

## *Love, Alabama*

Can someone get this hairy mutt off the set?" The director sneezed again and cast an irritated glance toward the large Golden Retriever. He didn't bother to make eye contact with Emma.

Emma stiffened at the unflattering reference to Big Al, who currently hugged her side in an effort to gain refuge from the angry vibes cast his way. Big Al's fur was cut close, so he hardly shed at all. Besides nabbing a poorly placed donut from the edge of the snack table, he'd been a perfect gentleman thus far today.

As soon as the filming segment ended, Emma couldn't help asking, "Are you sure you're allergic to the dog? Lots of folks react strongly to the flora around here when they come down from up North." The word north might've slid off her tongue just a little distastefully, as Emma smiled sweetly at Mr. Matthew Pope from Manhattan. Not that she had anything against the North. Just some products of it—like rude, impatient men and very cold weather.

"I can't do my job if there's hair and dander flying around and I'm sneezing my head off. Animals have no business on the set of a cooking show, anyway. Get rid of it." He made an offhanded, sweeping motion from his elevated position in the director's chair, as if he manned the bridge of a star ship on Star Trek. Make it so...

He'd referred to her baby as "it." Emma would keep her mouth shut, as this wasn't her gig, but why the network had sent someone down from New York with such an obviously pissy attitude to produce her sister, Cammie's, new smash cooking show baffled Emma.

She couldn't argue that he was slickly handsome and extremely male, despite his rafter-rattling sneezes, if one liked that sort of thing. Emma could appreciate those pleasing attributes from a detached and cerebral place. No emotional stuff for her, and no physical stuff either. She was different like that—had been for almost a decade.

Matthew Pope was simply a gorgeous pain in the ass, to her thinking. He sneezed again. Somebody oughta get him a pack of Claritin and call it a day.

As Emma led Big Al into the next room, her sister, Cammie, caught up with her after Mr. Producer/Director yelled cut again. "Hey, everything okay?"

"Yeah. Mr. Hotshot doesn't want Big Al on set," Emma said.

Cammie nodded and rolled her eyes. "I heard him complaining."

"Why would they send such a stinkpot? I don't think he's cracked a smile since he got here." Emma gathered the honey-blond hair that had fallen forward and smoothed it back so it hung

between her shoulder blades. She should have put it up, but hadn't taken the time before she left home this morning.

"I haven't seen one if he has, but I guess we're stuck with him until he goes into anaphylactic shock or gets fed up and quits."

Emma shrugged. For now, she was helping her sister out on the set. This wasn't her real job, so he wasn't going to be her problem going forward anyway.

Just then, the call rang out for Cammie to get back on set. "Gotta go. Thanks for all your help today."

"Sure. No problem. I'm teaching all afternoon, but I can come back in the morning, if you need me."

Cammie gave her a quick hug. "That would be a lifesaver, if you don't mind. I still can't seem to find anyone to do makeup and hair that doesn't make me look like Jessica Green's love child." Cammie grimaced as she said the words.

"Girl, we can't have that." Jessica Green was Cammie's former boss, and how she'd gotten her start in the television cooking world. But things had gone badly between them due to Jessica's jealousy of Cammie's rapid rise in viewer popularity. Jessica was Southern as sweet tea and wore all the makeup that Bobbi Brown put out—pretty much at the same time.

"Okay. See you tomorrow," Cammie said, just as Matthew Pope bellowed, but was cut short by a sneeze.

That made Emma smile. Kind of hard to be effective as a star ship commander with seasonal allergies kicking your ass.

"Bless you!" She singsonged toward the overbearing jerk, and then whispered under her breath, "And bless your heart." She thought she might have heard mumbled thanks through his tissue.

Just as she and Big Al were about to exit the barn where Grey had recreated the large farmhouse kitchen inside, Emma pulled a doggie treat from her pocket. "Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy?" She crooned.

In answer, he launched himself toward the treat, taking her right off her stilettos and dumping her in a pile with her appreciative pup. She managed to sit up just as Big Al licked her right on the mouth.

She couldn't help it; she laughed, "I was rewarding you for being such a fine gentleman this morning and you go and do this." Recognizing her unladylike position, Emma hoped nobody had just witnessed her takedown.

No luck.

“Do you know what dogs eat besides their food whenever possible?”

The deep voice lacked humor. She hadn't heard him approach, or never in a million years would she have allowed this man to catch her roughhousing with Big Al in the middle of the floor. Commissioning as much dignity as possible, Emma Jean rose from her position, temporarily ignoring her best retriever buddy.

She wished she could sic Big Al to knock Matthew Pope on his ass and give him a big ole sloppy kiss. But a Southern lady hid her crazy with fine manners—always.

Instead of using her manicure as a deadly weapon, Emma said, “Well, I'd rather eat my dog's shit thirdhand than spend another minute being insulted.”

She nailed him with her best beauty pageant, dazzler smile and made a slow, deliberate runway pivot, whistled to Big Al, and exited the room; head high, her five-inch heels clicking across the tiles.

Emma would love to have gotten a photo of his comical expression at her response to his rudeness, but a leave-taking like that prevented looking back to enjoy the moment. It was an epic exit.

Holy mother of God. The realization smacked him upside the head. The corn-fed, six-foot-tall blonde who'd just sashayed out the door with a Southern queen's bearing—her infectious mutt in tow—was none other than former Miss Alabama, Emma Laroux. He shook his head to clear it. Then, he smiled. Emma Laroux. Well, shit.