

The First Two Pages of *The Locket: From the Casebook of TJ Sweeney*
by Susan Van Kirk

My first Endurance mystery, *Three May Keep a Secret*, came out in 2014 to great reviews and excellent sales. Then my publisher held my second mystery in the series, *Marry in Haste*, for a full two years. What could I do? I was worried about losing my readers since I was writing a series. I decided to write a novella in between, but I would self-publish it as an e-book and make some unique decisions. The title I chose was *The Locket: From the Casebook of TJ Sweeney*. This breaks a theme in my titles for this series, but indicates that one of my characters from the Endurance mysteries is in this novella. I made my protagonist, Grace Kimball, a cameo character in this novella and concentrated instead on my detective, TJ Sweeney. Readers wanted to know more about my biracial, self-confident, female, small-town police detective. Because my books go back in time, I decided to create a cold case from the past, a case so old that DNA would not be available. My first two pages contain a hook, a setting and tone, the initial situation, and a glimpse of my detective.

Detective TJ Sweeney's experience told her that sunny days and dead bodies rarely occur together. This was obviously a dead body day.

These first two sentences name the protagonist, introduce the tone for the day, and hint about the initial situation. She's an experienced detective and has dealt with dead bodies before. This is going to be one of those days. If you didn't know you were reading a murder mystery, these two sentences would probably set you straight.

She swore at an SUV that passed her on the two-lane country highway, hurling drenching sheets of water on the windshield of her squad car. The wipers couldn't keep up, the heater didn't work, and TJ could barely see the center line through the deluge. The only good break was the temperature: it hovered near the forty-degree mark, so she wasn't concerned with ice or freezing rain. This year, weather in November had been unusually cold already, and it was only the first week of the month. The detective clenched her jaw and coughed several times as she reached for a tissue to blow her nose. It wasn't bad enough she was called out on this wretched day, but she'd caught a cold a week earlier, and the blankets on her bed had felt so snug and cozy before the dispatcher had called to tell her it was time to move the bones.

These words indicate the tone and setting. It is generally a good idea to place the reader in the setting early. My mysteries take place in the small town of Endurance, Illinois. We can already see that TJ is alone on this highway, unlike a setting in an urban area where she might have another detective and/or a contingent of police to help. Perhaps her small town doesn't have much money for equipment or her squad car might work better. It is obvious that this is a rural area since she's on a two-lane country highway. Because it is cold and rainy in November, we know this is going to be an uncomfortable time in the Midwest. (This novella fits between summer in the first mystery and the following January in the second mystery.) TJ's cold is not helping her situation, and her state of mind contributes to the bleak tone of the book's beginning.

The last sentence is a teaser since we don't know yet what bones she is talking about. Whose bones? Where were they found? Why do they have to be moved? Something must have happened before the story began, and this set of bones has something to do with it.

How can I set up the situation without dropping in a huge amount of back story to bore people? The next paragraph takes care of that.

Driving past Lenox Woods, she noted the rain had lessened slightly. Maybe she would catch a break by the time she reached the dog park. Tolliver Park was a relatively new addition to the small town of Endurance, named for Vince Tolliver, a business owner and pet lover who had died six months earlier. Tolliver had wanted a place where pets could run, and the construction crew was digging the foundation of a small shelter for pet owners to use during inclement weather. The construction of the shelter had been delayed because in breaking ground a week ago, she thought with annoyance, they had made an unexpected discovery—what appeared to be human bones. *Hence, I am out in this frigid, muddy mess when I could be asleep.* She sneezed.

This is partly back story and partly Sweeney's state of mind. How did this skeleton turn up? Why was anyone digging in this particular place? The town is now named and we know it to be small. People's estates leave money for things like dog parks. The Midwest often has inclement weather, so a building for this use makes sense. On the other hand, Sweeney is not happy—an idea mentioned often in this first chapter. Perhaps she is normally an even-handed person, but not with her cold and this weather. Later, we will find out more about the reasons for her unhappiness. I chose to write "She sneezed" as a separate paragraph, because it punctuates her misery.

It wasn't hard to find the site because she'd been out here every day, checking on their progress. Why she was so anxious about this, she wasn't sure. Perhaps it was because the discovery of buried bones was a unique situation, something she'd not seen in her years on the job. She was curious to know what the archaeologists had found in this spot she had passed many, many times, not realizing a crime had been committed and the evidence concealed here.

Now begins the foreshadowing of a connection between this body and the detective. Why is she so anxious about this situation? We will see the answer to that question later, but it is important to hint at it in the beginning. Also, it must be a very old crime because archaeologists have been called in. Another piece of foreshadowing is that they already know that this body is a crime victim that was buried here long ago. Now Sweeney has a skeleton that makes her anxious, a problem with its age, and a crime indicated by the remains. Even identifying it is not going to be easy. If no DNA is on file that matches this decades-old skeleton, how will she ever find out who this victim is?

Fortunately, the lighter rain allowed her to see up ahead, where heavy equipment, parked just off the road, had sat idle for a week while experts from Chicago worked the site. The bones originally had been covered with a tarp as soon as the construction foreman was informed. Then they placed an awning above the dig, courtesy of Homestretch Funeral Home. That had been a

week earlier ...

Everything is put on hold while this body is excavated. We're in Illinois, so the closest place to find the needed experts is Chicago, but the readers don't want to wait a week to find out the answers, so I chose to begin the novella with the end of the excavation so we'd have the results. The small town of Endurance has a funeral business called "The Homestretch Funeral Home," a funny, cozy detail of the town, and one that lightens the damp weather. This discovery happened a week earlier, so now we understand why TJ already knows this was a crime. When this paragraph ends, Sweeney begins talking to the job foreman, so we move into dialogue.

It was important to introduce my detective in the first paragraph and indicate the tone by describing the Midwest weather in November. The initial situation—a buried body from long ago—begins a series of twists and turns that are foreshadowed right here at the beginning.



Susan Van Kirk was educated at Knox College and the University of Illinois. Besides a teaching memoir published in 2010, she has written the Endurance Mystery series. *Three May Keep a Secret* and *Marry in Haste*, are both published by Five Star/Cengage. *The Locket: From the Casebook of TJ Sweeney*, is an Endurance Mystery e-book novella available on Amazon. *Death Takes No Bribes*, the last novel in the series, will be available in June 2017. Her website is www.susankirk.com; follow her on Twitter @susan_vankirk; or Like her at www.facebook.com/SusanVanKirkAuthor/