About a week after the concert, Lisa was in the kitchen with Bree, learning the secret of bread baking. She had never made bread from scratch. For her, homemade bread came from the freezer case. She mentioned that after the dough had been put into covered bowls to rise.

“Really?” Bree shook her head as she pulled her sleeves down. “You must have been bored all the time, since your work was done so quick. What did you do to keep busy?”

“I worked. I was a model.”

“Uh-huh.” From the look on her face, Lisa expected a question about modeling, but instead Bree said, “Well, we’re lucky to have a mill so close. At least we don’t have to grind the wheat ourselves. We could buy the bread. We have two bakeries in town: the Malarkeys have all kinds of breads and some cakes and cookies, too. The Horvaths have bread, but they sell pies they make with the fruit from their orchards, too. And the fruit, of course. In the late summer and fall the boys in town earn some money picking the apples and pears and helping to cut them up.”

“That must be a lot of work,” Lisa commented.

Bree leaned close to whisper. “Aidan Horvath is a cutie. Have you met him?”

“Uh, no.”

“He’s really nice, and he’s talented, too. He plays the flute, and he’s really good at math.” Her whisper sank to a barely audible breath. “I’m trying to get dad to talk to Mr. Horvath about a marriage.”

Lisa felt her eyes go wide, but couldn’t say anything because Eddie poked his head through the open door. “Lisa, will you come to Dad’s office? We need your opinion on something important.”

“Sure.” Lisa wiped her still-floury hands on a dishtowel and smoothed her hair before following him to the other end of the house. This was the outer office, which was larger than the mayor’s private office. Still it seemed crowded, and since the sky was sullen gray, not much light came through the thick window, making the office appear gloomy. Ray was behind the desk, with Darlene beside him, and four other men on the other side of the desk. She recognized Steve Herrick and Faron Paulson as associates of Ray’s but the other two men were strangers. They both looked like Native Americans, with naked chests, leather leggings and long black hair in braids.

Ray stood up. “Lisa, you know Faron and Steve. This is Snow Wolfe and Al Wolfe, from the Clan. Gentlemen, my daughter-in-law, Lisa Madison.”

Eddie’s hand clenching on her shoulder stifled her smile. She nodded solemnly at the two men and let Eddie push her down into a chair close to Ray. He remained standing behind her, close enough that she could feel the warmth from his body in the cool room.

“Now, Lisa.” Ray slapped his palms down on his desk. “Let me get you caught up. Them other women from the airplane were found by the Clan. They’ve been taking care of ‘em, but they can’t feed and protect an extra thirty women. So they’re lookin’ for a place for them to live.”

Excitement bubbled up inside Lisa. “They’ve been found? How are they?”

One of the Indians leaned forward, then drew back again when Eddie shifted behind her. “Not all survived, but those remaining will heal.”

“You said women.” Lisa squirmed, but obeyed Eddie’s hand on her shoulder, pulling her back. “Most of the men on the plane died in the crash, but there were a few still alive when I left the crash site.”

Both black-haired men nodded. Snow Wolfe said seriously, as if paying tribute to the dead men, “They sacrificed themselves to preserve the women.”

The other one, Al, said, “The four who remained after the crash are dead also. They were too badly injured to save.”

That opened an ache in Lisa’s chest. She knew some of those men had been badly off. Without immediate medical attention they had died. “How many women lived? Thirty?”

“There are twenty-eight who need a home.”

Only twenty-eight? With Carla and her, that meant only thirty people had survived out of the eighty or so who’d boarded the plane. Lisa looked at Ray. “So where will they live?”

“That’s the question.” Ray scratched at his graying beard. “My wife suggests the old pest house.”

“The what?”

Darlene smiled. “Decades ago those who contracted the Woman Killer Plague were put into quarantine in a three-storey brick apartment building in the northwest part of town. No one has lived there in thirty years. It will need some repairs, but it has everything needed for the women to make a home.”

“Yeah.” Steve Herrick smoothed his silver-blond ponytail. “It won’t be hard to find the manpower needed to fix the place up. It’ll be harder to keep guys out, with all those women living there.”

“We need to put security in place.” Faron’s round face was serious. “That many unattached women in one building will be a temptation. We need a good fence, and at least two men on guard at all times.”

The sun emerged from behind a cloud, pouring through the window and gleaming on Snow Wolfe’s hair. “The Clan can help with that. Some of our men have chosen mates.”

Steve arched a brow at the Native American men. “Can any of them use a plane or a hammer?”

“We can learn.”

“Good. We’ll need to work hard to get that place up to snuff.”

Eddie leaned on the back of Lisa’s chair. “Any chance you can have it repaired before the women get here?”

Steve shook his head. “We can get it livable in a week or ten days. Full repairs will take months.”

Lisa was glad to know that the survivors had been found and plans were being made to help them, but that didn’t explain why she was here. Lisa’s brow wrinkled and she looked at Ray. “Eddie said you needed my opinion about something?”

“That’s right, Lisa. I figure you know how these women think, since you’re one of ‘em, see?”

Lisa nodded dubiously.

“Well, now. In my whole life I’ve never seen more than two or three women live in the same house. Seems to me like they got along fine, but Darlene is afraid these women might have squabbles. What do you think?”

Feeling the weight of every eye on her, Lisa shifted in the chair. Her experiences of being on a photo shoot with a dozen other models had taught her how catty and mean women could be to each other. But ambitious models were more bitchy than regular women, weren’t they? Maybe the crash survivors would be so happy to be alive that petty jealousy wouldn’t erupt into bickering. Right.

“Well, I don’t know,” Lisa said cautiously. “How big is this place? Will there be an apartment for everybody?”

Steve tugged on his ponytail. “There are ten apartments and--” He paused to do some mental math, silently counting on his fingers “—twenty-four apartments. Most of the women will have a bedroom to themselves.”

“Some of them will live at the den,” Al Wolfe put in.

Lisa spread her hands for Ray. “I think there would be fewer fights if each woman had her own bedroom. Is there a place with enough bedrooms for that?”

Ray shook his head, fingers worrying at his beard. “No.”

“Maybe they could live at different places?” Lisa suggested.

It was Faron Paulson who spoke now. “That might not be a good idea. Then we’d have more places to guard. How thin can we spread ourselves?”

Lisa wondered why the women had to be guarded. Then she remembered the way the men at the Bride Fight had masturbated through their clothes beneath her balcony. She shuddered. “One place would be good,” she muttered.

Steve nodded. “We could partition off some rooms on the ground floor,” he suggested. “Those apartments were knocked out to make a big open area, as I recall.”

“No,” said Ray. “We won’t need to do that. Them women will get themselves married before they have time to start raising a fuss.” He turned to his wife. “You’re right, Dar, the old pest house will do fine for them women from the plane.”

His statement was plain, his voice business-like. He didn’t sound surprised that his wife was right, nor condescending. Lisa found herself moved. Ray was the mayor, but he treated his wife as a respected equal. She titled her head enough to slide a glance at Eddie’s face. He didn’t treat her as an equal, not really. But he would, she silently vowed.

\*\*\*\*