

CHAPTER XXXII: VINCENT'S STORY

"So everything you told us was a lie."

"Yes," Amanda replied. "I was never held prisoner. That was all just a story to get you to trust me. I'm sorry. I nearly killed you. I would understand if you hated me."

Barret nodded without saying anything. The Chadara had flown them all back to their ship. Barret was badly hurt, but Roshnialu predicted a full recovery. Now, the next day, he was sitting up in bed, already antsy to get up, though it would be a few more days before he could. With him in the room, along with Amanda, were Cloud, Tifa, Aeris, Elena, Red, Nipala and Yuffie.

"I don't hate you," Barret replied. "From what I've heard you were the one who led them to me. No permanent harm was done."

Amanda looked at him gratefully.

"They told her you had killed her parents," Cloud said.

Barret's eyebrows rose.

Amanda nodded.

"Calin was the one who raised me. He was the only kind one. I can't believe he would lie to me. But as I got to know you, I just couldn't believe you could have done such a thing. Now I don't know what to think."

"I've never murdered anyone," Barret said. "But a lot of people died when we blew up the reactors in Midgar."

"For all we know they could have made the whole thing up," Cloud said. "I think they were just using you, Amanda."

Amanda shook her head.

"I can't believe Calin would do that to me."

"I know he treated you well," Tifa said. "But sometimes people aren't what they seem."

Amanda just looked glumly at the floor.

"But why did they want Barret dead in the first place?" Reeve questioned.

"Who knows?" Cloud said thoughtfully. "We've all made a lot of enemies."

"You okay, Yuffie?" Aeris asked, looking over at the young ninja. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Yuffie cleared her throat and looked at Aeris.

"Huh? Oh, no, it's nothing," she said. "I guess I'm still feeling the effects of that knock on the head yesterday."

"Perhaps you better get some rest too," Reeve said.

"No, I'm fine, really," Yuffie reassured them.

"Well, you did the right thing in the end," she continued, looking back at Amanda. The truth of the matter was, she was still a little bit annoyed at herself that she hadn't seen through Amanda's lies, and, irrational as it may seem, a little bit hurt that Amanda hadn't told her earlier. "Though you could have said something a little sooner."

"I know," Amanda replied. "I was afraid. I was worried about what would happen to Calin if I didn't succeed. I still am."

"Yeah, that's something we'll have to address when we get back," Cloud said. "And I don't suppose they'll be too pleased with you, either, after they find out that Barret is still alive."

"I don't care what happens to me," Amanda said sadly.

"But we do," Aeris told her. "In the end you did the right thing. We'll help you any way we can."

Amanda looked up at her and smiled.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you all."

Vincent walked in the door, holding some papers in his hand.

"What Amanda told us earlier about her ability to use materia spells without materia sounded vaguely familiar," he said. "I was sure I had seen something about that before. So I went back and looked through the papers Elena and I found in Hojo's lab in Midgar. Take a look at this."

The others gathered round to see what Vincent had.

"The Nathan Project?" Cloud said, reading off the paper.

"Yes," Vincent said. "It was another of Hojo's little experiments. It had to do with injecting mako directly into someone. He was apparently trying to see if the mako in their blood could let them use materia spells without using materia."

"Just like Amanda can!" Yuffie stated.

Vincent nodded.

"Yes. But the experiments never succeeded. At least, not the one recorded here. I don't have a complete record, but apparently he had tried it a number of times and either nothing had happened or the person had died. He seemed to think it would have a better chance to work with a woman."

"Wait a minute," Cloud said, his brow furrowed. "This reminds me of something too. I've heard a story like this before myself...somewhere. Oh yeah, I got it. Dr. Nathan!"

"Who?" Tifa questioned.

"One of the doctors who treated you," Cloud replied. "When we were talking about injecting mako into you I asked him if it had ever been done before to a female. He told me only once, and that the woman had died."

"Dr. Nathan?" Red said thoughtfully. "The Nathan Project? Sounds like more than a coincidence to me."

"Yes," Cloud agreed. "I think we'll have to have a talk with Dr. Nathan as soon as we get back."

"So Amanda might have her powers because of some experiment by Hojo?" Tifa questioned. "That he might have infused her with mako?"

"It's a possibility," Cloud said.

Tifa looked up suddenly at Amanda.

"If you were infused with mako too...then...were you the one who taught me that mind trick? When I had those headaches?"

Amanda hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"I used to get them too. Calin taught me how to do that."

"Why didn't you say something?" Tifa questioned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to know, you know, about what I could do."

Tifa looked at Amanda a moment, then smiled.

"Thank you," she said.

Amanda acknowledged it with a nod of her head.

"So Jenova ended up being killed by Sephiroth, and Ellengio destroyed the crystal materia, and when you used the super materia as a substitute, the whole mountain nearly came down on top of ya," Barret summed up. "And I missed it all!"

"I guess it was quite an adventure, wasn't it?" Cloud mused.

"Yes, but now that it's over, I can't wait to get home," Tifa said, siding up beside Cloud.

"So when are we leaving?" Barret questioned.

"Cid's already making preparations," Cloud replied. "Speaking of which, we really should be helping."

"But what happens now?" Barret questioned. "I mean, here on this planet? There are still other Jenova."

"True," Cloud replied. "But there are not many of them. The Chadara have rebelled against them. Darius is already free. With Jenova Prime dead, the Chadara guards in ruins, even the one's who had been guarding our ship had been called to the mountain to help Jinn, and no longer able to receive any support from Shinialyn, Jenova doesn't have a chance."

"Do you think we should stay and help?" Barret asked.

"We've done our part," Red stated. "It might take months to hunt down every Jenova left on the planet. You don't really want to stay here that long, do you?"

"We've given the Chadara the ability to fight quite capably on their own," Cloud said. "It's no longer our fight."

Barret nodded.

"I just hope that some of the Jenova are willing to surrender before they are all wiped out," Aeris said. "It would be a shame to see the race disappear completely."

Cloud wasn't sure he agreed with that.

"Well, the one's that escaped from the planet were sterilized by the force field, and they're going to die eventually. Whether they surrender or not, it's over for them."

Aeris just looked at the floor.

"All right. We better get going. We'll see you later," Cloud said to Barret.

Aeris looked back as they filed out of the room.

"Take care," she said.

He just grunted in return.

As they walked down the corridor Vincent put his hand on Elena's shoulder. She turned to look at him and he nodded toward the observation room.

"I'd like to speak to you for a minute."

Elena nodded and followed him into the room. Soon they were alone.

"I can't tell you how happy it made me to have you say you loved me," Elena said before Vincent could say anything. "You don't know how long I've waited to hear that. I had given up hope."

Vincent nodded and took her hand.

"I realize I've made things difficult for you. I'm sorry for that. But after all that happened to me, I thought I didn't want to feel that way again, I didn't want to take the chance. And when I thought you were dead, that just made me believe it that much more. But when I found out you were alive, I..."

Vincent stepped closer and shook his head, looking down at her with his fiery red eyes.

"I just knew I had to say something. I realized I had been hiding all these years, and I don't want to do that anymore."

Elena hugged him.

"I'm so glad," she said.

"Just uh..." Vincent began.

Elena looked up at him.

"Just what?"

He looked at her uncomfortably.

"Just...umm...do me a favor and don't go around telling everyone," he finished.

Elena frowned.

"Telling everyone what?" she questioned. "That you said you loved me?"

Vincent nodded.

"Why not?" she questioned, pulling back a bit.

"Well, you know I have a reputation as being somewhat aloof."

She gave him a sharp look.

"That's an understatement."

"Yes," he added. "Anyway, I'd kind of like to, well, keep that image, or at least the appearance of it."

Elena looked unhappy.

"What are you saying. That you're ashamed of me?"

"No, no, not at all," he said with a hint of exasperation. "I know how you can be. I just thought you might be able to tone down all the talk...if....you..."

The look on her face stopped him.

"So what, now you're saying I'm a blabbermouth too?" she accused.

Vincent shook his head vigorously.

"That's not it at all," he replied. "You're twisting around everything I say. I didn't ask you in here to argue with you."

"You could have fooled me!" she exclaimed, hands on hips.

Vincent opened his mouth again. He fumbled for words. Finally he gave up and grabbed hold of her. Pulling her to him he kissed her.

For a long minute they stood there motionless, until Vincent felt Elena relax in his arms. Their lips parted, but he still held her.

"I'm not very good at this," Vincent said. "It's been a long time since I've had to deal with anything like this. I'm afraid you're just going to have to bear with me."

Elena smiled and nodded.

"I know," she said. "I was just teasing you. I know how difficult this is for you. I'll help you anyway I can. I won't say anything to any of the others if you don't want me to. It was enough just to know myself."

She looked up at him.

"I won't spoil your bad ass image."

For the first in the conversation Vincent smiled in return.

"So is that why you called me in here?" Elena continued.

"No," Vincent replied, the smile vanishing. "It's something else. I wanted to tell you a little story. A story about Victoria."

Elena looked at Vincent, a quiver of surprise in her features.

"I'm all ears," she said.

"It happened a long time ago," Vincent began. "But I'll never forget it. I'll never forget what happened that day."

"This calls for a celebration."

"You're right," Vincent replied. "You're absolutely right. I believe the whiskey is in the storage cabinet in the pantry."

Victoria gave him a look.

"That cabinet is locked," she pointed out.

Vincent looked at her and grinned.

"Then I guess I'll have a chance to put my newly acquired Turk skills to the test."

Victoria gave him a wicked smile.

"Oh you're so bad," she said conspiratorially.

"It's taken you this long to notice?" Vincent replied.

He walked into the pantry and came out a few minutes later carrying a bottle.

"You did it!" Victoria said.

"Of course," Vincent replied modestly.

Victoria went and got glasses from the kitchen. She set them down on the coffee table and Vincent poured them both a drink.

"To your career as a Turk," Victoria said, holding up her glass. "May it be long and prosperous."

Their glasses touched, then both of them quickly drained them.

"Hey, I want some too," Vernon called out as Vincent poured another.

Vincent looked over to see him standing in the doorway to the other room, where he had been watching TV.

"Don't you think you're a bit young?" Victoria questioned.

"So are you two," Vernon replied. "And if you don't let me, I'm going to tell Mon and Dad."

"Oh you little tattletale," Victoria admonished.

Vincent offered his glass to Vernon.

"Vincent!" Victoria said.

Vincent dismissed it with a wave.

"Oh, one little drink isn't going to do him any harm," he replied.

Vernon eagerly took the glass and put it to his lips, taking a gulp. Suddenly he made a gagging sound and started coughing.

"Oh that's disgusting!" he managed to spit out.

"Easy, easy," Vincent said, laughing. "That's strong stuff. Just take little sips."

"How can you drink that?" Vernon said, his face pinched in disgust.

"It does take some getting used to," Victoria agreed, finishing off her glass.

Vincent looked at his own half full glass and cast her a glance.

"Looks like you've had some practice," he suggested.

Victoria gave him an innocent look.

"Some of us just have a knack for it," she replied. "You seem to be taking your time with yours."

Vincent looked at her for a minute. Then he downed the rest of his and broke into a grin.

"What, you think you can out drink me?" he questioned.

Victoria shrugged.

"You think I can't?" she replied.

Vincent's smile turned into a smirk. He filled their glasses once again.

"You asked for it," he said. "But don't come crying to me when you're puking on the floor."

"I wouldn't think of it," she replied. "And I can just picture the look on all your Turk friends faces when they find out you got drunk under the table by a girl."

Vincent raised an eyebrow, then picked up his glass and drank it down. He looked at Victoria.

"I hear a lot of talk," he said. "The question is, can you back it up?"

Victoria emptied her glass as well.

"I want some more," Vernon said.

"You've had enough," Victoria told him.

"Aw, c'mon," Vernon pleaded.

"I thought you didn't like it," Victoria pointed out.

"Oh, let him have another," Vincent said.

"You're a bad influence," she chided him.

"That's another thing you've known for a long time," Vincent replied.

Vincent gave Vernon his glass again. This time Vernon took his time and managed to drink a fair amount.

"That's enough," Vincent said, taking the glass back. "Don't want you to get drunk."

"Yeah, there should be somebody sober in the house," Victoria said.

"I'm still sober," Vincent responded.

"Well, we'll have to remedy that then," Victoria replied, filling their glasses again.

Vincent came over and sat down on the couch beside Victoria. The both drank their drinks. When they were done Victoria laughed.

"What's so funny?" Vincent asked, grinning himself.

"I can't believe you're a Turk," she replied. "All this time you've spent dreaming about it, and your dream has finally come true. I have to admit, I never thought you had it in you, brother. I'm proud of you."

Vincent refreshed their glasses.

"Hey, don't go getting mushy on me now," he said.

They picked up their glasses, emptying them a bit more slowly this time. Vincent looked at Victoria thoughtfully.

"Well, I couldn't have done it without you," he said.

Victoria looked at him in surprise.

"Me?" she questioned. "What did I do?"

"You were the only who supported me," Vincent replied. "We both know how Mom and Dad feel about this, how they feel about me. They always said I wouldn't amount to anything."

Victoria gave him a reassuring smile.

"Don't be too hard on them," she said. "They mean well. Dad just wanted you to grow up like him. To continue his legacy. You know you haven't helped the situation."

"We're not the same person," Vincent said.

"I know that," she replied. "But it's hard for him. And you don't make it any easier for him, always being so contrary."

"Can you blame me?" Vincent replied. "Everything I've ever done, everything I've ever aspired to, that I wanted for myself, instead of for him, he's always torn down. Why should I try to get along with him when he doesn't give a damn about anything I say?"

Victoria filled up their glass once more.

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "I agree with you. He can be hard headed, but he's our dad. And your his oldest."

Vincent took a drink and shook his head.

"How I wish you had been born first," he said. "There's no way I can live up to his expectations."

Victoria didn't look thrilled with that idea.

"No thank you," she said. "I don't need that kind of pressure. The truth is, I think it was very nice of you to be born first and take the pressure off of Vernon and I. But even I was born first, you'd still be the firstborn male."

"All right, I wish you had been born first and a male," Vincent replied with a grin.

"Oh brother," was her only response.

Vincent drained his glass and banged it on the table.

"This is getting depressing," Victoria said as she poured them both another, spilling a little on the table. "This is supposed to be a celebration, not a funeral."

"You're right," Vincent agreed. "And it doesn't matter now anyway. I've got my own career now. I'll have my own place at Shinra headquarters. I don't give a damn what the old man thinks anymore."

"All right then!" Victoria said supportively.

Vincent drained his glass and set it down, examining the glass in Victoria's hand.

"You're falling behind," he said.

"You've been distracting me," she replied defensively.

"What an excuse," he mocked.

She finished her glass and Vincent filled them again.

"So when are you leaving?" she asked.

Vincent shrugged.

"The day after tomorrow, probably. They told me I didn't have to be there until Monday, but I don't see much point in sticking around here for the weekend. And it's not like I've got a lot of stuff to move. I don't think I'm going to be taking anything but some clothes."

"I heard they treat their employees really well," Victoria agreed. "They supply you with just about everything you need."

"Yup," Vincent replied. "Clothes, gun, everything."

"Can I see your gun?" Vernon asked.

Victoria gave him a sour look.

"It's not a toy," she said.

"Geez, I'm fourteen years old," Vernon protested. "I'm not a little kid anymore."

Vincent took another drink from his glass. It fell over when he went to set it down.

"Damn," he muttered.

"You're going to have to drink another glass to make up for what you spilled," Victoria stated.

"There was only a little bit left," Vincent replied.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "If you spill it you have to start over."

"Who made up that rule?" he questioned.

"I did," she replied smugly. "Just now."

"Fill it up," Vincent said.

"I want to see the gun," Vernon repeated. "Please?"

Victoria finished her glass.

"Oh all right," she conceded.

Vincent looked at her in surprise.

"You're going to let him?" he asked.

"Why not?" she said. "Like he said, he's not a little kid anymore. And I'm not Mom, thank god. I don't see what it would hurt to show it to him."

Vincent got up. He paused for a moment to steady himself. Then he disappeared into the other room. He came back a few minutes later with a gun in his hand. He sat down as Vernon came up to stand eagerly beside him. Vincent held it out for him to look at.

"It's not loaded, is it?" Victoria questioned.

"Of course not," Vincent replied.

"Wow, that's really cool," Vernon said. He reached out to touch it but Vincent pulled it away.

"Look, don't touch," he said.

"But I..." Vernon began.

"No buts," Vincent said. "You wanted to see it. Well, here it is."

Vernon didn't look happy, but did not protest.

Victoria proffered a drink in front of Vincent's face.

"You're falling behind," she said.

Vincent put the gun down and picked up his glass.

"You've been distracting me," he replied.

"Distracting you?" she questioned. "I haven't done anything."

"You made me go get the gun."

"Vernon did that," she said.

"Yeah, but you were the one who said it was okay."

"Just drink," she gave up.

He drained his glass and Victoria poured them another one. This time most of the liquor ended up on the table. Victoria started to laugh.

"I think you're drunk," Vincent said.

"I am not!" Victoria denied. She burst out laughing again, and Vincent joined in. He put his glass down and it rolled across the table and fell on the floor.

"That's the second time you've dropped that," Victoria said. "I think you're the one who's drunk."

"I'm no drunker than you," he said, getting down on his hands and knees and chasing after his glass.

"That's not saying much," she replied.

"Aha, so you are drunk," he stated, grabbing hold of the glass.

"I never said that," she contradicted.

"Yes you did, you just did," Vincent said adamantly, getting up on his knees and looking at her.

"Nope, nope," she said, shaking her head vigorously. "Didn't."

She looked at him.

"And what are you doing way over there?" she questioned. "Are you trying to run away? Have you given up?"

"Not likely," he replied. He stumbled to his feet and came back over, dropping down heavily beside her. "Not when I've got you right where I want you."

"Don't count on it, buster," she replied. She started to fill his glass again, but only a few drops came out.

"Oh fud, it's empty," she said.

"Oh fud?" he questioned.

"Yes, fud," she said. "Fud, fud, fud. Whassa matter with that?"

"Nothing," he replied, getting up. "But now we're going to have to get more."

"Get more what?" she questioned.

"Ummm, I forgot," he replied.

"Probably wasn't important then," she said.

"Uh huh," he replied.

They were silent for a moment.

"Why are you standing?" Victoria asked.

Vincent looked around.

"I don't know," he replied.

Victoria took the bottle and tried to pour herself another drink, but it was still empty.

"While you're up, could you get us another bottle?" she asked.

"Sure," he replied.

He walked unsteadily back into the pantry. He rummaged around in the cabinet for a minute. For some reason the bottles seemed to be very difficult to find. Eventually, though, he managed to grab hold of one.

He walked back into the other room. Victoria was sitting up on the couch, looking around blankly. Vernon sat in their father's lounge chair. Vincent's gun in his hand.

"I told you not to..." Vincent began.

The blast seemed deafening, even to his inebriated ears. For a moment he stood there, not realizing what had happened. When it finally penetrated that Vernon had fired the weapon he almost laughed, but stopped when he saw the look on his younger brother's face. He turned to see Victoria slumped over onto the table in front of her, and blood. Blood everywhere.

"Wait a second," Elena said in shocked surprise. "Are you telling me that Vernon was the one who shot Victoria. But I thought..."

"Just let me finish," Vincent said.

He felt his stomach twisting. The pleasant feeling he had had a moment ago was washed away by an ice cold feeling of horror and fear.

"My god! Victoria. Victoria!" he cried out.

He rushed over to her and laid her back on the couch. Her shirt was soaked in blood.

"Victoria!" he screamed, desperately searching for some sign that she was somehow all right, that by some miracle the wound might not be serious. But she was unresponsive, her head hanging limply to the side.

He felt as if his own heart had been torn out. He felt her wrist, fumbling with trembling fingers for a pulse, but he could find nothing. He tore open her shirt and pressed his hand against the wound.

"Oh my god!" he cried out again. "Vernon, get help!"

Vernon was still sitting in the chair, his eyes wide. He was sobbing, but he did not move.

"Vernon please!" Vincent shouted. "Get on the phone. We need an ambulance!"

Vincent was about to get up and grab hold of Vernon when he suddenly moved. He ran into the other room. A moment later Vincent heard him on the phone.

Vincent tried to calm himself. He felt his heart racing a mile a minute. Victoria couldn't die, she just couldn't. What would he do, how would they ever live it down?

He still had his hands on her chest. They were drenched in blood now. So was she, and the couch. He had never seen so much blood. He couldn't stop it. How much could a person lose before they couldn't survive?

He heard himself praying to god, promising anything, if she would just live. He looked at Victoria. She hadn't moved since she had been shot. He couldn't see any sign of breathing, any sign that she was alive. Her face had an awful gray pallor. Putting pressure on the wound didn't seem to be helping. There had to be something else he could do!

Vernon came back in, staring at their sister. Vincent looked up at him.

"Doctor Hamilton lives two houses down," he said. "Go get him. Bring him here."

Vernon just stared at him.

"Go!" Vincent shouted.

Still Vernon did not move.

"She's not going to die...is she?" he said slowly.

"Damn!" Vincent muttered. He didn't have time to argue, or to discuss it. "I'll get him myself!"

He stood up and ran past the younger boy. He heard Vernon cry out in protest, but he paid no heed. There was no time to try to comfort him, he had to get help.

The rush of adrenaline from the shooting had sobered him up, and the cold air stung him as he ran out into the night. He went out the back door, crossing into the woods behind the house, the fastest way to Dr. Hamilton's. There was an old trail through the woods, one he and Victoria had blazed when they were younger. It was a bit overgrown now, and some of the bushes slapped against his arms, drawing long lines of scratches, but, like the cold, he paid it no heed.

He reached the back door of the Hamilton's residence in minutes and banged on it furiously. It seemed to take forever to open, but eventually it did. Dr Hamilton frowned when he saw the state Vincent was in.

"What the...what's wrong?"

"You've got to come quick. Victoria's been shot."

Dr. Hamilton looked at Vincent for just a moment. Vincent didn't know what the man was thinking, it didn't even occur to him what kind of apparition he made showing up on the man's doorstep covered with blood and stinking of alcohol. But the doctor said nothing, just grabbed his bag off the table and followed Vincent as he ran back.

Vincent had to keep pausing to let Dr. Hamilton keep up. Although the doctor was by no means an old man, he still had trouble keeping up with the speed of the adrenaline charged younger man. Each time Vincent had to pause, the wait for the doctor seemed interminable.

Even so, it wasn't long before they broke out of the woods and entered the fields behind Vincent's house. As they did Vincent saw the flashing of red lights from the front of the house. As he ran toward the house Vincent felt hope at the sight of the sheriff's car in the driveway. They had arrived so quickly, maybe they were in time to help Victoria.

He burst back into the house and ran into the parlor, leaving Dr. Hamilton to catch up on his own. Three uniformed men were in the room. Victoria still lay on the couch. None of the men were attempting to help her.

"What's going on?" he shouted. "How's Victo..."

His voice fell silent as he saw the looks the men were giving him. One of them stepped forward.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid it's too late."

Vincent just looked at them, shaking his head but unable to speak, as he felt tears running down his cheeks.

"Vernon's told us everything," the man continued. "He told us it was an accident. We know you didn't mean to kill her."

Elena looked at Vincent, the frown deepening on her brow.

"You mean Vernon told them that you were the one who shot Victoria?" she questioned.

Vincent nodded.

"Yes," he said. "He blamed it all on me."

"But...but," Elena began. "Didn't you tell them the truth? Didn't you tell them that Vernon was the one who had fired the shot?"

Vincent shook his head.

"You don't understand," he said. "I was the black sheep of the family. I was the one who had always been getting in trouble. Vernon was the one who could do no wrong. No one would have believed me. It would have just sounded like I was trying to lay the blame on him."

Elena still wasn't satisfied.

"But, wasn't there an investigation? Couldn't they have figured it out from fingerprints or something?"

"There was no investigation," Vincent said. "There was nothing to investigate. As far as everyone was concerned, they already knew what happened, they had already passed judgment. My father made sure that it was all taken care of very quickly and very quietly. He didn't want to put 'the family' through any added trauma."

"And that was it?" Elena said in disbelief. "They just took Vernon's word? They just condemned you out of hand, without even attempting to hear your side? Did you even try to tell them the truth?"

"It wouldn't have done any good," Vincent said, a bit sharply. "I could tell just by the look in my father's eyes when he came home. I knew right then there would be no good in even trying to argue. The investigation cleared me of any wrongdoing. It was labeled an unfortunate accident. I left the next day to join the Turks. I never saw my mother or father again."

Elena was silent for a moment.

"But that's horrible," she finally blurted out. "So no one ever told them the truth?"

"They went to their grave thinking I was the one who had killed Victoria. Vernon was only fourteen, I could understand him not wanting to be blamed. After all, it was still my gun, and it was my responsibility to make sure Vernon didn't touch it, and that it was unloaded. So in a way, it was my fault. But even when he got older, Vernon never told the truth, or showed the least bit of remorse for what he had done to me."

Elena nodded.

"So that's why you dislike him so much," she said slowly.

"I spoke to him a few times in the years following, before the whole thing with Hojo. Each time he seemed more and more like a clone of my father. Money seemed to be all he was interested in."

Elena looked thoughtful.

"And when your parents were killed," she said. "He told me he suspected you of doing that. Do you think it could have been him?"

"I don't know," Vincent replied. "It wouldn't surprise me, but I left them all behind me. I didn't care what happened to any of them. I still don't. When Victoria died, my family died along with her."

Elena looked at the ground.

"That's so sad," she said softly.

Vincent just shrugged.

"It was a long time ago," he said, just as quietly.

She looked up at him again.

"I have just one more question."

"Only one?" he said.

"One for now," she amended. "Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

Vincent didn't answer right away. When he spoke again, it was in a measured tone.

"I have never told anyone that story. I'm not exactly sure why. I guess the truth of it is...I wasn't sure you'd believe me."

Elena looked at him sympathetically. She came toward him and wrapped her arms around him.

"Of course I believe you," she said, looking into his eyes. "It all makes sense now. I was so afraid, being kept in the dark. I was afraid you were hiding something. You don't know how glad it makes me to finally know the truth."

Vincent did not reply, just stood there returning her gaze. But his arms slowly came up to encircle her as well.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you for telling me. For letting me in."

The trace of a smile tugged at Vincent's lip.

"I'm just glad to have you back," he said.

Then he pulled her closer still, and pressed his lips against hers.