

Murder with a Terrace View

By Terea Michael

Chapter 2

Saturday—the Next Morning

Harrington House

River Crest, Ohio

Molly yawned as she strolled into the Harrington House Bed-and-Breakfast kitchen. Chef Elise was already there in her crisp white smock, her chef's hat atop her short, pale-pink hair. Molly Harrington closed her eyes and inhaled the morning scents of baking biscuits and freshly brewed coffee.

“Well, good morning, Molly Sunshine.” Elise was wide awake and totally in her element in the newly renovated professional kitchen with bright, stainless-steel commercial appliances, which had been one of Elise's requirements before signing on as chef. “What a glorious Ohio spring morning. The flower beds will be gorgeous this year.”

“Do you have to be so cheerful so early?” Molly asked, running her fingers through her short, wavy, chestnut hair. She had stayed up too late the night before. The bed-and-breakfast she owned with her brother, Kevin, had hosted its first big event, a book launch for a local celebrity. Although Molly had planned much larger and more extravagant events as a hotel event planner in her previous job, this book launch was the largest event for the recently opened Harrington House. In the six months since they had opened, bridal and baby showers, book clubs, wine tastings, and luncheons were common events. With the book launch's press and social media

posts, she had high hopes that the Harrington House B and B would be the next destination for those looking for a quiet weekend in a delightful country escape along the Ohio River.

Molly pushed her hair behind her ears and worked the crick out of her neck. “I slept on the couch in my apartment. With all the rooms full, I let Nana have my bed. She didn’t want to go home when Aunt Vanessa left.” Molly’s apartment suite was the most recent project completed by her brother, a contractor. Behind the kitchen was an area that had been the cook and butler’s quarters, storage, and a pantry, which now included Molly’s studio apartment, an office, and the laundry room with a new industrial-sized washer and dryer.

Elise laughed. “Your grandma has a severe case of fear of missing out on what’s going on.”

“Yep. She definitely has that. And she’s sneaky too. She came to the party with Noxzema and clean underwear in her purse.” Molly chuckled, glad her grandmother was becoming more of her old self after having suffered from depression following her daughter’s sudden death. Molly understood. She missed her mother as much as Nana missed her daughter. “Have you heard any of the guests up and about? The inside front door wasn’t latched. No matter how often I remind people, they don’t remember to pull it shut.”

“No, I haven’t heard anyone. They’re probably all sleeping in until breakfast. It was quite the night,” Elise said, pulling a tray of homemade biscuits out of the oven. “River Crest will talk about the Aubrey Rhodes book launch for some time.”

“It was exciting. The house looked great, everyone seemed to have a good time, and they sold all the books Betty had in stock,” Molly said as she poured a cup of coffee. “But it was quite awkward between Betty and Aubrey.”

Elise turned toward her, wire whisk in hand, as she prepared the Hollandaise sauce for the eggs Benedict. “It seemed like half the town showed up.”

“Besides wanting to see what we’ve done to the house, they wanted to see what might happen between Betty and Aubrey. According to Aunt Vanessa, that feud began in high school when Aubrey broke up with her the week before prom.” Molly pulled fresh strawberries and blueberries from the refrigerator for fruit and yogurt parfaits.

“Thirty years is a long time to hold a grudge,” Elise said, sliding the bacon into the oven.

The Harrington family’s pink rose china was set on the antique rectangular oak table by eight o’clock. Colorful red-and-blue yogurt and berry parfaits in stemmed-glass dessert dishes sat in the middle of coordinated place settings with carefully folded matching cloth napkins.

Tracy Barnes, Aubrey’s twenty-something publicist, was the first one down. Her long, ash-blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and extra concealer covered the dark circles under her eyes. A few minutes later, George Roark, Aubrey’s agent, appeared and pulled out the chair next to Tracy. In his midforties, medium height, with his hair stylishly cut to disguise his receding hairline, he wasn’t fat but was fighting the tendency to go soft in the middle. He wore a dark suit and white shirt with no tie.

Nick Chiasson arrived next. He and his wife Diana were from the New Orleans suburbs. In town for a family wedding, they were not part of the book-launch festivities, but they had joined the stragglers for a nightcap when they had arrived later in the evening.

“Good morning, y’all,” Nick said in his thick Cajun accent. “I am starvin’. My mother-in-law says the breakfasts here are wonderful.” He reached for the basket of warm biscuits in front of him. “That’s one reason we booked at Harrington House.” In his early thirties, he had thick, black, curly hair and eyes so dark Molly could barely see his pupils.

“Thank you,” Molly said. “I hope we live up to your expectations. The chef has prepared her special eggs Benedict this morning.”

Minutes later, Nick’s wife Diana slid onto the chair beside her husband. “I’m sorry I’m running behind this morning. I probably shouldn’t have had that nightcap after all those toasts at my sister’s rehearsal dinner.”

Nana strolled in as the guests were finishing their first course. Her blue eyes were sharp, her gray curls combed into place, and she wore a lavender pantsuit fit for an Ohio spring day.

Molly served the breakfast entrée, artfully plated on matching rose-trimmed dishes. “Today’s offering is Chef Elise’s version of the traditional eggs Benedict on country biscuits with breakfast potatoes.”

As Molly refreshed the coffee, Tracy asked, “Have you heard from Aubrey?”

“No, but I was thinking the same thing,” Molly said. “Last night, he mentioned a ten-thirty appointment in Cincinnati and said he wanted to be down for breakfast by eight thirty.”

George pulled his phone from his pocket and checked the time. “He’s probably overslept again.” George pressed a button to call Aubrey, but it went to voicemail after a few rings. “We can’t be late for this meeting. I should go up and roust him.”

“No, no.” Molly placed the coffee pot on her great-grandmother’s massive oak breakfront. “Finish your breakfast. I’ll go up and knock on his door. He’s probably just slow to get moving this morning. Aubrey had quite a bit of champagne last night.”

“He’s not the only one,” Tracy said. “But this breakfast is an amazing cure for what ails.”

“Those women were all over him last night,” Nana cackled. “Just like when he was back in high school. You know, he was in my daughter Vanessa’s class.”

George laughed. “Aubrey eats that up, especially since this is his hometown. It was quite the book launch, Mrs. Wells. Very successful, and I’m sure it will help promote your granddaughter’s B and B.”

“Call me Margie. I’m tickled pink with what my grandchildren have done with this old house. You know, their great-grandfather on their daddy’s side built this house. My daughter, their mama, God rest her soul, moved into this house on her weddin’ day.” Nana’s Eastern Kentucky accent seemed to be thicker than usual. “They moved out when they started havin’ babies, though.”

Oh, Lord. Nana will talk their ears off, Molly thought as she stepped into the entry hall to the wide oak staircase polished to a shine.

Molly jogged up the stairs but stopped on the landing when she saw Lindsay Luttrell, Aubrey’s fan-club president, coming down the steps. In her early twenties, she was short but round, with shoulder-length, light-brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail.

“Good morning, Lindsay.”

“Am I too late for breakfast?” She looked worried as she joined Molly on the landing. “I stayed up too late uploading the launch photos to social media.”

“Oh, no,” Molly said. “There’s coffee on the breakfront and a yogurt parfait for you. I’ll bring your plate after I knock on Aubrey’s door.”

“He’s probably overslept. He was up late last night. I heard his door open and close about one.” Lindsay shrugged and continued down the stairs.

Molly watched her slouch down the stairs and thought that if anyone ever needed a makeover, it was Lindsay Luttrell. She continued up the stairs, passed the Art Deco room, and stopped at the second door. She'd named it the Terrace Room because French doors opened onto a terrace overlooking the rolling hills that slid down to the Ohio River. She knocked on the door and called his name. When he didn't answer, she tried the door and found it unlocked.

"Aubrey," she called and knocked again. "It's me, Molly." She opened the door and peeked inside. It was a calming room in shades of mauve and cream. The duvet was mussed, but the bed did not appear to have been slept in. The room was chilly, and as she opened the door farther, she noticed the French doors were open and the bathroom door was closed.

Molly halted at the doorway. "Aubrey, are you in here?" The room didn't feel right. A chill ran up her spine. She eyed the closed bathroom, and images of a drunk, naked, passed-out Aubrey crossed her mind. She winced. Reluctant to go farther, she stepped back into the hallway and closed the door. After many years working in the hospitality and food service industry, she firmly believed in the CYA philosophy—Cover Your Ass. She needed a witness to whatever was inside, especially for any possible material damage. She patted the pockets of her trousers and realized she'd left her phone and passkey in the kitchen.

Molly hurried down the stairs, hoping her guests in the dining room didn't hear her. As she tiptoed into the kitchen, she heard her guests chatting about the book launch and the evening's wedding. In the kitchen, Elise was busy filling the basket with freshly baked biscuits.

"What?" Elise asked. "You look like you've seen the family ghost."

"Come with me," she whispered, motioning for Elise to follow her. "I need a witness."

Elise's eyes widened. "You've seen her, haven't you?"

Molly shook her head. "Let's go up the back way." The butler's pantry stairs entered the large second-floor foyer between the Roaring Twenties Room and the Terrace Room.

"What are you doing?" Elise asked as Molly opened Aubrey's bedroom door.

"He's not answering, and I didn't want to go inside without a witness."

Elise nodded toward the bathroom. "He's probably in there." She leaned against the doorjamb. "But I don't hear any water running."

"Knock on the door."

Elise knocked, and Molly called out, "Aubrey, it's time for breakfast. You have that appointment. Remember?"

"Should we open the door?" Elise asked.

"Perhaps we should get George to do that. Maybe he's passed out drunk."

Elise scrunched up her face. "And naked! Good idea."

Molly crossed the room to pull the French doors closed. She froze. Aubrey Rhodes lay face up on the terrace floor, his leg cocked sideways in an unnatural position, his latest novel upside down next to him. It must have rained during the night, because the terrace floor, the book, and Aubrey were wet.

"Molly, shut the doors, and let's go. He's such a horn-dog. He probably hooked up with one of his groupies last night. That explains why the front door wasn't latched this morning."

Molly let out the breath she didn't realize she had held. "I don't think so."

"What are you talking about?" Elise abruptly stopped next to Molly. "Oh, jeez."

Molly pulled her gaze away from Aubrey's body. "We probably should check for a pulse."

"Okay. Go on." Elise gestured toward Aubrey.

The brisk April wind stung Molly's cheeks as she stepped onto the terrace. She'd had some training and had watched enough television to know she shouldn't touch anything or do anything to contaminate a possible crime scene, but if Aubrey was still alive, time was of the essence. She needed to check his pulse. Molly stood next to him and looked down. He wore the same clothes he'd worn the night before—black trousers and a pale-blue shirt. His eyes were wide open and stared blankly up at the gathering gray clouds.

"Molly. Is he...?"

"Yes," Molly said. "I'm sure of it."

"I've never seen a dead person."

"Except for my mother in the hospital, I haven't either." Molly closed the French doors and backed into the spacious room.

"What should we do?" Elise asked.

"Call the police." Molly patted her pockets and realized she still hadn't picked up her phone or the keys.

"What about the guests downstairs?"

Molly tapped her forefinger on her chin. "Let's keep feeding them until the cops get here."

Elise stepped into the hallway, and Molly pulled the bedroom door shut. They reached the stairs as George Roark stepped onto the landing below them.

"Is he awake?" he asked, running up the remaining eight stairs.

"Uh...no," Molly said.

Elise looked from Molly to George and back to Molly. "I'm going to take care of that thing we discussed." She slipped around George and ran down the back stairs.

George moved to open the bedroom door, but Molly blocked his way.

“He needs to hurry up,” George said, reaching around her. “We must be on time for our appointments. I’ve set up some interviews and another signing.”

“I don’t think that will happen.” Molly stood at the bedroom door, her hand on the doorknob behind her. “I shouldn’t let you in there.”

He reached over her shoulder, knocked on the door, and called for Aubrey. When there was no answer, he looked at Molly and said, “What are you hiding?” He pushed her aside, none too gently, and opened the door.

“Please, don’t go in there.”

“Aubrey,” George called as he looked around the room. He checked the bathroom and peeked into the closet.

“He’s not in there.”

“Where is he?”

Molly gestured toward the terrace. George glanced back and then opened the French doors. He froze, arms wide, hands still on the doorknobs. He dropped his head to his chest, took a deep breath, and shut the doors. He paused for a moment before turning to face Molly. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. I found him like that when I came upstairs. Elise went to call the police.”

George sank into the mauve Queen Anne chair between the door and the fireplace.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Molly and George turned simultaneously toward Tracy, standing in the doorway. “Where’s Aubrey?” She looked from one person to the other. “Is he out there?” She gestured toward the French doors.

“Don’t,” Molly and George said simultaneously.

Tracy wrinkled her brow. “What? Why?”

“Don’t go out there,” Molly said. “Aubrey’s...uh...he’s dead.”

In disbelief, Tracy looked between them and then toward the terrace. “What are you saying?”

“He’s dead,” George said, holding his forehead.

Tracy leaned against the French doors, head down.

“Tracy, you were in the room next door,” Molly said. “Did you hear anything last night?”

“No, nothing,” she said. “I drank too much champagne. So, I took two ibuprofen, put white noise on my phone, and went to sleep.”

Molly stood by the door. “I think we should go back downstairs until the police arrive. George, you’re his agent. You can explain to the other guests while I check with Elise about the police.”

Molly looked at Tracy, who nodded but glanced away as she wiped away a tear with her fingertips.

Molly followed George and Tracy into the hall.

“Oh my,” Molly muttered as she pulled the door shut and put the Do Not Disturb sign on the doorknob. “Not exactly the book launch we’d planned.”

