday Foster, the comic book character. Now when do I go to this mainstream?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Here's director Quentin Tarantino.

QUENTIN TARANTINO: I find it hard to believe with all the really terrific, I'm not talking about just like the movie brats, but with all the good directors out there working in Hollywood in the seventies, I put the blame on them a little bit for not realizing what they had in Pam Greer. What, you think Steven Spielberg's going to see Coffy? No. You know, you think Scorsese is saying Sheba Baby? No. De Niro is seeing Sheba Baby. But Scorsese is not.

RACQUEL GATES: You know, in general, I don't think that Hollywood has often known what to do with Black people, like period, but especially not Black actresses and especially not Black actresses who don't fit into kind of like neat and conventional and simplistic categories.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's film professor Racquel Gates.

RACQUEL GATES: But, you know, Pam Grier for as iconic as she was in the seventies, I mean, she doesn't have the career that like a white male icon from the seventies had. You know, she's not like Clint Eastwood or Robert Redford. Like that's literally just not a possibility for a Black actress.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam kept trying to find a mainstream role with a major studio. And her parts in Blaxploitation movies were drying up.

DONALD BOGLE: I've always seen Blaxploitation, it was not a long period in a sense. And I see it basically from like '71 to about '76. The audience just wanted something, something else. And what I think happened in 1976, *Silver Streak* comes out and it's with Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor. And we get a theme now that's going to become important in Hollywood. And it's the theme of interracial male bonding. The black man and the white man.

SILVER STREAK TRAILER: Nothing can stop *Silver Streak*!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Blaxploitation era was giving way to the interracial buddy movie, many of which were made by bigger studios. And often white directors.

As for Pam, she was determined to keep acting, even if that meant smaller roles and minor characters.

DONALD BOGLE: But it's to her credit that she kept working. She really did.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: For nearly five years, producers and directors had been creating projects just for Pam. Now, it appeared, that era was coming to an end.

Freddie Prinze never stopped calling Pam. She went months without answering. But she missed him. So one day she picked up the phone.

Freddie asked Pam to go for a drive and meet a friend, a friend he worshiped. His name was Richard Pryor.

PAM GRIER: He wanted to be like Richard Pryor, and he wanted to use his body to do improvisation like Richard did, and wanted to have a show in Las Vegas and then make movies after *Chico and the Man*.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie took Pam to Richard's mansion 45 minutes outside of Hollywood. He lived in what used to be the Wrigley family estate. The bubble gum people.

Freddie rang the bell on the gate and spoke into the intercom.

PAM GRIER: He said, Hey, let me in. I've got Foxy Brown here, I've got Pam Grier here. Richard said, Oh motherfucker, no, you don't. I'll open that gate if you don't have Pam Grier in that car, I'll shoot you in the ass right now, that's what he told Freddie. And they laughed. And I was like, this aint funny.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard Pryor came out of the house in a bathrobe. With a gun in his pocket. Pam noticed everything. Richard only noticed Pam.

PAM GRIER: And he comes over and he's like hey, you really are Foxy Brown, and Coffy, and Coffy can cream you! He's like going through all the dialogue. [laughs] He said, why don't you get out. I said, no, we got to go. I just came up with him to come here.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie went into the house with Richard. When he came out, he had a vial of liquid cocaine. Freddie revved the engine, and headed down the driveway. Pam never got out of the car.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Richard wanted you to stay. And the implication was, party a little bit with this liquid cocaine.

PAM GRIER: Probably.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That was not your scene.

PAM GRIER: That wasn't my scene at all.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Seeing Freddie with Richard, Pam knew she'd made the right choice breaking up with Freddie. Drugs, guns, Richard Pryor. The whole situation screamed – danger.

And Pam was about to find out just how dangerous.

Pam and Freddie talked occasionally but they drifted apart. Freddie had gotten married. He had a baby son, Freddie Prinze Jr. And then one day Pam's agent phoned with a message from Freddie. He wanted Pam to call.

PAM GRIER: I called him back on the number. And it was at a hotel in Westwood.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Freddie picked up, Pam knew something was wrong. Freddie had battled depression for years. On the phone, he sounded distraught. And he immediately asked for money.

PAM GRIER: Hola Papi, what's going on? I'm really in a bad way. I need \$200 and I don't have any money. Then, I'm in a hotel. OK. And I don't know who my friends are. I don't know where anybody is. I found you. And I need \$200 dollars.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie didn't say why he needed the money. He was still a rich man, thanks to his sitcom, Chico and the Man. Pam was worried that he wanted the cash for drugs.

The next thing he said was chilling.

PAM GRIER: I feel alone and, and I have a gun and I'm probably going to shoot myself. And I was like [gasp] I can get the money delivered to you, but I really think you need to find a male friend to come over and take the gun away from you. Feed you, bathe you, get you to bed. Not a woman, not me. But I'll make sure you get the money and when you get this cleaned up and get the gun away, your friends with you and you've eaten, you feel a lot better and you want to talk. You know, we can talk on the phone. We can talk. You want someone to talk to? I can listen. He said, Okay, Mami. I'd like that. I hung up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam and Freddie never spoke again. Three days later she heard the news.

NEWS REPORT: Freddie Prinze, star of television's Chico and the Man, shot himself early today at his Hollywood hotel suite.

PAM GRIER: I heard it on the news and people were calling me, like, constant, you know. Pam, Pam, Pam!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Pam was staying with friends just a few blocks away from the hotel in Westwood.

PAM GRIER: I left the house. I was barefoot, running down the street to the hotel. I didn't know when it had happened, but when I got there I could see that they were still there, investigating to see if there was a crime scene or something going on. I just fell to my knees. And I just started crying. And I just looked up and I was watching from my knees, just sobbing. I didn't see them take him out. I just saw the activity and the yellow tape and people moving back and forth and it was his room.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Freddie was taken to the UCLA Medical Center where he was put on life support. He died 33 hours later, at 1:00 PM on January 29th, 1977.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: You shouldn't, but do you feel any guilt about not going over there three days earlier?

PAM GRIER: No. I've learned about people who are depressed and domestic violence and relationships and how it's the most dangerous situation is when someone has a gun.

NEWS REPORT: Freddie Prinze, the costar of *Chico and the Man*, was buried today in Beverly Hills. Prinze is survived by his parents, a baby son, and his 26-year-old estranged wife Kathryn.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: More than a thousand friends and fans came to the funeral, including Shirley MacLaine, Tony Orlando, and Lucille Ball. Lucy hated funerals. And she didn't know Freddie personally. She came out of respect for his talent.

Pam did not go. She was afraid of confronting some of Freddie's friends, friends she thought should have helped him.

The next day, Pam went to Forest Lawn Cemetery by herself. She brought a bouquet of white stargazer lilies, and she laid them on Freddie's grave.

THEME MUSIC

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On the next episode of *The Plot Thickens*: Pam finds love again.

RICHARD PRYOR: There really is a difference between white women and black women. And I've dated both. Yes I have.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And she struggles with the toughest role of her career.

PAM GRIER: Oh, I had nightmares for a while. Graphic scenes that I saw in my preparation, they haunt you.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: If you are in a crisis, or need support, please call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline, at 1-800-273-8255, or contact the crisis textline by texting "talk" to 741741.

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.

Thanks to David Byrne, Taryn Jacobs, Caroline Wigmore, Dexter Fedor, Marci Sacco, Genevieve McGillicuddy and Mark Wynns, and the entire TCM Marketing team.

Original music in the podcast comes from the band Cadillac Jones. Believe it or not, their bass player is also our lawyer, John Renaud. Thanks to John, Kristen Hassell, and Tseleng Molton.

Thomas Avery of Tunewelders composed our theme music.

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.