



## THE RED PENCIL

Cindy Vallar analyzes the work behind published manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles Cheryl Honigford's *The Darkness Knows* (Sourcebooks, 2016).

Tension engages the reader. It stirs our emotions and makes us care about what happens to the story's characters. Romantic tension involves the interactions between two main characters. The spark igniting it riles or bonds them in some way. While they may not recognize that this initial encounter promises to draw them together throughout the story, we see it and connect with it. Our curiosity is aroused and we wonder: Will they or won't they? Discovering the answer to that question is what compels us to read the book from cover to cover.

In *The Darkness Knows* by Cheryl Honigford, Vivian Witchell is a young, upcoming star at a Chicago radio station. Late one night in October 1938, she stumbles over a dead body. When a letter threatens the character Vivian plays, the station manager hires Charlie Haverman, a private detective, to protect her. As the investigation unfolds, the attraction between Vivian and Charlie grows even though they live in two different worlds. As Cheryl explains, "The romance is the backbone of everything and the only reason two such disparate people in both class and character would ever be in each other's company for more than a few moments. That attraction binds them together and it gives a depth to their relationship that they wouldn't have if they were somehow platonic partners solving murders."

Romantic tension requires two types of conflict: internal and external. The former involves emotion, while the latter emerges from the circumstances in which the two characters find themselves. Raising the stakes in a scene heightens the characters' feelings, and, in doing so, the reader focuses on what happens next, rather than how the scene is written. The author's goal is not to pour gasoline on the fire and strike a match to it; the flames would consume the fuel too quickly and once the fire's out, why should we stick around? Instead, the writer creates situations where the characters attempt to act on their desires, only to have another character or situation prevent the consummation.

At one point in *The Darkness Knows*, Charlie visits the

murder victim's apartment and Vivian insists on coming along. He doesn't want her there, but she's not about to wait around for the killer to get her. Besides, she's intrigued because they shared a kiss earlier in the story, but then Charlie tells her it was a mistake. She knows he's fighting his attraction for her, which begs the author to create a scene to force him to act. Since this isn't the end of the story, Cheryl also needs to insert a barrier to prevent them from completely fulfilling their desire. What better way to do this than to have them sneaking around the murder victim's apartment only to be interrupted by another intruder, which forces them to hide somewhere in the bedroom?



*Without answering he disappeared into the darkness of the bedroom closet and pulled Viv in behind him. He pulled the door almost completely shut, leaving only a crack of gray light.*

*. . . The closet was tiny, the air stifling. Viv found herself pressed against Charlie, his holster pressing uncomfortably into her forearm. She tried to shift her stance, but it only served to bring them into even closer quarters. . . .*

*Viv heard a key scratch the lock of the front door and she felt the hair stand up on the back of her neck. Someone was coming in. She was unable to breathe against the fabric of Charlie's lapel. She sucked in a breath along with the cloying odor of mothballs. She moved her face to the side and stifled a cough against the back of her hand.*

While being confined in close quarters provides an ideal opportunity, the draft fails to heighten the tension. Cheryl explains: "The first version was too light and Vivian's reaction wasn't really appropriate to the situation she and Charlie were in. Vivian should be afraid of getting caught by a possible murderer rather than feeling mild annoyance at smelling mothballs." To correct this, she revised the scene and employed a more ominous sound than "scratching."

*Without answering, he disappeared into the darkness of the bedroom closet and pulled Vivian in behind him. He pulled the door almost completely shut, leaving only a crack of gray light.*

*"Someone's coming, but Trask said there wouldn't be police here for an hour," he said, his*

voice low.

. . . The closet was tiny, the air stifling. Vivian found herself pressed against Charlie, his holster pressing uncomfortably into her arm. She tried to shift her stance, but that only brought them closer together. . . .

Then Vivian heard the click-thump of the front door unlocking and felt the hair stand up on the back of her neck. Someone was coming. The front door swung open with an ominous creak. Vivian sucked in her breath and held it. She heard nothing for a long moment except the pounding of blood in her ears, then the floor creaking under shuffling footsteps. Someone lingered just inside the front door. Her mind flitted over what Charlie had just said. The police weren't due for an hour. So if they weren't in the front room, who was?

Eventually, they learn the answer to this question, but it doesn't solve their problem. They are still in the apartment illegally and the other intruders have settled in to listen to a football game, trapping them in the closet.

Charlie finally removed his hand from Viv's mouth, and she breathed in deeply . . . Her hands still rested on Charlie's broad chest, but neither one of them made an effort to move . . . There wasn't an inch of her body that wasn't touching his. She blushed at the thought and the feel of his thigh against her hip. A fur coat tickled the back of her neck and she resisted the urge to brush it away. She didn't want to move her hands from his chest, so solid and comforting under her fingers. She saw the corner of Charlie's mouth twitch slightly as he looked down on her. Nervous energy or something more? Vivian bit her lip and raised her eyes in a question. What were they to do now? . . . Charlie's eyes drifted slowly down to her mouth, paused, then drifted just as slowly back up. A not unpleasant tingle made its way up Vivian's spine. Not dropping her gaze, he leaned down . . . as if he were about to say something terribly important. Instead he licked his lips, slowly and methodically. She could feel Charlie's warm breath on her face. Butterflies stirred in Viv's stomach, and not just for fear of being found out. He was going to kiss her . . . and she wasn't going to stop him.

He continued to lean forward and she raised her chin automatically toward him. When his lips

were just inches from her own he tilted his head suddenly to the right. His lips brushed her ear, and he whispered so quietly she almost couldn't make out the words, "We have to go."

There is romantic tension in the draft, but it occurs too quickly. "I wanted to show that Charlie's still irritated with her and their situation, and he's a little harder to win over." It's also Vivian's chance to have Charlie admit he wants to kiss her again. "I wanted the reader to be thinking 'kiss already!'"

Charlie gave Vivian a warning look and took his hand away from her face. She hitched in a great gulp of air, immediately regretting it as she gagged on the thick scent of mothballs. Her hands still rested on Charlie's broad chest, but she didn't move away. There was nowhere to go inside the tiny closet. Besides, his solid nearness was comforting.

. . . Her eyes traveled down to stop almost involuntarily on his lips. That kiss – she'd been thinking about it all day . . . how easy it would be to pop up on her toes right now and repeat it. She was acutely aware that there wasn't an inch of her body not in contact with his.

She shifted uncomfortably . . . He looked down on her with a frown of disapproval, and she scowled back. A fur coat tickled the back of her neck, and she brushed it away with an irritated flick of her hand.

Vivian raised her eyebrows at Charlie in a question: So what now? . . .

He raised one eyebrow in response, his shoulders rising in a halfhearted shrug. She clenched her fists against his chest in frustration. Charlie's eyes narrowed. He glanced down at her hands, and then his eyes slid slowly back up, pausing at her mouth before locking with hers again. One corner of his mouth quirked up as his hand brushed down her side, his palm coming to rest on her hip.

It was a subtle move, but its effect was immediate . . . She melted into him and lowered her forehead to his chest. She hitched in a breath, taking in the smell of him – a hint of spearmint chewing gum under the musky citrus of his aftershave. She slipped her hands higher over the woolen lapels of his jacket, her head still bowed. Then she brushed the tip of one index finger lightly against the side of his neck. He started slightly at her touch, as if it had surprised him, and then she felt his other

hand glide around her waist to rest at the small of her back.

Vivian didn't move, didn't breathe. She was almost glad for this ridiculous predicament, because it meant she couldn't talk. And if she couldn't talk, she couldn't say anything to ruin the moment. His warm breath ruffled the hair at the top of her head, and she shivered – all of her nerves on fire. His hands moved lower to cup her bottom, pressing her into him. She lifted her head at the urgency in his touch to find Charlie's face, his mouth, was inches from hers.

She slid both hands up to clasp together at the base of his neck and held his gaze, stroking his neck with her thumbs until his mouth twitched into a smile. There was a clank from the hall, and Charlie's head jerked toward the sound. He tensed, automatically alert. His grasp tightened, his fingertips digging into Vivian's flesh. They stood silently, not breathing for a long moment, listening for any sign that they were about to be discovered.

Vivian waited for the closet door to be flung open behind her . . . But there was nothing . . . She smiled and used her fingertips to gently nudge Charlie's chin back in her direction. She raised her eyebrows again in a silent question: Well?

Charlie's half-closed eyes flicked down to her mouth again, the smirk returning to his lips. He leaned down until his forehead touched hers and rested it there a moment. Then he inched forward and nudged her nose with his. Vivian lifted her chin and nuzzled into him, the sandpaper of his cheek stinging her lips. She stood on tiptoe to reach the soft spot where his neck met his ear and breathed him in again. Now she smelled the soapy clean scent of the pomade in his hair. Her lips wandered and found his earlobe. Impulsively, she pulled it quickly into her mouth and released it. He sucked in his breath sharply in a mixture of surprise and pleasure. She dragged her lips back down his cheek and then finally, decisively, caught his mouth with hers.

They fumbled silently in the darkness of the closet, mouths hungrily searching, hands roaming. Then Charlie lifted her up, and Vivian squeaked in surprise as her feet lost contact with the floor. She leaned too hard against him, making both of them lose their balance. They stumbled, and

Charlie's back hit the wall of the closet with a thump. He dropped Vivian to the floor, and she had to grasp a handful of mink coat to stay upright. Charlie held one finger to his lips and cocked his head to listen. Vivian held her breath, heart pounding. . . .

Charlie blinked and shook his head as if to clear it. He leaned down again, grim-faced and businesslike this time, positioning his lips next to her ear. He whispered so quietly that she almost couldn't make out the words: "We have to get out of here."

Cheryl succeeds in the final version of this scene because she focused on the characters' emotions. She also accomplishes her goal of making us "feel like shouting, 'Kiss already!'" before allowing us to get what we want.

*The Darkness Knows* – a play on "The Shadow's" famous opening, "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men? The Shadow knows" – is the first in the Viv and Charlie Mystery series. Book two will be released next year, and Cheryl has "so many ideas of the trouble those two can get into!" For readers who would like to learn more about Cheryl, her books, and old time radio, she invites you to visit her at:

<http://cherylhonigford.com/>

<https://www.facebook.com/CherylHonigfordAuthor>

<https://twitter.com/CherylHonigford> ❖



A freelance editor and historical novelist, CINDY VALLAR also presents writers' workshops and writes nonfiction articles about maritime piracy and historical fiction. Her historical fantasy "Rumble the Dragon" appears in Dark Oak Press' anthology *A Tall Ship, a Star, and Plunder*. You can visit her at [www.cindyvallar.com](http://www.cindyvallar.com).