

Murder at the Million Dollar Pier: The book is set in Saint Petersburg in 1926. The main characters are Cornelia Pettijohn, her very close companion Teddy Lawless, and Professor Percival Pettijohn, Cornelia's elderly uncle. Teddy is suspected of murdering Ansel Stevens, her ex-fiancé from thirty years before.

When the trio returned to their room, they discovered Detective Knaggs and Sergeant Duncan leaning against the wall outside their hotel room, waiting for them. Knaggs straightened and stuck his notebook back into his jacket. "We need to have a word with you three again. Something needs clearing up."

"Of course," Uncle Percival said, unlocking the door. Cornelia had another bad feeling in the stomach. The pair of officers didn't sit down, and the one had his notebook out again. Her uncle didn't sit, either. His hearing device was in his ear and his face had the calm expression he wore when he was in the middle of tricky negotiations. "You said you needed clarification, gentlemen. How may I assist you?"

"Professor Pettijohn, we have made inquiries since our last visit," Knaggs said.

Duncan broke in. "And you want to know what we found out? She ain't your niece." He jerked a thumb towards Teddy. "You're not related to her at all."

Knaggs made a quieting gesture at Duncan. "Why would you say she was your niece, when she's not? She came from Colorado with your real niece, so why didn't you just say she was a friend of your niece? More importantly, why are you paying for her to stay in this hotel?"

Cornelia held her breath. Teddy had no good reason for being with them outside of friendship. What Knaggs was implying was scandalous, but the truth was illegal.

The professor didn't blink. "Really gentlemen, you look like men of the world." He walked over to Teddy and put a protective arm around her shoulders. "I'm sure I can rely on your discretion. I claimed she was my niece to avoid gossip. You see, gentlemen, Miss Lawless and I are engaged to be married."

Shock forced Cornelia into a seat. She listened, speechless, as her uncle continued. "I realize that Theodora is perhaps twenty years younger than me, which would make us subject to talk. We wanted to avoid that while we shopped for a honeymoon cottage and made all the necessary arrangements."

*Twenty? More like thirty or thirty-five,* Cornelia thought.

"If you have done a thorough checking, you will discover that she and I have been looking at rentals to live in whilst we search for our cottage in Paradise. I assure you that she has been staying with my niece, her maid of honor, in the other side of the suite to avoid the appearance of impropriety before the ceremony."

Teddy, teary-eyed, took the professor's arm. "Oh, sweet Percival, I'm so sorry. I told you we should have eloped."

He patted her hand fondly. "Nonsense, my dear. You deserve a proper wedding with all the trimmings. Before you came along, I took for granted I would die a bachelor. You have made an old man very happy."

All the color had drained from Cornelia's face. She clung to the arms of the chair and did her best not to gape. *Insane, both of them.*

Knaggs harrumphed. "Well, that does explain a few things, sir. Were you aware that Miss Lawless' former fiancé was in Saint Petersburg before you traveled here?"

"Absolutely not," Professor Pettijohn said. "If I had known, we would have chosen Naples or perhaps Marco Island for our nuptials. I want no distraction from our future happiness."

"A pity that you didn't elope," Knaggs said. "It would have saved us some time."

"My apologies," Cornelia's uncle said. "Can you forgive a romantic old fool for making your job harder?"

Once the officers were gone, Cornelia's shock turned to anger. She bounded out of the chair and rounded on her uncle. "Now look what you've gotten us into. Engaged? That preposterous lie is going to come back on us. Then what?"

"It seemed to be the best explanation," her uncle said. "It stopped them from asking more personal questions. An engagement rather neatly explains why we're traveling together. I can't believe I didn't think of it before."

"I can't believe you thought of it at all," Cornelia snapped. "You realize that now people will expect the two of you to marry, and sooner rather than later."

"Hmm." The professor rubbed his white-haired chin. "We can always break the engagement if we need to."

"Now, wait a minute," Teddy said. "One broken engagement is bad enough. Another one will make people think I'm a shrew."

"They already think you're a murderess," Cornelia said. "How much worse could the gossip get?"

"A woman can have any number of good reasons to kill a man, but getting jilted twice makes her sound like an ugly spinster."

Cornelia smacked herself in the forehead as she sank back down in the armchair. They were both hopeless. "You *are* a spinster. Just not an ugly one."

"That's hardly the point. I'm already suffering from public humiliation."

"I can't fake my death again; you can only get away with that once. I could simply marry her," Uncle Percival said. "Then we could argue that she wanted Stevens alive, so he could see that she'd found a better prospect."

"They'll think she's a gold digger."

“Nonsense, they’ll think I’m an old fool.”

“They’ll think both,” Cornelia snapped, “and they’ll be right about you.”