

## **Tea and murder – the classic combination.**

So, I'm sitting in the busy café of a local garden centre, pitching the idea for my next novel to a detective sergeant from the Major Crimes Team.

She doesn't look like a detective or a police officer – just an ordinary, everyday woman dressed in casual clothes, her hair pulled into a loose ponytail. She sips her tea, looking thoughtful and considered as I relate the idea for my next novel.

And then I realise she's weighing me up – the way police officers do. It's a casual observation made with keen eyes that give nothing away. She seems relaxed and at ease, but she's concentrating, taking in all manner of small details, memorising them as she's trained to do.

It's a skill I'm desperate to perfect, but my mind can rarely focus for long enough. Everything around me, whether it's a sound, something visual, a delicate fragrance or the sticky feel of the table beneath my fingers is potentially an idea, a description, something for my novels.

That's what I'm awake and alert to – though you'd never know it while I'm waxing lyrical about the plot for the next novel.

As I draw close to the end of my account, pausing briefly to frame the final summary line, I realise I've never spoken to anyone who investigates murders in the real world.

My murders are fictional. They're contemporary murder mysteries that pay homage to the classic whodunit by authors like Agatha Christie. The police don't generally feature that much as my sleuth is an amateur detective.

That's not an excuse for laziness though. Accuracy in all details equates to pride, to caring about readers, the places and subjects I cover. Moreover, it's about credibility. I don't want to be known as an author who brushes aside procedure because it doesn't help my story or because it deadens the excitement.

Many readers may be unaware of procedures governing the gathering of evidence, the interview of suspects and the many myriad rules and procedures that make up the justice system. As an environmental health officer, I enforced all manner of laws, sometimes prosecuting people or companies in court. I've attended a Coroner's Inquest on several occasions, given evidence in court and interviewed suspects under caution.

That's how I know about PACE – the Police and Criminal Evidence Act and the codes law enforcement officers have to follow.

While the details and procedures often seem dry and onerous, they're designed to protect those accused of crimes and guide those investigating them. You hear about cases being dismissed on a technicality or evidence not admissible due to a failure of process.

I want my novels to be as accurate as I can make them. When Kent had to give a statement at the custody suite, I asked Sussex Police if I could take a look around so I could accurately portray the experience and show how professional the police are.

Let's say, what I discovered there was quite different from what I'd expected – and much better as a result. If you're interested, the scene features in *No Bodies*, the second Kent Fisher mystery.

So, when I had an idea for my next novel, I turned to the police to find out what would happen in the real world. That's why we're sitting in a garden centre café, enjoying a brew.

The plot concerns an unsolved murder from ten years ago. The victim has never been identified, which limits most avenues of enquiry. Then a link to Kent Fisher is found, involving a café he closed down because of a mouse infestation ten years ago.

Naturally, the police would like his professional help as an environmental health officer.

But I want Kent Fisher to investigate the cold case and solve the murder.

The detective sergeant puts her cup in its saucer and purses her lips. Either she's struggling to answer my questions or choosing her words with great care.

Then, with a slight shake of her head, she says, "It can't happen like that. The police can only tell him what's already in the public domain. Anything more and they risk having their evidence contaminated. A loose word here, a slip of the tongue and something confidential could become public."

I nod, well aware of confidentiality from my work as an environmental health officer. "He's a law enforcement officer too," I point out.

"Sure, but when you consider the complexity, the time and resources it takes to put a prosecution together, you don't want it to all come tumbling down. How would that look to the victim's family, looking to us for a conviction, for justice?"

I nod, well aware of the impact.

"Sorry," she says with a sympathetic shrug. "I've just ruined your story, haven't I?"

I consider for a moment and then smile. Actually, I'm delighted.

"Kent Fisher will have to find another way to get the information he needs," I say, my mind already buzzing with ideas. "That should make for a far more interesting story, especially if he gets into trouble unearthing the details."

She looks relieved.

Me too, I guess. I could have ignored the strict rules of evidence and procedure the police follow. Instead, my mind's already working out how my sleuth can be more devious to get the information he needs.

"I'm so glad I spoke to you," I say, checking my watch.

"I have a couple of ideas how your sleuth can get the information he needs," she says.

"I'll order another pot of tea," I say.