

CHAPTER I

Truth or Dare

Avoid flurried manner, even when you must work fast.

—Patricia Murphy’s manual for employees, 1930

It was exactly one week before Thanksgiving, 1961. The windows of Macy’s flagship store in New York’s Herald Square would soon be festooned with more than 100,000 red and green Christmas ball ornaments and three miles of tinsel. Store holiday displays all over Manhattan were going to be unabashedly traditional, ending years of experimentation with modernist and Asian-inspired trends, prompting a newspaper to declare, “It’s Chic to Be Corny.”¹

For now, other delights enticed passersby from behind the plate glass. Mannequins wore Botany knit jackets over knee-length skirts, the Jackie Kennedy look. Guitars and Hammond organs were arranged under a banner announcing that the kids from *The Sound of Music* would take part in the Macy’s Thanksgiving parade. Two windows on Broadway showcased washer-dryers, hi-fi systems, and TV consoles. The one-stop-shopping craze had seized the suburbs, and even here in Manhattan, Macy’s boasted of carrying everything from rings to refrigerators.

On this day, November 17, Macy’s had something extra. An entire window on Thirty-Fourth Street was devoted to the display of a single book whose author would autograph copies at Macy’s that evening. The title was *Glow of Candlelight*, and the author was Patricia Murphy, a restaurateur—or “restauratrice,” as her publisher described her—who over the previous three decades had opened five restaurants in Greater New York and Florida and financed one in London. All had thrived, particularly the Patricia Murphy’s Candlelight Restaurant in Yonkers, recently

expanded to thirteen acres of hills, gardens, artificial ponds and enormous parking lots. Still, an entire Macy's window was a lot of hoopla for the autobiography of a woman known best for her popovers—airy rolls served from bottomless baskets by roaming, attractive “popover girls.”

By 4:30, two hours before the autographing session in the book department, Kay Vincent, the author's publicist, was a smartly dressed mass of nerves. Not that she displayed any as she left the department store's executive office. Everything was ready for the 5:30 press conference that would precede the book signing. Patricia's catering staff had laid out china, silver, a sumptuous buffet, and, of course, orchids.²

The author, Kay knew, would be oh-so-slightly late for the press, though her Manhattan penthouse was just a short limo drive from the store. As one of Patricia Murphy's pilots would later say about her penchant for flying short distances more easily driven, with Patricia it was all about *The Arrival*.³

Kay passed the typing pool, blowing kisses to the clerks. Everybody knew her; she had headed up Macy's public relations department until the previous year. Patting her chignon to check for wayward hairs, she rode the escalators down to the fifth floor, digging in her purse for the notes given her by Patricia, a warm friend and congenial drinking buddy, but a demanding client. Even the *Trib*'s horticulture editor, though mesmerized by Patricia's gardens, found her to be “an intense lady.”⁴

There were the notes, green scrawls, and doodles. Proudly Irish and still steaming from an ancient and ambiguous anti-Irish slight she mentioned twice in her book (Howard Barnes, Kay's left-leaning husband and the book's ghostwriter, had egged her on there), Patricia always wrote in green.

Green ink! Would there be enough in Patricia's fountain pen for ninety minutes of autographing? Suppressing an urge to scramble up the moving escalator and grab one of those typist's phones, Kay instead looked out at the store and admired her handiwork. She had done enough—an entire Macy's window dedicated to the book, full-page ads in *The New York Times* and other papers announcing the event, and, floating past Kay as she descended, posters bearing Patricia's image in a dozen departments.

“MEET AN ALMOST-LEGENDARY LADY IN AN ABSORBING AND INSPIRING BOOK,” the posters demanded.⁵ Maybe that “almost” had been a mistake, but it was too late to change it now. And,

frankly, Patricia was no William L. Shirer or Theodore White, whose *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and *The Making of a President*, 1960 filled large swaths of the bookcases lining the walls of the book department. Hell, she wasn't even that doctor who wrote *Calories Don't Count*, which one ample-figured Macy's shopper was at this moment taking to the register.

However, Patricia Murphy was rich. She had invested sixty dollars in a failing Brooklyn restaurant at the start of the Depression and turned it into a fortune, exactly as the posters and book ads said. Plus, she threw fabulous parties, and knew people like Kay Vincent. The press would show up for Patricia's book launch to gobble jumbo shrimp and to say hi to Kay, who for years had been fashion editor of the *Herald Tribune*. When the *Trib* pushed her aside for that snarky young editor who wrote the Christmas-is-corny headline, Macy's snatched her up. It was Kay who decorated Macy's model home for the trade exhibition in Moscow, where Nixon and Khrushchev held their 1959 Kitchen Debate.⁶

Today she faced a tougher challenge: decorating the dowdy book department to Patricia Murphy's exacting standards. Piles of *To Kill a Mockingbird* were swept off tables. Damask tablecloths were laid down and topped with candelabra and orchid arrangements. These, as well as popovers, were the signature emblems of Patricia Murphy's Candlelight restaurants. Candles and flowers, along with costumed employees and a constant round of seasonal celebrations, gave her eateries "atmosphere," a feeling that one had stepped into a world beyond everyday experience. That's what kept the public coming.

They were coming here, too. Kay, after moderating the well-attended press conference upstairs returned to a mobbed book department. An announcement was made, and a short, middle-aged woman took a seat at a table, between an elaborately carved candelabra and a tall vase of orchids. Interlocking gold hexagons marched across the woman's white jacket, worn over a sheath of the same brocade. The top of her small pillbox hat echoed the pattern in miniature.⁷ Kay had been wondering why Patricia insisted that the candles be lit. They were a fire hazard, and the flames were barely visible in the dull wash of Macy's fluorescents. Now, however, they worked their magic, brightening the gold of Patricia's clothes and jewelry.

A typical Patricia stroke of genius, Kay thought, to choose precisely the right outfit for the debut of a book titled *Glow of Candlelight*. The effect also softened her face, which on bad days—and there had been

plenty of those since Patricia's second husband had suddenly died four years earlier—bore little resemblance to the portrait Patricia had commissioned for the book-jacket cover. Patricia was a failure at posing for pictures. The back of the jacket featured a nice candid of her with her dog. But the minute she became aware of the lens, she froze.

So instead of a photo, a painting dominated the cover of her book. It showed an elegant blond woman sitting among orchid plants in a full-skirted white evening gown. The person in the portrait resembled the screen goddess Lana Turner, whose stardom was then just beginning to wane, though the eyes were Patricia Murphy's. The artist was Jon Whitcomb, by that time a high-priced magazine and advertising illustrator, more accustomed to portraying glamorous young actresses like Debbie Reynolds and Natalie Wood than businesswomen who had just turned fifty-six—not fifty, as the dates and ages in her book suggested. She had been lying about her age since her first humble Brooklyn Heights tea room attracted press coverage with its enormous success.

The Patricia Murphy signing book after book for her adoring fans was somewhat heavier than the one in the portrait, although the real Patricia had been dieting like mad. She'd been subsisting on breakfasts of tomato juice and half a cup of coffee—half, because once sipped midway, a full cup failed to meet her exacting temperature standards.⁸

Whitcomb had captured, though idealized, her heart-shaped face with high forehead and semi-circles of brow over eyes set so wide they appeared serene, though that was not an adjective to describe Patricia, who invited comparisons to a hummingbird.⁹ She had a decent nose, but candlelight and lipstick couldn't help the small, taut mouth. That's where all the tensions of running her businesses showed. When Patricia needed a drink, lines formed and made her jaw area look sectional, like the face of a marionette.

Kay stood to the side of her friend and client, enduring Patricia's rearrangement of stacked books already carefully arranged, and praying, if that was the word for it, that Patricia would not cross herself in secular Macy's, where God took second place to Mammon. Patricia was not particularly religious, but incurably superstitious, and her behavior could verge on the eccentric.

But Patricia looked fine, beaming at the adoring fans who had waited patiently in line, first at the register and then in front of her table. She was in her element, as was her audience. Folks intolerant of

long lines were unlikely to have dined at a Patricia Murphy's Candlelight Restaurant, which at times sat ten thousand people on a single day. When tour buses jammed the parking lots, and there was no hope for tables, meals were beautifully plated and served on the buses.

Unwound, she more closely resembled her portrait, the image she had cultivated for decades. "It was a glamour picture, and it was somewhat different from what she looked like," said her interior decorator, Carleton Varney, "but Patricia Murphy was a fantasy. She was the hostess in the restaurant."¹⁰

She also had astounding commercial instincts. Sentimentally, the book linked her midlife interest in horticulture to memories of her mother's rock garden in Newfoundland. It also cloaked her profitable restaurant gift shops in family tradition. Her father had run a general store in a fishing village, selling everything from needles to anchors.

Like much of the book, that was partly true. But in business, Patricia looked forward, not back. She had anticipated middle-class flight from city to suburbs and the jet-age potential of Florida. The Fort Lauderdale restaurant was smaller than the one in Yonkers, but she had grand plans for it. Having already invested heavily in renovating and landscaping the Fort Lauderdale restaurant, she planned to persuade the city to let her develop the marina with a hotel and shopping center.

A reporter once called her "five feet of Irish dynamite." True enough. Wherever Patricia went, explosives and earthmovers followed.¹¹

Meanwhile, in Fort Lauderdale and Yonkers, gardens and gift shops, not to mention the bars, gave people something to do and a reason to spend while they stayed on site, ready to refill the table seats. Patricia had fixed things so that hundreds, even a thousand, were often waiting for tables, ensuring a steady stream of revenue.

Kay watched the stacks of *Glow* disappear as Patricia bent forward to listen to her fans give their names or the names of intended gift recipients. She scrawled as they talked about their grandfather's birthday, celebrated in the Yonkers restaurant back in the fifties when it first opened, or asked if the live animals would be in the Christmas crèche again this year.

Two older women had taken the IND train from Brooklyn. Oblivious to the crush of people behind them, they were regaling Patricia with their memories of the first Candlelight as it looked in its infancy. Those early months, when it was down in the Henry Street basement,

before all the expansions upstairs—how tasteful and artistic Patricia had managed to make it look. And how surprising to read in the Macy’s ad that she’d been juggling twenty cups and saucers among thirty-six seats. That didn’t mean the cups hadn’t gotten a thorough wash, did it? They had been so pleased that Patricia, a girl with manners and refinement, had taken over that dreadful place so they could be sure it was clean, not like when that man was running it, that Italian . . .

Kay chuckled to herself as Patricia interrupted and deftly changed the subject. Even with Kay mediating, ghostwriting the book had not always gone smoothly for her husband. But Patricia’s views on working-class people and oppressed groups had met with Howard Barnes’s approval. That, along with friendship, had prompted Howard to take the task on. For four decades Howard had been the film and theater critic for the *Herald Tribune*, but he was also the son of an unschooled farm boy who had managed to become a Stanford professor. With Patricia’s schedule allowing no time to keep a journal or write letters too fat for a small baronial envelope, this book was her only chance for a literary memorial.

Patricia’s story wasn’t quite the rags-to-riches tale the ads and jacket copy promised. Her merchant father had done well and sent her to Catholic boarding school before the family fell on hard times, so it was more like Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *A Little Princess*, about the English girl whose wealthy father died in India, leaving her to starve temporarily in her former private school’s attic. Still, for all of Patricia’s furs, jewels, and lap dogs, she bristled at injustice. Howard had happily crafted sentences from her complaint about the real estate broker who, on learning that “Pat Murphy” was no burly Irishman but rather a tiny female, laughed her out of his office.

“Aside from being young and tiny, I was blackballed in advance by my sex,” Howard quoted Patricia, perhaps slightly radicalizing her late-1930s anecdote. “The fact that women are discriminated against has always made me mad, and I’ve championed scores of girls and women who were looking for careers ever since that time.”

Or at least, Kay thought, girls and women attractive enough to be relish girls, who like their popover counterparts, visited tables with condiments and pickles. And Patricia had certainly courted women restaurant-goers. She’d defied the East Side snobs who initially spurned her second restaurant, on Manhattan’s East Sixtieth Street. The club-

women claimed that the salad bar—eighty-five cents for half a lettuce head crammed with salmon and topped with hard-boiled egg, plus beverage, and dessert¹²—attracted the so-called riff-raff, namely salesgirls and secretaries working in the area.

“I encouraged the patronage of white-collar working girls, who were just becoming a factor in the restaurant luncheon trade,” is how Howard helped phrase Patricia’s whiskey-fueled recollections. Patricia could match Howard and Kay drink for drink.¹³ Her book boasted that she spiked watermelons for unsuspecting guests. She never made cracks about the Barnes’s alcohol intake or that time Howard had wrapped his car around a tree in Connecticut.¹⁴ Patricia liked a good time.

Beaded, bejeweled, and doused with her own brand-name fragrance, Patricia also liked to flaunt her wealth and accomplishments. To enter the Fort Lauderdale market, she flew its mayor up to Yonkers on her private plane. Patricia had bid nearly a third of a million dollars for a ten-year lease on a city-owned yacht club, and Mayor John V. Russell boarded the small aircraft to verify her credentials. The young Democrat, friendly with JFK, wished to see with his own eyes the floral-fabulous Westchester dining place pictured on hundreds of thousands of postcards.¹⁵ Patricia’s business dispensed the cards to queued-up patrons and spent \$10,000 a year on three-cent postage. Many mailed the cards to friends hoping to instill envy.

Kay didn’t envy Patricia’s restaurant staff that day. They swore that Patricia could simultaneously count the house while noticing the customer in a distant corner who needed butter.¹⁶ Yet her employees seemed more respectful than terrified; Patricia treated others with dignity. Howard pointed out that Russell was on the right side of the civil rights struggle in Florida. The Candlelight hosted Urban League dinners and catered wedding receptions for black couples. A black church had chosen Patricia’s restaurant for a celebration of the first anniversary of school desegregation.¹⁷ The young Floridian may have found this remarkable, coming from the segregated South.

Well, the popover girls were still lily white, and Negroes were just another market, mused Kay. Between them and the Filipino waiters, Patricia was probably providing plenty of conversation for the out-of-towners who took tour buses to the Westchester Candlelight, the official name of her Yonkers location because the county name carried cachet, while the city suffered stigma. As for Patricia, Kay knew that, despite

the green ink and the all-out St. Patrick's Day celebrations at her restaurants, she was dying for WASP acceptance and buying her way into Palm Beach society.

Kay noticed that the pair from Brooklyn had emerged from the autograph line and were now browsing the wall shelves. Would they choose something by J.D. Salinger, perhaps? Kay doubted it. She shared Patricia's dim view of this pair's "staid borough of churches," as Howard wrote, quoting her almost directly, but she was happy that as publicist, she'd forced the two of them to omit the worst jabs. Patricia could nurse a grudge like nobody else—that's why she was still speaking to only one of her six siblings—but you couldn't publish this stuff and expect folks from Brooklyn to buy your book.

Kay recalled the passage she'd noticed in the final manuscript, right before the book went to press. She and Howard were at their weekend home in New Hartford, Connecticut, when it leapt out at her. It was well worth the cost of a prolonged long-distance call. The Prentice-Hall editor had been persuaded to soften Patricia's final kiss-off to Brooklyn, calling it "provincial" and "prejudiced."¹⁸

As for Patricia's telling of her love-hate relationship with the nuns, Kay let it stand. Kay, too, had been educated by the Sisters of Mercy before engaging in antics like racing a horse around the ballroom of the Hotel Astor for a Newspaper Woman's Club event. For Manhattan-born Kay, Catholic school academics had laid the foundation for journalism. For Patricia, a convent school for middle-class Newfoundland girls had created a restauratrice who played classical piano and arranged flowers, skills that endeared her to the Brooklyn Heights burghers.

Patricia could not only ride horses but buy them. She had a show jumper, Treaty Stone in Ireland, as well as a rented castle in County Mayo, part of her self-prescribed rehab regimen after the death of her beloved second husband, Captain James E. "Rosie" Kiernan. Oh, the parties they hosted when the captain was alive! There had been the one at their Florida estate when Rosie—nicknamed for his rosy complexion, extra rosy *that night*—filled the swimming pool with orchids and topped it with Plexiglas for a dance floor. What a loss that had been for Patricia, finding a man secure enough not to mind becoming "Mr. Patricia Murphy," then losing him after only nine years of marriage.

Patricia was rapping out one of her requests, which, no matter how politely phrased, always sounded like a close-drill order. This one

was something like, “May I have another pen, Mrs. Fitzgerald?” Patricia always used the honorific with her front-office employees, and many of them called her Mrs. Kiernan. Not her general managers, though. Not her right-hand man, John Rogers, who called himself her brother-in-law, though he was related only to one of her estranged brothers, nor Greg Camillucci, who had worked his way up from busboy to general manager. Both were listed, along with Kay and Howard, on the acknowledgments page of the book, though Greg’s last name was misspelled, Kay had noticed earlier in the day.

There was nothing to be done about that, and it wasn’t significant like the Brooklyn gaffe. That one would have cost sales. The Camillucci misspelling was not an entirely wrong name, as when Howard somehow typed “Edward Cabana” instead of “Alexander Cabana, Jr.” for the name of Patricia’s pilot. Kay had fixed that, too. Maybe the mistake revealed Howard’s unconscious discomfort with the Big Lie: that Patricia, along with running restaurants and raising flowers, often flew the plane herself.¹⁹

Kay and Howard were her co-pilots on that fib, letting it stand because it helped sell the publisher on the book. They were news people, and they knew what made a story. Restauratrice wasn’t enough, no matter what obstacles Patricia had overcome. They also had to make her an aviatrix. It was in the book, which opened with Patricia surmounting her grief at the loss of her husband by flying in the clouds, and in all the publicity materials which, as Kay knew, most newspapers would copy verbatim.

There had been one more last-minute manuscript fix. Howard had Patricia writing, “ours was a large family” after fifty-odd pages in which she had mentioned only one of her three sisters—the youngest, Sheila—and none of her three brothers.

Right now, Kay wished she could bunch up Patricia’s table linen to gag a threesome from Long Island’s North Shore, who for some reason were Christmas shopping at this Macy store instead of the one near them in Roosevelt Field and had recognized the name on the posters.

“We were at your Manhasset restaurant last Mother’s Day. Just lovely as usual,”²⁰ said one, referring to a Patricia Murphy’s Candlelight Restaurant that Patricia had sold seven years before and had nothing more to do with, as she made clear in a message printed on her menus. That line of text had spawned lawsuits, appeals, and enmity. Kay held her breath, as the Long Islanders waded deeper into yet more perilous waters.

“Of course, we love your sister Lauraine’s place, too. We’re there even more, maybe twice a month.”

“Only because it’s closer to Lord & Taylor,” interjected one of the speaker’s friends. She was, perhaps, a more intuitive sort who had seen the flicker of irritation pass over Patricia’s face, looking a little tired now from the labor of inscribing books, the shedding of facial powder, and the mention of the Lauraine Murphy restaurant.

Kay hovered as Patricia recovered her composure, asked the Long Islanders for their names, and gave them her autograph. She had never spoken to her siblings again, but Kay knew they were always with her, gnawing at Patricia’s gut. In the Murphy family’s version of the Cold War, the dueling siblings practiced industrial espionage on one another, pumping their mother and Sheila for news of the other side, or visiting Patricia’s Yonkers restaurant when they knew she’d be away. Her brother Vincent, managing Westchester at the time, had given them the all-clear. He was a double agent—staying on with Patricia for several years while secretly investing in Lauraine Murphy’s before eventually joining the others in Long Island.

The mutinous quartet couldn’t have missed the ads for this event, and the press conference had been well attended, ensuring plenty of reviews. The women’s page writers and book reviewers had closed their notepads and left after the conference, but Kay spied an editor from the industry trade bible, *Publishers Weekly*, still lurking on the fringes of the thinning crowd. He had already taken some pictures. Did he plan to stay until the bitter end?

“It could be setting a record of some sort,” was his answer to Kay’s query.

As it turned out, it had. At eight o’clock, the last autograph seeker straggled out of the department. The cashiers began proofing their registers, and while Patricia’s private secretary and other minions imported from Yonkers moved the furniture back into place and packed away candlesticks and table cloth, Patricia personally counted the few books remaining before they went into boxes. As always, Kay admired Patricia’s swift calculations.

Between chatting, accepting compliments, and fending off uncomfortable questions, Patricia had autographed 400 books in ninety minutes. Added to the 950 she’d signed for pre-publication mail orders, plus 200 more for Macy’s to keep on hand, she’d made history.

The man from *Publishers Weekly* confirmed the numbers with the department manager. Yes, it was indeed a record for autographed copies sold by the store. Yes, this made it the number one bestseller at Macy's, over Shirer, Turner, Lee, and the diet doctor.

On December 18, his trade weekly ran a piece that placed Patricia's accomplishment alongside others who had broken records for sales of autographed book copies. Those others included former President Harry S. Truman, who had signed four thousand copies of his autobiography, *Years of Decision*, at a hotel in his native Kansas City and baseball Hall of Famer Bob Feller, who had inscribed three thousand copies of *Strikeout Story* in Cleveland, where he was then playing for the Indians. And at Macy's rival, Gimbels, Democratic Party kingmaker and former U.S. Postmaster James E. Farley had equaled Patricia's numbers with his 1948 autobiography.

But, remarked an astonished *Publishers Weekly*, "what seems to be unusual about the sales of the Murphy book is the fact that the author is neither a nationally known nor even a well-known local figure. . . . She is a restaurateur whose hobby is gardening." The report—perhaps trying to unravel the mystery—went on to mention that her book included not only her life story, but also gardening tips, recipes, and full menus for meals and entertaining.²¹

In truth, the throngs had shown up for the woman, not the recipes. Patricia Murphy had built herself into a brand, so valuable that the buyers of her Brooklyn and Long Island restaurants continued to use all or part of her restaurant name, paying handsomely to do so. It was a name that sold not only meals—"luxury dining at budget prices," as her menus put it—but also her Patricia Murphy's Green Orchid bath oils and perfumes, on display at her New York and Florida gift shops.

The packing up was almost finished, but Patricia conferred with her Westchester staff for a few minutes. She wanted to make sure the new menus had come back from the printers, listing her book above the soups and appetizers to tell customers they could buy it in the gift shops, the restaurant lobbies and the Yonkers greenhouse.

Was it on the Florida menus, too? Patricia's weary secretary nodded. Kay put her arm around Patricia and steered her toward the elevator.

Macy's hired elevator operators long after self-service elevators became available. That was the kind of touch that pleased Patricia. "She was a socially conscious gal, wouldn't be seen in Manhattan without a

hat and gloves,” recalled Camillucci, her former manager. Referring to an upscale store that had once competed with Macy’s, he added, “She wouldn’t go to Best and Company when they got rid of the elevator girl and you had to push the buttons yourself.”²²

They ascended to the executive offices on the thirteenth floor so Patricia could retrieve her fur and get some rest. One of the men from Yonkers was already trotting down chilly Seventh Avenue in search of the limo that had been circling Herald Square for hours. The driver was waiting to take Patricia back to Sky High, her penthouse at 1136 Fifth Avenue, later to become the fictional residence of the rich girl in the twenty-first-century book and television show, *Gossip Girl*.

Kay had even worked Sky High into the book publicity campaign, convincing gardening columnists to cover Patricia’s stupendous terrace gardens. As far back as July, Patricia was getting coverage of her hibiscus, azaleas, her many national and international gardening awards and, by the way, her upcoming book.

There would be many articles and honors to come. Patricia had already been named Woman of the Week by a New York paper, the *Journal-American*, and Woman of the Month by the American Woman’s Association of New York. *Life* magazine had run a full-page photo of the Miss Patricia Murphy dahlia. A few months after her book appeared, American Express would select the Westchester Candlelight as Restaurant of the Week. *Current Biography* 1962 would devote one of its rare slots for women to a profile of her. Papers across the nation would run features about her and the book, and no one would question her pilot’s license.

The book would soon cede its number one sales slot at Macy’s to national bestsellers, but it remained a favorite in small-town women’s book clubs. Two years after publication, it was still the top nonfiction title in Amsterdam, New York. Even five years later, a woman in Statesville, North Carolina, chose to review the book for her club, never mind that times had moved on and Jacqueline Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls* would be another choice at the same meeting.

But there was none of that to temper the triumph of the two women basking in the afterglow of the *Glow* party, kicking off their shoes in an office shortly before the notorious Macy’s Dobermans were due to start patrolling the empty store. A dog lover, Patricia hoped her limo wouldn’t be located too fast because she wanted to meet the Dobermans.

One of her first extravagances had been to rent the yards adjacent to her own in Brooklyn for a dog run.

Almost every family in Newfoundland had dogs, Patricia thought, as she shrugged into her mink and pulled on her gloves. Newfoundlanders used dog sleds in the winter if they couldn't afford horses. There had been no roadmap to point her toward success. In fact, she came from a place that barely had roads.