

Chapter 20: Vianne's Resolve

Vianne wanted desperately to find words that could soothe Rachel's growing fear, something that could provide a sliver of hope amidst the darkness. But as she stood there, facing the stark reality of the situation, she realized that no words could undo the danger pressing in around them. The weight of uncertainty was suffocating, but the urgency to act forced her to push aside her own doubts.

"You shouldn't be afraid alone," Vianne finally said, her voice steady despite the turmoil within her. "I'll help you, Rachel. And Sarah too. But we have to be careful, think things through. There has to be someone in town who knows how to move people safely." The idea of resistance, once unthinkable, now felt like the only option left.

Rachel let out a trembling breath, her fingers gripping the fabric of her dress as though grounding herself in the moment. "I know it's asking a lot," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "But I don't know what else to do. I'm terrified for Sarah, for Ari. This star... it makes them targets. How can I send my children into a world where people see them as less than human?"

Vianne reached out, clasping Rachel's hand with quiet determination. "We'll find a way," she promised, though the path ahead was anything but clear. The certainty in her voice was for Rachel's sake as much as her own, a fragile shield against the terror they both felt.

The afternoon sun stretched long shadows across the yard as they stood together, their gazes fixed on the horizon. The question of how to protect the ones they loved hung heavily between them, an unspoken burden they both bore. Every moment felt precious, every decision fraught with consequence, but beneath the fear, a silent pact was formed—a shared resolve that no matter what lay ahead, they would face it together.

As the days passed, the tension in Carriveau thickened, and Vianne became acutely aware of the whispers, the furtive glances exchanged between neighbors. The town was changing, shifting under the weight of an invisible threat, and every interaction carried the possibility of betrayal. The sound of boots marching down the cobbled streets sent chills through her spine, a constant reminder that safety was an illusion.

Rachel, too, felt the shift, keeping her children close and speaking in hushed tones even within the walls of her own home. The yellow star on their clothing had become more than a mark—it was a brand of fear, an ever-present reminder of the growing hostility around them. Every knock at the door, every unfamiliar face in the market, held the potential for catastrophe.

One evening, as Vianne walked Sophie home from school, she noticed a figure lingering near the bakery. A man she didn't recognize, his coat pulled tightly around him as though shielding himself from more than just the cold. Instinct told her to keep moving, to pretend she hadn't seen him, but something in his posture—tense, watchful—made her pause. Was he someone who could help, or someone who had been sent to watch?

Back at home, as she bolted the door behind her, she realized just how precarious their lives had become. It was no longer just about survival—it was about resistance, about finding the courage to act before it was too late. The decision to help Rachel and her children had already been made, but now came the hardest part: figuring out how. And time was running out.

Vianne and Rachel sat in the dim glow of candlelight that evening, their voices barely above a whisper as they discussed their options. Rachel had an old friend in the next town, someone she believed could provide false papers, but reaching him would be the challenge. The roads were watched, and the town was no longer

safe for those marked as different.

"We need to be smart," Vianne murmured, tracing invisible patterns on the wooden table. "Careful. One wrong step could mean—" She swallowed the rest of the sentence, unwilling to give voice to the consequences they already understood too well.

Rachel exhaled shakily, nodding. "I can't stay here much longer. The soldiers... they ask questions. Neighbors are looking at me differently." Her voice broke on the last word, but she quickly recovered. "I just want my children to be safe."

Vianne reached across the table, gripping Rachel's hand with renewed determination. "Then we do whatever it takes," she said firmly. "No matter the risk."

A faint sound outside made them both freeze, their breaths held as they waited for the noise to pass. When nothing followed, they slowly exhaled, exchanging a look that spoke volumes. The world had grown dangerous, but their resolve had never been stronger. Whatever came next, they would stand against it together.