

The First Two Pages of *The Color of Fear*

by Judy Alter

I wrote my first novella, *The Color of Fear*, for two reasons: it had been over a year before I brought Kelly O’Connell to her followers. I’d been out of the market (and I sometimes think the world) because of a complicated and painfully disintegrated hip, and I made a major downsizing move. Both worked out well, and I knew it was time to get on with my writing. Second, I had an invitation to contribute a novella to a digital anthology. The first Kelly O’Connell title, *Skeleton in a Dead Space*, was included in the anthology, *Sleuthing Women: 10 First-in-Series Mysteries*, which will be followed this fall by *Sleuthing Women II: Ten Mystery Novellas*. *The Color of Fear* is the seventh title in the Kelly O’Connell Mysteries series.

Kelly O’Connell, heroine of the series, is a single mom and a real estate agent, specializing in renovating Craftsman houses in the Fairmount Historic District in inner-city Fort Worth. Her assistant, Keisha, is a young black woman, product of an alternative school, who boasts the sixth sense. She is colorful to say the least, preferring loose gauzy tops with jeans or an out-of-date squaw skirt and, on occasion, muumuus, too-high heels, spiked hair dyed to match her outfit of the day. She is also kind, caring, outspoken, and street smart. With a sense of experimentation, I decided to let Keisha tell the story in *The Color of Fear*. (Kelly narrates the other books.) So the major task of my first two pages was to establish Keisha as the narrator and set her voice.

The voice part was hard. Keisha does not speak in what is derogatorily called “black English,” but her occasional grammar lapses and colorful phrases definitely strike a different tone than Kelly’s middle-class Texan speech. I found myself lapsing into Kelly’s voice occasionally, so the first two pages were a place to do the best I could to capture Keisha’s distinctive tone.

Those first two pages also had to remind readers of Kelly’s history and persona and to hint at the story thread to come. I opened with direct presentation of infant Gracie and what a

happy baby she is, how much joy she's brought to her family. I wanted readers to know how wonderful the baby is so they'd appreciate the horror of the threat to her.

Then Keisha introduces Kelly:

Kelly's my boss. She owns O'Connell and Spencer Real Estate in the historic Fairmount District in Fort Worth, Texas. But Kelly's on an extended vacation to play mama to her baby. Who knows if she'll ever come back to the office? We meet daily, and I tell her what's going on, what houses we've listed or sold, what house Anthony, our carpenter/construction manager, is renovating. Kelly likes Anthony to take an old Craftsman and restore it—she usually picks the house, but I'm getting pretty good at deciding which ones are possibilities and which have been neglected for too long. What I'm trying to say is I really am running that office without her. And I love it! Shhh. Don't tell Kelly.

This paragraph establishes right away Keisha's relationship to Kelly, introduces the professional Kelly, and explains her absence (which coincided with my own absence—how convenient). But we also get a glimpse into Keisha's personality—she's ambitious, proud that she's almost as good as Kelly at picking houses and capable of running the office. But she's also loyal—she doesn't want Kelly to know how easily she's taken over the business. And, finally, she's inviting the reader into her confidence, like a trusted friend.

Keisha is also tasked with reminding readers of Kelly's history, so she makes quick reference to a serial killer and a sociopathic televangelist. We know Kelly obviously survived these dangers, but we are told it was with Keisha's help and her sixth sense.

Did it work? Here's what one of my beta readers said:

The hardest challenge any author faces is "hooking" his/her reader. Judy Alter does this splendidly, bringing back the character of Keisha, Kelly O'Connell's office manager, and presenting the story that follows in her voice. Keisha's far from a detached observer/participant, her engagement in the action grabs you from the start, and seeing things from her perspective breathes new life into the on-going saga of Kelly and her family.



An award-winning novelist, Judy Alter is the author of seven books in the Kelly O’Connell Mysteries series: *Skeleton in a Dead Space*, *No Neighborhood for Old Women*, *Trouble in a Big Box*, *Danger Comes Home*, *Deception in Strange Places*, *Desperate for Death*, and *The Color of Fear*.

She also writes the Blue Plate Café Mysteries—*Murder at the Blue Plate Café*, *Murder at the Tremont House* and *Murder at Peacock Mansion*. With the 2014 *The Perfect Coed*, she introduced the Oak Grove Mysteries and in 2016 she returned to her Chicago roots to write the historical novel, *The Gilded Cage*, which uses one unusual woman’s life to examine social structure and labor relations in the late 19th Century.

Judy’s historical fiction, stories of women of the 19th-century American West, and her mysteries are available in print and ebook on Amazon, B&N and other platforms. Retired after twenty years as director of a small academic press, Judy is single parent of four and grandparent of seven. She lives in Texas, sharing her cozy cottage with her Bordoodle, Sophie. Follow Judy at her blog, “Judy’s Stew,” <http://www.judys-stew.blogspot.com> or on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/judy.alter> and <https://www.facebook.com/Judy-Alter-Author-366948676705857/>, or on Twitter, where she is @Judy Alter