



THE PLOT THICKENS

EPISODE TWO: REACHING FOR THE STARS AND PAYING THE PRICE

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Sherman McCoy was 38. He was supposed to look like a Wasp-ey aristocrat. Tall. With a round, majestic chin.

He was the main character in Tom Wolfe's novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

Sherman was rich, arrogant. The 1980s version of the 1%. He was a Wall Street guy who assumed the world owed him everything. Tom Wolfe called men like Sherman "Masters of the Universe."

"THE BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES" CLIP: I am a Master of the Universe. I deserve more.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Believe it or not, Tom Hanks was cast in the movie role.

Not exactly the part you'd peg him for. Tom Hanks was likable. He was a comedy actor. He falls in love with a mermaid in "Splash." In "Big," he played a 12 year old boy in a grown man's body.

Even Tom Hanks was nervous about playing Sherman McCoy. And he said as much in a TV interview.

NEWS CLIP: Why would you be intimidated?

TOM HANKS: For the sole reason that 1.7 million people have read this book and have an opinion of who Sherman is and what he should look like. To take that on to say, Okay, well, now, I'm the definitive Sherman McCoy... You're just not going to please everybody.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Tom Hanks had no idea how right his prediction would turn out to be.

I'm Ben Mankiewicz, and this is season two of *The Plot Thickens*—a podcast from Turner Classic Movies. This season, we partnered with Campside Media to bring you *The Devil's Candy*: the story of a Hollywood fiasco and the director who made it. The movie was *Bonfire of the Vanities*. The director was Brian De Palma.

JULIE SALAMON: I'm Julie Salamon. I was there to witness it all.

I was a film critic at The Wall Street Journal. But in 1990, I spent a year on the set of The Bonfire of the Vanities with a notebook and a recorder. Barely anyone noticed me. But I noticed just about everything.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This is Episode Two: Reaching for the stars and paying the price.

Once again, Julie is our guide.

OSCARS CLIP: The nominees for Best Picture are...

JULIE SALAMON: It all started at the Academy Awards ceremony in 1989. Peter Guber's film "Rain Man" had just won the Oscar for Best Picture.

OSCARS CLIP: And the winner is... "Rain Man."

JULIE SALAMON: Following the ceremony, there was the afterparty. The Governor's Ball.

Peter Guber was thrilled about his win. But he was the kind of guy who was already scheming about his next big project. He saw Tom Hanks across the room and walked up to him.

PETER GUBER: I walked up to Tom Hanks and said to him, Hi, I'm Peter Guber, and he said Oh, I know you, you just won the Academy Award and I said, Yeah.

JULIE SALAMON: Guber says, Listen, I've got an incredible picture and you don't even know about it. You are the one to play Sherman McCoy in "The Bonfire of the Vanities."

Tom Hanks was far from the obvious choice. He was 33 years old and had built his reputation as a light comic actor. That reputation grew with the success of "Splash."

"SPLASH" CLIP: All my life I've been waiting for someone, and when I find her, she's a fish.

JULIE SALAMON: But it was "Big" that pushed him into a different sphere.

"BIG" CLIP: I turned into a grown-up, mom! I made this wish on a machine, and it turned me into a grown-up.

JULIE SALAMON: It was a comedy about a 12-year-old boy trapped in the body of a 35 year old man.

"BIG" CLIP: I want to spend the night with you.

TOM HANKS: Do you mean sleepover? OK, but I get to be on top.

JULIE SALAMON: And it was a huge success. One of the biggest movies of 1988.

A lot of that was due to Tom Hanks. He was brilliant in it. It even won him an Oscar nomination. It was a very different kind of role than Sherman McCoy. But Peter Guber didn't care.

Guber was going for sympathy. He thought that a nice guy like Tom Hanks would bring out the nice guy in Sherman McCoy.

PETER GUBER: You see him as Sherman McCoy. Arrogant, rich. You knew that somewhere in his past he was a likable kid.

JULIE SALAMON: Guber's saying, there's an extra component in a film that isn't there in a book: a history of the actor's films and of his likeability.

He was excited about his idea. He started pressing Tom Hanks to the studio executives and to Brian De Palma, the director.

PETER GUBER: And we talked about casting.

JULIE SALAMON: Other names came up for the role. Steve Martin, Michael Caine. But Peter Guber kept coming back to...

PETER GUBER: Tom Hanks.

JULIE SALAMON: He was so excited about Tom Hanks that he even clapped his hands while telling me.

PETER GUBER: Tom Hanks. He was my first choice when I read the book. I thought Tom Hanks.

JULIE SALAMON: Peter Guber saw Hanks as the solution to a basic problem. He knew that studio executives might like the idea of taking risks.

But building an entire movie around unlikeable characters? That would be box office poison.

MICHAEL CRISTOFER: his was a book that really made the rounds and uh, nobody really wanted to do. And for one specific reason. There was no sympathetic character in the book.

JULIE SALAMON: That's the screenwriter Michael Cristofer. He'd written two movie screenplays, and won a Pulitzer Prize for a play he'd written about terminal cancer patients.

MICHAEL CRISTOFER: In terms of all the characters in the book, I found Sherman McCoy sympathetic. So, uh, in a nest of Vipers, the least, the least poisonous is your sympathetic character. So that was, that was my view of it.

JULIE SALAMON: For Peter Guber—to make Sherman McCoy that sympathetic character? He needed Tom Hanks. He would hear of no one else. He would call the director and the executives and he would literally chant the actor's name.

PETER GUBER: Tom Hanks, Tom Hanks, Tom Hanks.

JULIE SALAMON: Finally they gave in. I talked about it with Lucy Fisher, the Warner Bros executive in charge of production.

We were sitting in her office on the Warner Brothers lot in Hollywood.

LUCY FISHER: The question of sympathy is a very overused word in the movies.

JULIE SALAMON: Lucy says, that in books, protagonists can be unsympathetic. And they can be fascinating. It won't matter for readers.

But in movies, you've got to have a protagonist that people like. For big, expensive movies, that's just the rule.

LUCY FISHER: And we always knew this was gonna be a big budget, Hollywood movie. And it is.

JULIE SALAMON: I was laughing with Lucy but wasn't really sure why she was laughing. Was she nervous that it was a big expensive movie? Or was she proud?

Brian De Palma also liked the idea of Tom Hanks as Sherman McCoy. He called him to explain why he should take the part.

LARRY KING: Were you surprised why they picked you?

JULIE SALAMON: Hanks recounted the conversation on Larry King.

TOM HANKS: I asked Brian De Palma Why me? Because the first time I ever spoke to the man, he called me up on the phone to tell me that he wanted me to do it. And he said, very simply, that he wanted somebody that could be funny and yet could deliver all the drama and the emotion at the same time.

JULIE SALAMON: That closed the deal. How could any actor resist?

Tom Hanks took the role seriously. He wanted to know exactly what it was like to be a bond trader—a master of the universe.

So before shooting on the film began, he took a trip to the Financial District in Manhattan. He wanted to visit the bond trading room at Merrill Lynch.

That was gonna be a location for a scene that showed Sherman McCoy in his element, as a “Master of the Universe.”

Tom Hanks had already visited Yale University. That was Sherman’s alma mater. He’d also had his teeth capped to make them look more aristocratic.

And now, he was going to hang out with a bond trader just to see what the job was all about. This was research. He actually let me tag along.

I liked Tom Hanks right off the bat. He was nice. He was unpretentious.

The studio offered to pick him up in a stretch limo. He turned it down. I was a little disappointed, but he wanted to head downtown in a plain black sedan. That looked like the cars that always idled outside the firms. He wanted to slip in without anyone knowing he was there.

Well, that didn’t happen.

BOBBIE COLLINS: So, the women were excited, the men were very excited, because I mean, it's not often that they get to go to work and think that they might be in a movie with Tom Hanks.

JULIE SALAMON: Bobbie Collins was the Vice President of Corporate Communications for Merrill Lynch at the time. She was the one in charge of the arrangements with the "Bonfire" team.

BOBBIE COLLINS: Well, overwhelmed would say the least. It was a very scary thing for a 32 year old, young lady on Wall Street. I remember him coming down through the elevators, and there was just tons of people who were moving in and moving to desks and working. And what a nice guy, I remember, he came down, and he just started, like, karate chopping and throwing his leg up in the air and just making people giggle.

JULIE SALAMON: From the minute he entered the room, it was almost like trading stopped.

I followed him to a desk where he sat down with a bond trader. Bunches of traders started gathering around in little groups. You could see everyone sneaking glances from their desks nearby.

Hanks spent the next few hours sort of hanging out with people and making jokes on their trading phones. I think he even called somebody's wife.

At lunchtime, the traders usually just ate at their desks. They didn't want to miss a beat. When someone handed a box lunch to Hanks, he took it. He ate his sandwich, his apple, whatever else, right alongside them.

At one point, the trader Hanks was hanging out with turned to him. He said, "This isn't just get rich quick. It's get everything quick."

BOBBIE COLLINS: The power and the movement on a trading floor, it's palpable. You walk down there, and people standing up screaming with phones hanging across their necks and across the floor. You walked away with, like, your breath taken away.

JULIE SALAMON: Tom Hanks really wanted to blend in that day. But that just wasn't going to happen. People wanted to get close to him. He couldn't avoid it.

He was a movie star. And a really sweet movie star.

BOBBIE COLLINS: He's seen as Mr. Nice, and you needed a villain in that role. And he's not the villainous type.

JULIE SALAMON: Being a ruthless Master of the Universe didn't really seem to be in his blood.

"LOOK WHO'S TALKING" CLIP: There he is!

JULIE SALAMON: When I was eight months pregnant, I reviewed a movie called "Look Who's Talking."

OLYMPIA DUKAKIS: Do you know who I am?

BRUCE WILLIS: Actually, I don't.

JULIE SALAMON: It starred Bruce Willis. He narrated the part of a baby.

BRUCE WILLIS: Okay, lady. If you say so. You're my grandma. So what do you want from me?

OLYMPIA DUKAKIS: Who's got a wet tushie?

BRUCE WILLIS: I give up.

JULIE SALAMON: Maybe because I was pregnant at the time, I thought it was hilarious. But so did a lot of other people. It even spawned two sequels.

But there was another movie Bruce Willis starred in around that time.

"DIE HARD" CLIP: Bruce Willis. Die Hard. Got invited to the Christmas party by mistake. Who knew?

JULIE SALAMON: It was a massive hit. Everyone was quoting Bruce Willis's lines from the movie.

"DIE HARD" CLIP: Yippee ki yay, motherfucker.

JULIE SALAMON: Five years earlier, Bruce Willis didn't have a career. He was 30 years old, working as a bartender in Manhattan, facing rejection after rejection at acting auditions.

Then in 1985, he hit gold. He was cast in "Moonlighting" with Cybil Shepherd.

"MOONLIGHTING" CLIP: This is gonna work, we're really gonna do this!

JULIE SALAMON: They played unlikely business partners.

"MOONLIGHTING" CLIP: My name is Addison. David Addison. And I'd like the opportunity to take care of all of your investigatory needs.

JULIE SALAMON: The show sent Bruce Willis from unemployed actor to TV star.

But like Tom Hanks, he felt typecast. He wanted a role with more complexity. That's when he heard about a big part in "Bonfire of the Vanities": Peter Fallow.

Peter Fallow was a tabloid journalist. The character writes a bunch of sensational stories about Sherman McCoy which causes Sherman's downfall. Peter Fallow was written as a drunk and a hack. And British.

The British part was important. Tom Wolfe thought the British looked down on Americans. So he wrote Fallow as this total sleazebag. I think it was a little bit of writer's revenge.

Peter Fallow was also going to be the movie's narrator. He'd be omniscient, narrating Sherman McCoy's undoing in voiceover. Brian had decided on it with the screenwriter. Using a narrator would help simplify the story. And make it easier to understand.

But there was a problem. Brian De Palma didn't want an English voice.

When Stanley Kubrick adapted the Nabokov novel Lolita, he had also used a narrator: the British actor James Mason. Brian loved that movie. But in his mind, it wasn't a sensation. And for some reason he blamed it on James Mason's British voice.

It didn't make any sense, it wasn't logical, but it's how he felt. And he didn't want to make the same mistake.

He talked about this on a program called the South Bank Show, which, ironically enough, was on British television.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I wanted to get a narrator that they could sort of feel kind of chummy with. And that's why I chose an American narrator and somebody whose voice they're very familiar with.

JULIE SALAMON: That meant that Peter Fallow, the character Tom Wolfe had specifically written as British, would be American.

The executives tried to get Jack Nicholson for the part. He was busy.

And then Bruce Willis came along.

BRUCE WILLIS: I mean, this was not a, necessarily a safe choice for me. It was, I mean, there are other things that I that I could have done that I was that I would have been much more comfortable with, or much surer that I would have done a good job at.

LUCY FISHER: Sometimes stars are the best people for the part. That's why they're stars sometimes, too.

JULIE SALAMON: In the movie business, some people are actors. Even great actors. And some people are stars.

When I talked to Lucy Fisher, she was just open about it. She liked the idea of Bruce Willis as Peter Fallow. She thought he was talented. But that really wasn't the point. It wasn't his most important credential.

JULIE SALAMON: Do you think that Bruce Willis would have been on your list to play Fallow if he weren't a movie star?

LUCY FISHER: If he weren't movie star? Probably not because we wanted a movie star.

JULIE SALAMON: So that was that. Just as he'd narrated for the baby in "Look Who's Talking," Bruce Willis would narrate "The Bonfire of the Vanities" sounding very much like...Bruce Willis.

"BONFIRE OF THE VANITIES" CLIP: For now, indulge yourself in the extravagance of the moment and remember, if you will, a phrase from another little best seller: For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?

JULIE SALAMON: Shooting on Bonfire of the Vanities was set to begin on April 13, 1990. Which happened to be a Friday.

Friday the 13th? What were they thinking? I thought movie people were supposed to be superstitious.

Two weeks before that, Lucy Fisher called Brian De Palma. She was worried. There was a big issue with the script.

LUCY FISHER: Some of the changes that we made incrementally were that we redeemed Sherman McCoy more, we gradually redeemed Peter Fallow more...

JULIE SALAMON: As the story changed, Sherman McCoy had become more and more likable. Peter Fallow had become less and less despicable.

Tom Wolfe's M.O. had been to insult everyone equally. But now, the script was telling you to feel sympathetic toward the white men who carried the story.

LUCY FISHER: And these were not decisions where we sat, one day, and they went from black to white... I'm sorry to keep using the word black. They went from...

JULIE SALAMON: But for the Black communities, Jews and women, it was still a bunch of nasty caricatures.

Lucy Fisher was happy with the changes in how the two male leads were depicted. It was everyone else she was worried about.

LUCY FISHER: So we were nervous, maybe nervous is too—we were careful. We were cognizant of that. And the racial thing, you know the book did get slammed for it. And we didn't want to be inadvertently—I mean, the book is about racism, so obviously, you can't take that out. That's like declawing it in a terrible way. But yes, we were worried that there that there were no were no Black characters.

JULIE SALAMON: Well, there were Black characters. Just no sympathetic Black characters.

Brian thought the studio executives were being cowardly. How much more did they want to dilute The Bonfire of the Vanities?

Racial dynamics cut through the heart of Tom Wolfe's book. Brian knew that. Demographics in New York were changing during the 1980s.

NEWS CLIP: We're coming off the bloodiest year in the history of New York.

NEWS CLIP: Almost every week is a bad week for the people of the South Bronx, who are mostly Black and Puerto Rican

JULIE SALAMON: It was an era of high crime. And toughening crime laws. More and more people were being incarcerated. Black communities were hit hardest.

Wolfe's book—in its own way—was pointing out how the judicial system is rigged. His characters reflected that. That it was rigged in favor of people like Sherman McCoy. People who are white and rich. And rigged against people like Henry Lamb, the Black teenager who was hit by Sherman's car.

In *Bonfire of the Vanities*—the book—Tom Wolfe showed a vision of New York City that was bleak. Helpless politicians. Clergy on the take. Cops and prosecutors who are either cynical or sold out.

But there was one decent character. That was Judge Kovitsky. Sherman McCoy would be brought to trial in front of Judge Kovitsky. And Kovitsky ultimately does the right thing. But at great cost to himself.

Kovitsky represented the old guard of the Bronx. The Jews and Italians who had run the borough for years.

And Judge Kovitsky was based on a real judge: Judge Burton Roberts. Roberts was outspoken, a public figure. The kind of judge who showed up on late night talk shows.

Here he is on *Nightline* in the 1980s.

JUDGE ROBERTS: We're being somewhat tough on crime and at the same time we're also being smart on crime, by directing our by using most of our funds for treatment and—I know it has become a dirty word in the justice system—in rehabilitation.

JULIE SALAMON: Judge Roberts was chief administrative judge of the State Supreme Court in the Bronx.

He was also Tom Wolfe's friend. I asked Tom Wolfe about him.

JULIE SALAMON: I meant to ask you about, how did you first meet Judge Roberts, my new favorite person in the world?

TOM WOLFE: Oh you were talking to Burt?

JULIE SALAMON: Wolfe told me he met Roberts in Southampton and started trailing him at work.

It was watching Roberts in court that gave Wolfe the idea for *Bonfire*. He modeled Kovitsky on him—and later, even dedicated the novel to him as a thank you.

JULIE SALAMON: Oh, hey, I love him. He just, he calls me up and sings to me on the telephone.

JULIE SALAMON: That might sound weird. That Judge Roberts would call me and sing to me. It sounds weird to me too! For the life of me, I can't remember what it was. Except that it was kind of endearing.

When Judge Roberts heard about the movie, he wanted to audition for the role of Judge Kovitsky. To him, there was no question. The role was made for him.

Brian de Palma wasn't so sure. He figured, This is a judge, not an actor. Casting Roberts would be nothing but trouble.

But Judge Roberts was quite a character. He kept leaving messages with Brian's assistant. Like, "Judge Roberts called. He heard you tried out Joel Grey for the part of Kovitsky and he had a real laugh with Tom Wolfe!"

Judge Roberts did end up auditioning. I was there when he came down to the Tribeca Film Center, command central.

I was surprised at how deferential and respectful Brian was when he greeted him. But then, before they even started, the judge started offering advice on how to change the scene. Brian was really patient. And amused. You could see he was being polite—kind of running out the clock—until Judge Roberts got started.

Pretty quickly, everyone in the room felt his power. I remember thinking, he was terrific! Like Moses coming down from the mountain. Someone blurted out, "Judge Roberts, you should've been an actor." And Judge Roberts said, "yeah, I should've been an actor."

Later on, I talked to Tom Wolfe about the audition.

JULIE SALAMON: He was great. I saw the audition

TOM WOLFE: Oh you saw it? Burt is dying to see it.

JULIE SALAMON: They should have cast him in my opinion. He was great.

JULIE SALAMON: The casting director was tempted. He called Judge Roberts "an ethnic Spencer Tracy." That's code for "a Jewish Spencer Tracy."

Brian liked Roberts too. But it came down to that same old question. Roberts was authentic... but was he likable? And would be a pain in the neck to work with? Judges were used to giving orders, not taking them.

Brian decided they should play it safe. Walter Matthau.

"BUDDY, BUDDY" CLIP: Come on, you know I do nice work. I better, because if I don't, you guys are gonna have my ass, right?

JULIE SALAMON: But Matthau asked for \$1 million—for eight days of shooting.

Alan Arkin said he'd do it for \$120,000. So, they signed a contract. That was it. Alan Arkin would be Judge Kovitsky...

Until he wasn't.

[MUSIC]

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Season 2 of the Plot Thickens: The Devil's Candy will be back, right after this.

OSCARS CLIP: And the Oscar goes to...

JULIE SALAMON: On March 26, 1990, less than three weeks before filming, Brian De Palma watched the Academy Awards.

OSCARS CLIP: "Driving Miss Daisy."

JULIE SALAMON: "Driving Miss Daisy" won the Oscar for Best Picture that year. It was about a rich white woman and her Black chauffeur—who was played by Morgan Freeman.

Suddenly De Palma had an epiphany. He understood the studio's race problem with Bonfire. He understood what Lucy Fisher meant about there being no sympathetic Black character. And he had a solution.

LUCY FISHER: He was the one that actually came to us. And said, you know, I've been thinking about it.

JULIE SALAMON: Brian's idea was this. Judge Kovitsky was the character who would give the picture heart and decency. But he wasn't going to be Jewish. He would be Black.

And he would be played by Morgan Freeman.

LUCY FISHER: It was not something forced upon him by the studio at all. It was his decision. Morgan had emerged as such a pinnacle of integrity in so many ways...

JULIE SALAMON: She says: It wasn't that they wanted just ANY Black actor. And it wasn't that they didn't want Alan Arkin. It really was Morgan Freeman that convinced them. It was his talent, his persona.

Tom Wolfe... he wasn't convinced.

He had deliberately taken a back seat when it came to the movie production. But when he heard about the Judge Kovitsky decision, he wasn't happy.

TOM WOLFE: There is an etiquette, particularly on television—and in the movies too...

JULIE SALAMON: Wolfe told me that oftentimes, movies and TV would deal with racial hostility. As long as later on, there's an enlightened Black character. One who teaches everyone the error of their ways.

He told me, "As the drama ends, everyone heads off into a warmer sunset. Sadder perhaps, but wiser."

I've got to say, no one was more surprised than Morgan Freeman when he was offered the part of Judge Kovitsky.

I talked to him about it at the time. He was totally friendly and seemed a bit amused at the absurdity of the whole situation.

JULIE SALAMON: My question, is why do you want to make this movie?

JULIE SALAMON: We were on set, between takes. There was a lot of noisy stuff going on in the background, so it's hard to make out.

But what I asked him was, Why do you want to make this movie? I mean, do you feel like you're the person anyone would've thought of as Judge Kovitsky?

MORGAN FREEMAN: The general answer to that question is no.

JULIE SALAMON: He answered honestly. He says, The general answer to that question is no.

JULIE SALAMON: Had you read the book before you got called up?

MORGAN FREEMAN: Oh yeah.

JULIE SALAMON: He told me he'd read the book beforehand. He knew the character. But when he heard about the other casting choices... It seemed like everything was up for grabs.

JULIE SALAMON: Meaning?

MORGAN FREEMAN: Well, everybody's cast the book in their own minds. I wouldn't have cast Tom Hanks if I was the director, Bruce Willis, or me.

JULIE SALAMON: "I wouldn't have cast Tom Hanks, or Bruce Willis, or me." That's some brutal honesty you don't normally get from actors.

Still, Morgan Freeman was happy with the role. His only problem was a good one for him. At age 52, with his movie's Oscar, he was a hot property. His time was limited. And his heart was in theater.

He was about to start rehearsals for "Taming of the Shrew."

MORGAN FREEMAN: Verona, for a while, I take my leave, to see my friends in Padua.

JULIE SALAMON: He was playing Petrucio.

MORGAN FREEMAN: You've got an actor here with a narrow schedule, an actor here with a narrow schedule, an actor here with a narrow schedule...

JULIE SALAMON: Morgan Freeman told me, "You've got an actor here with a narrow schedule, an actor here with a narrow schedule, an actor here with a narrow schedule. A bureaucracy."

But his job, his job wasn't to be involved in that. Not to worry about it. Worrying about it—that was Fred Caruso's job.

Fred Caruso was the movie's line producer. That's not the same as the producer. That was Peter Guber, and he had left "Bonfire" before pre-production even began. I know the titles are confusing, but they're important.

FRED CARUSO: The producer is the buffer between the studio and the picture. The line producer is the person that puts everything together.

JULIE SALAMON: I caught up with Fred Caruso on a call this year. He's still working as a producer, of various sorts, in Hollywood. When we talked, he was in Santa Monica. I could hear the sound of birds in the background of our conversation.

When I met Fred 30 years ago, on Bonfire, he wore his black hair slicked back into a little duck tail. He had a tendency to hug people he liked. Probably wouldn't do that today.

As line producer, Fred was part psychologist, part manager, part con artist. He liked to get the job done, and he also wanted to make everyone happy. But he understood that one person's happiness mattered a lot more than everyone else's.

FRED CARUSO: I'm a crew person. I like to know who they are, how their family is. Good morning, good evening. I would like to have a calm, calm crew, for the director. Because ultimately, it's the director's job to make the movie. Our job is to support the director. That's all we do.

JULIE SALAMON: That support—it often fell into two categories. Budget and schedule. Fred's job was to make sure neither one of those got out of control.

FRED CARUSO: The studio says, "You gotta bring it in on budget, you gotta bring it in on schedule, you gotta bring it in on budget gotta bring it in on schedule..." and the director says, "I'm making a movie, I'm making a movie. Don't talk to me about schedule and budget, I'm making a movie."

JULIE SALAMON: Brian—he wasn't concerned with the ripple effects of his creative decisions. He had to focus on the creative. Fred Caruso was the one who had to go around making sure those ripples didn't turn into tidal waves.

In this case, the thing causing the ripples was casting Morgan Freeman. It was causing problems nobody had anticipated. For starters, Alan Arkin had already agreed to play the part of Judge Kovitsky. The deal was done.

Fred told me about it when we were on set together.

FRED CARUSO: He's entitled to \$120,000. That's the contract. And when you, when you're settling, pissed off, and you get a divorce. So when you're getting a divorce, you're not doing anybody any favors. So now that we're getting a divorce from Alan Arkin, he's saying, Fine, I want all my money. Why should I do you a favor?

JULIE SALAMON: Just do the math. Alan Arkin's fee was \$120,000. Morgan Freeman was asking for more than five times that. Fred could see already that the movie's budget of \$29 million—that was a mirage.

As for scheduling, Morgan Freeman had already committed to the Shakespeare play. His free time for Bonfire was very, very tight.

FRED CARUSO: Between now with Morgan Freeman's dates and Bruce Willis's dates and Melanie Griffith's dates, and the release of the picture, what's gonna shoot in New York?

JULIE SALAMON: The shooting schedule kept changing—at least 20 times according to Fred.

If he felt frazzled, he never showed it. Fred was the son of immigrant parents. And he'd been a high school music teacher in New Jersey for seven years. He loved it. But he had a show business itch.

When he signed on to Bonfire he'd been on film crews for 22 years. He'd worked his way up the ranks. On some of the biggest pictures ever made—

"NETWORK" CLIP: I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!

JULIE SALAMON: And some of the toughest.

"THE GODFATHER" CLIP: I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse.

JULIE SALAMON: "Bonfire" would be Fred Caruso's fourth movie with Brian. But once the movie lost its producer, Fred's job, it just got a lot more complicated.

FRED CARUSO: So it's Brian who's dealing with the writer, the casting, and how the look of this film is going to be. And yes, he talks to Lucy Fisher in the studio...

JULIE SALAMON: But there was no middle person to act as a go-between. No buffer. Fred had to step in.

FRED CARUSO: There'll be 65 phone calls a day for the next 65 days as to why this is happening and why that's happening or why isn't this happening or why isn't that happening...

JULIE SALAMON: Then there were special problems raised by "Bonfire of the Vanities" itself.

Tom Wolfe's book had been wildly popular with a lot of people. But it had made just as many people really angry. And a lot of those angry people lived, worked and prayed in the same places where Brian De Palma wanted to film.

FRED CARUSO: Well, I got thrown out of Temple Emanu El.

JULIE SALAMON: For what?

JULIE SALAMON: The Bonfire naysayers included a certain group of elite New York women—the bony socialites who Tom Wolfe called "Social X-rays." They were women who believed you could not be too rich or too thin.

And some of those Social X-rays were Jewish. And some of them went to Temple Emanu El. Caruso found that out the hard way, while visiting the temple, where he wanted to shoot.

At first it seemed like the rabbi there was interested.

FRED CARUSO: Come on in, look at the look at the synagogue, how wonderful, and what's the name of the movie?

JULIE SALAMON: Fred hemmed and hawed... he stalled for time. Finally, he had to tell them...

FRED CARUSO: I said "Bonfire of the Vanities." Out! Out!

JULIE SALAMON: You're kidding!

JULIE SALAMON: Fred did a great job of mimicking the rabbi's reaction. It was hilarious.

FRED CARUSO: You can't be here! Out! We don't want you here! Cool it rabbi, what's up, you know, what's the deal? All of them Jews that are in this book, in your book, are in this synagogue! They know who they are. And Tom Wolfe wrote about them from this synagogue, and they're all here, them X-rays and so on. Out! We don't want you! And threw us out.

JULIE SALAMON: On top of all that, there were the usual problems of filming in New York, where nobody wants to be taken for a sucker. Location after location fell through.

And even when they nailed one, it wasn't going to come cheap.

When Fred Caruso and I talked, we were on Park Avenue. It was the first week of shooting. The crew was planning a shot of a fancy apartment building. It was supposed to be where the main character Sherman McCoy—the Master of the Universe—lived.

We stood on the sidewalk, looking up the boulevard. Park Avenue itself was the star of the scene. It was lined with elegant buildings. The street was separated with a median, filled with tulips. It was the best place to see spring arrive in Manhattan.

But all those tulips—it wasn't enough for the movie people. They hired a team to plant even more. Fred and I stood there, watching them plant them.

Then he gestured to the building in front of us.

FRED CARUSO: Like this building where we're here...

JULIE SALAMON: He broke down how much it cost to shoot the scene. \$35,000 to use the sidewalk outside the building. Plus fees to the security guards, doormen, superintendent. When it's all over, Fred tells me, shooting that tiny little scene cost 50 grand.

FRED CARUSO: when it's all over, it's a \$50 thousand bill.

JULIE SALAMON: For four days.

FRED CARUSO: For four days, yeah.

JULIE SALAMON: The whole thing was new to me. It was a spectacle. And there was so much money being tossed around, all the time, everywhere.

You could already feel flashes of panic coming from the studio. Bonfire had sat in limbo at Warner Bros. for a year. And now, it was an urgent project. The studio wanted that Christmas release. And it was April. That urgency was getting more pronounced with every last-minute creative decision.

I was starting to get the hang of it. Every time Brian made a new call, I'd just go look for Fred. I'd ask him, What does this mean for the schedule? What does this mean for the budget?

But on that beautiful day in April, standing on Park Avenue, Fred Caruso took a deep breath. And he told me about the order he gave his assistant just as shooting was about to begin.

FRED CARUSO: We sent a rose to every department with a little note, thanks for the help to getting us to the first day of shooting. Every secretary...

JULIE SALAMON: He'd sent a rose to everyone on the first day of shooting—to the secretaries, the legal department, the music department—to everyone. And the roses came with a short note: Thank you for getting us to the first day of shooting.

That day, Fred Caruso sent 200 roses.

That kind of courtly gesture was completely alien to Brian De Palma. Strange as it sounds, Brian hated making movies. He loved to dream them up and sketch them out—alone in his room.

But the actual process? He called it the nightmare, the horror show. Most often, he referred to the experience as the dreaded tunnel. The tunnel is this dark and scary place you're stuck in until you emerge on the other side.

For the next four months Brian—this guy who's happiest alone in his room—would be surrounded by dozens and dozens of people every day.

All of them, looking to him. Waiting for him to tell them what to do.

Watching for him to make a mistake.

BRIAN DE PALMA: I'm the one that's completely responsible for this movie. When it comes out, if it's not successful, I'll be the one that'll be blamed. You'll be onto your next project and your next job. And I'll be the one who will live with the movie for the rest of my life.

JULIE SALAMON: I'll be the one who will live with this movie for the rest of my life, he says.

And now... here I am. Doing a podcast about it. 30 years later. I guess... Brian was right.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On the next episode of The Devil's Candy... Brian De Palma and his crew are ready to shoot in the Bronx.

But when they get there, they find out not everyone is excited about their movie.

NEWS CLIP: Ferrer is demanding a disclaimer which would mention some good things about the Bronx.

FERNANDO FERRER: At least a few seconds at the end of the movie, at the end of the movie, telling people, Oh, by the way, the Bronx isn't exactly Calcutta or the murder capital of the face of the planet.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Season 2 of The Plot Thickens was produced by Campside Media in partnership with Turner Classic Movies.

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