

Love's Landscapes



Alex Gale
CLICKING

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

CLICKING

By Alex Gale

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

A heavily-tattooed man, wearing aviators and a white cotton V-neck T-shirt, is carrying a beautiful, blonde baby girl. She's about a year old and wearing a little pink dress. The man is holding her tightly and kissing her sweetly on the cheek as she smiles.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've started to fall in love slowly with this man in the picture. I am a freelance photographer and got invited to take pictures of a band while they are on tour. This doesn't only include pictures of them performing, but also of them backstage and sometimes even on their days off. This man is one of the band members and through all the pictures I've taken of him I feel so close to him, but we haven't even had a real conversation. A couple days ago I took this picture when his daughter visited (I didn't even know he had a daughter, though now it makes sense he kept mentioning a girl to the other band members). Seeing him with her I knew there was no back for me: I'm completely in love with this man. I just hope I have the guts to approach him (like I have a chance with a man like that... I don't even know if he's gay. He has a daughter, for Christ's sake!), because the tour is almost over and the possibility of us meeting again is very slim.

Sincerely,

Rochella

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: musicians/rock stars, photographer, men with children, kidnapping, homophobia, sweet-but-dirty

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Finally, thank you to all my loved ones for encouraging and believing in me. I hope to do you proud!

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Chapter 1

The moment Matt Courtland saw Mitch Miles carrying a baby, he knew he was done. The little star-struck crush that had been percolating in the outer boroughs of his psyche was now a major, full-on, grade-A love affair. Only in his mind, of course. There had been no indication in the last few months Matt had spent touring as Vain Affliction's official photographer that Mitch had noticed him as anything other than one more guy hanging in the background and lugging heavy equipment about. Hell, there had been no indication Mitch was even gay.

Seeing him with the beautiful baby girl, who was obviously well taken care of and well loved, impressed Matt for two reasons. One, he was a complete kid person. Kids were his kryptonite. He melted in their presence and, in turn, they migrated to him, realizing that he spoke their language. Ever since he was a little boy he had loved taking care of his younger cousins. Seeing a man who liked children was very attractive to him.

The second reason was that it humanized Mitch Miles. It took him from being a rock god/musical genius, who had earned every accolade known to man and could have any person down on his knees in a second, and turned him into a human being who was currently wiping snot from a tiny nose with the back of his fingers without losing the smile on his face for even a second. Matt couldn't build a fantasy life together with the first guy; even his prolific imagination had limits. But the second guy? Matt was currently picturing the morning routine they would enjoy every weekend, with Mitch manning the coffee preparation, while he flipped Mickey Mouse shaped pancakes for their kids. Yes, kids. Plural. It was his dream and he was making the most of it.

While his brain never stopped churning impossible scenarios, his finger was equally tireless with the clicking. He took frame after frame of Mitch and the little girl. He was entranced and he was sure there were some beautiful shots that Mitch might enjoy having for himself, even if they were never published.

Matt had been hired to document the tour for a coffee-table book that would be published in celebration of the tenth anniversary of Vain Affliction's first multi-platinum album. He had been glad to get the gig since he was rapidly losing interest in the society-wedding niche. While it had brought him success, as well as the attention of Vain Affliction's manager, a former client who had been so happy with his work for her wedding that she had recommended him

for this job, the fact of the matter was that if he had to deal with another powder-puff nightmare masquerading as a bride, he just might give it all up and escape to Walden Pond. No joke.

His job had been fairly easy and he was sorry the tour was wrapping up. Oddly enough, he had encountered less prima donna behavior from the world-famous rock stars than he had from the spoiled brides he had formerly shot. Never literally, of course. Not that he wouldn't have liked to a couple of times.

He was good at his job. A photographer should be unobtrusive, lulling the subject into acting as if they were not under a microscope. While he could do portraits with the best of them, it was his work documenting the little moments of a wedding—the groom's face when he first sees the bride coming down the aisle, the look of love after saying "I do," the flower girl dancing on her daddy's shoes—that made him so good at his job. It had also served him well on the road. He blended so well into the background that the band tended to forget he was there. He felt he had gotten many wonderful photographs depicting who these men really were behind the scenes: their focus on the music, their generally positive attitudes, and the way they always tried to make time for their fans, barring security issues and the appearance of impending epileptic attacks on the part of said fans.

It was insane the way people reacted to them, especially to Mitch. Matt probably wasn't one to talk, given his monster crush, but at least he had managed to refrain from bursting into tears and yelling through gasps, "I love you, Mitch!!! Marry me!!! Please!!!!" Not by much, but still, the restraint was there.

Matt had been so busy, mindlessly following Mitch and the baby with his camera and clicking, that he did not notice they had made their way towards him, until he found himself in the uncomfortable situation of having been caught fixating on his crush. While it was his job to focus on Mitch Miles, there was no denying that there was more than professional dedication involved in the way he lost himself photographing the man.

"Hey," Mitch said to him with a knowing smile on his face.

"Oh, hey. Hi. Hey..." Matt willed himself to stop stammering.

"How are those coming along?" Mitch asked, gesturing towards the camera.

"Great, They're great. I have a lot of great stuff. You guys are great subjects. The photos are just... great..." Wonderful, he was no longer stammering. Now he was babbling.

“Dude, relax, I promise I won’t bite. At least not while I’m holding Lexi.” Mitch smiled again, and Matt nearly fainted.

Was Mitch Miles flirting? With him?

“Uh, okay.” Brilliant. Now he was struck dumb. Literally. His breakfast fantasy was cementing its status as a complete impossibility at a staggering rate.

Mitch laughed, his eyes shining brightly. “You’re pretty cute, all confused and whatnot.”

Matt scrunched his eyes and looked around, understanding, as he hadn’t earlier, that there was obviously someone behind him. Or next to him. There was obviously someone very nearby, because there was simply no way this man had just called him cute. He was of average height and build, with dirty-blond hair and brown eyes. He knew he was not a bad looking guy, but this was Mitch Miles, *People* magazine’s sexiest man alive a couple of years back. He was a whole other level of good-looking. There was no way he thought Matt was cute. None.

“Ok, let’s start over, shall we?” Mitch asked, switching the baby to his other arm and extending his right hand. “Hi Matt, how are you doing today?”

“I’m well. Thanks,” Matt said, tentatively shaking his hand, trying his very best to appear as normal as possible. He was confident he was failing admirably.

“This is Lexi, she’s my daughter. She’s having her first birthday this weekend, and I wanted to do a photo shoot of her. It wouldn’t be for publishing anywhere, just for the family. I’d also want some family pictures taken with my mom. I remember from your portfolio that you have some great photos of kids, so I was wondering if you could help me out. I’d pay you, of course. It’s separate from the tour thing.”

Photography was a subject that Matt felt very confident about, and hearing Mitch was just interested in hiring him to take some pictures made far more sense than any flirting that might appear to be happening. His heart steadied, and his body stopped vibrating, allowing Matt to feel downright self-possessed when he answered. “Of course, it would be my pleasure.”

“Good! I look forward to seeing you on Saturday. Take care, Matty.” Mitch winked—winked!—and walked away, having a baby talk conversation with Lexi that had the little girl giggling hysterically.

Matt brought up his camera just in time to catch the two exchanging a look of complete adoration. Oh God, he was definitely in trouble.

Wait... Matty?

Chapter 2

On Saturday, Matt drove up to the gated entrance of Mitch's Spanish-style home in the Hollywood Hills. He had visited before to photograph rehearsals at the recording studio Mitch had built in his former pool house. At the time he had focused on the band as a whole, and while he was never unaware of Mitch, he was somewhat nervous at the prospect of spending time alone with the man and his family.

After parking in front of the garage, Matt started to gather his equipment when Mitch emerged from the front door—looking like the rock god he was—barefoot, in ripped jeans and a tight, white V-neck that showed the tattoo sleeves decorating his muscular arms. His hair was going in every direction and his smiling face was delectably scruffy. Matt had to concentrate to make sure he wasn't staring, slack-jawed. That would not do.

"Hey, man, how are you? What can I help you with?" Mitch walked over to the car and looked at the equipment Matt had brought.

"Hi," Matt smiled shyly. "No help needed. I'm actually going to try to do most of the shots with natural light, so I just need my camera. I brought all this stuff just in case, but there's no need to carry it in yet."

"Always be prepared, right?" How on earth were this man's eyes twinkling?

"Right."

Matt grabbed his camera bag and started walking with Mitch towards the house.

"So Lexi is napping, we had a very busy morning. She just started walking, and won't stay still for a second. I think she completed a 5K today..."

Matt laughed. "This is a great age. Everything is new to them, and now they can get to it. Lucky girl."

They walked into the huge kitchen connected to a family room that appeared to have been hit by a pink and primary-colored tornado.

"Oh, I'm the lucky one. I'm glad I got back in time to spend this time with her. I hate that I didn't get to see her first steps, but at least I can be with her for other firsts. Like this morning, she discovered gardening. My little girl is a champion dirt digger, and I couldn't be prouder." Mitch laughed.

“That’s amazing. I didn’t even know you had a kid.”

Mitch’s eyes dimmed, “Yeah, I’ve tried to keep it a secret. I would prefer no one knows how she came about. It’s not a particularly heartwarming story, even if the result is having her in my life. She’s not really mine. I’m her guardian and in the process of adopting her. Her dad died and, without my knowledge, he had appointed me guardian of his unborn kids years ago as a joke. He never expected to have any, so he thought it was funny when the lawyer suggested it... But he signed it, and he died, and now I have Lexi.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, I wasn’t prying... It’s none of my business.” Matt wanted to crawl under a rock.

Mitch put his hand on Matt’s shoulder, “I don’t mind telling you. I just don’t want it to get out to the press. Not because of me, but because of Lexi. She’ll know the truth when she’s old enough to understand it. But people can be very cruel, and I don’t want that for her...”

“You can trust me, I won’t tell anyone.”

Mitch’s hand was still on Matt, and he was looking into his eyes, with a slight smile. “I know I can. I wouldn’t have told you if I didn’t feel I could.”

“Uhm... okay... I mean good... yeah...” Matt was very flustered being in such close contact with his dream guy.

“Do I make you nervous, Matty?” Mitch asked, his eyes mischievous.

“Uhm, no? I mean, of course not... Why would you? That’s crazy.” Matt was out of breath.

Mitch got even closer, placing his hands on Matt’s chest. “See, I think you kinda like me.”

“You’re Mitch Miles, everyone likes you...” Matt was staring at Mitch’s hands, which were softly caressing his chest.

“I guess. That might be true. But I don’t like everyone back...”

Matt’s eyes popped wide open. “Huh, what?”

Mitch spoke slowly. “I,” he pointed at himself. “Like. You.” He pointed at Matt, poking him in the chest.

“What do you mean, you like me?” Matt must have slipped into the Twilight Zone. There was no other logical explanation.

“I mean, I think you’re very attractive, and I’d like to get to know you better.”

“Better?” Matt was squeaking by this point from the lack of oxygen being taken in by his body, which was too busy trying to adjust to what was obviously a parallel universe.

“A whole lot better.”

“But you’re not gay!”

“I’m not? That’s shocking news to me, Matty. All these years, so confused...” Mitch teased.

“But no one’s ever said that. You date models and actresses. You were engaged!”

“Was I? All that was manufactured for publicity, Matt,” Mitch stepped back, sounding bitter. “I was in a relationship with a man for ten years. The record company didn’t want it getting out, so they made me do all that shit... I already put a stop to it, ’cause it ended up fucking my life up. Now I don’t say anything, but I won’t keep pretending to be something I’m not.”

“Ten years?”

“Yeah. Of uninterrupted happiness,” Mitch said sarcastically.

“Oh, okay...”

“Sorry, don’t mean to lay all this crap on you. I had a very bad situation, and I’ll tell you all about it someday. It has to do with Lexi too. But it’s a bit much for a first conversation, and not appealing in any way, I’m sure.”

“No need to be sorry,” Matt had no idea what was going on, or why this man was talking about telling him anything in the future.

Mitch smiled uncertainly, “Anyways, what I was trying to get to before was that if you’d like to hang out or go out or something, someday, that’d be cool.”

“Me?” Matt looked around the room, sure this had to be a huge joke everyone was playing on him.

“Yeah. Why not?”

“Cause you’re you... And I’m... me...”

“I’m kind of aware of that. Still doesn’t answer my question. Why not?”

“First, I’d need to know why...”

“Fishing for compliments, Matty?” Those twinkling eyes may well be the death of Matt.

“No. Genuinely confused.”

Mitch got close to Matt, once again caressing him, this time his arms. “Matt, you’ve been traveling with the band for three months now. I’ve seen you watching me, but I’m guessing you haven’t seen me watching you.”

“No...”

“Well, I’ve been watching you for a while now.” Mitch ran his hand through Matt’s hair, brushing back the floppy side-swept bangs that perpetually refused to stay out of his eyes. “You’re very beautiful, and I guess that’s the first thing I noticed. But then I also noticed how dedicated you are to your job and how much you like what you do, and that’s very attractive to me.”

“Okay,” Matt leaned into Mitch’s hands, seconds from purring.

Mitch stepped closer until their faces were inches away. He murmured, his voice gravelly, “Also, you’re sweet. You’re nice to everybody and don’t get pissed off for no reason. You seem easy-going. And you’re quite hot... I said that already, didn’t I?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Well it’s definitely something that bears repeating. I know the idea of getting involved with someone like me can seem overwhelming, but I’m quite normal, despite all the circus crap going on around me. You’ve probably noticed that, haven’t you?” Mitch looked at him hopefully.

He had. Mitch, and all the men from Vain Affliction really, were not prima donnas. They didn’t do the stereotypical rock-band things, like snort cocaine from a hooker’s belly button or throw televisions out of hotel rooms. They didn’t yell at people to get them a fifth of whiskey and a bag full of red Skittles. They showed up. They worked hard. They were nice to the roadies and fans. They were perfectly normal. If one could ignore the extraordinary good looks, out of this world talent, and millions of dollars and awards netted. It wasn’t until observing Mitch with Lexi that Matt was able to conceive of a world where Mitch Miles was something other than the rock god of his dreams.

“I guess...”

“So what do you say, Matty? You wanna date me?” Mitch asked teasingly. He seemed nervously excited, but he was still working his twinkly smirk thing. It was the combination of the two that did Matt in. Witnessing Mitch looking like an over-excited puppy at the prospect of dating him was a dream come true, and Matt wasn’t going to keep on questioning it.

“Sure.”

“Awesome!” Mitch leaned in and planted a quick kiss on his lips. It took all Matt had to not start jumping around like some giddy tween.

“Awesome.” Matt smiled shyly. He hoped to be able to keep an air of normalcy. It wasn't every day one was asked out by a celebrity, but Matt had seen enough on the road to know hyperventilation was never sexy.

“Hey, I'm sorry you have to wait around for Lexi to wake up. I should have planned today better, I guess.”

“It's not a problem, I left the whole day open for this.”

“You want to go in the pool or something while we wait? She's a bit of a diva about her beauty sleep. It might be awhile before she's up.”

“Yeah, sure. But I don't have a—”

“I've got a suit you can borrow. You never know when an impromptu pool party's going to break out, so I have a stash of them in the guest room. I'm not a fan of strangers free-balling in my pool!” Mitch said, gesturing for Matt to follow him as he walked towards a wide hallway Matt assumed led to the bedrooms.

Matt laughed. “And you call yourself a rock star!”

“I know, right! Shameful!”

Matt followed Mitch through the house surprised, as he had been before, at how homey it was. There were no black walls and paintings of devil worshipping rituals. It was light and airy, decorated in warm tones, which were highlighted by colorful pieces of modern art, many by artists whose work he loved and had seen before. In museums. It was difficult for Matt, who lived very comfortably yet modestly, to understand the wealth necessary to live like this. But he couldn't say Mitch acted differently because of it. There was certainly a confidence about him, a positive demeanor typically apparent in those who have known great success and are certain things will generally work out in their favor. Yet it wasn't laced with arrogance or snobbery. To someone like Matt, who was usually uncomfortable around everyone except good friends, Mitch's attitude was very attractive.

After changing into a pair of bright blue board shorts, Matt walked to the pool where he found Mitch had already jumped in.

“You can grab a beer and there are also some sandwiches, if you want,” Mitch yelled from the pool, where he was reclining against the border, bottle in hand.

Matt headed to the fully stocked bar beneath the gazebo, where he grabbed a beer and a sandwich. Having been too nervous to eat before coming over, his rumbling stomach was excited just from the smell of grilled chicken and sun-dried tomatoes.

The pool had an edgeless border that gave it a beach-like appearance, so Matt simply walked in, wading towards the deep end, holding his drink and food above the water level. Mitch, who was sitting on a bench that lined the end of the pool, was smirking, probably at the awkwardness of his movements as he attempted to keep his sandwich dry. Between the dripping hair, wet skin and the unobstructed view of Mitch's colorful tattoos, Matt could see that this experience would be quite a test for his impulse control. This was further complicated by Mitch's eyes, which were very much focused on Matt. He really hoped he wasn't blushing. Splotchy necks were never attractive.

“So, Matty,” Mitch said, after Matt had settled in and was almost done eating, “talk to me. I don't know much about you, and let me tell you I've been trying to find out! You have this mysterious vibe around you. I've been asking around, trying to find out if you even liked guys and no one had a clue.”

“You did? Why didn't you just ask me? I keep mostly to myself. I'm kind of... shy. Introverted or something. I'm sure you've noticed...”

“I have. Somehow it makes you more attractive.” Matt imagined he'd never get used to hearing Mitch talk like that about him, but his whole demeanor was very earnest. “You have all these amazing qualities, but you're not a show-off. You don't need to be the center of attention, making a show wherever you go. You just do your thing.”

Matt laughed. “I was thinking the same thing about you earlier.”

“See... we're meant to be, Matty.” Mitch's slow smile, combined with the looks he kept giving him, made Matt grateful the rippling water was camouflaging his lower body's reaction.

After staring at each other for what may have been several hours for all Matt knew, Mitch's gaze turned predatory and, putting his bottle down, he moved towards Matt, maneuvering him until his back was against the wall. Mitch then straddled him, placing his hands on Matt's shoulders and drawing close until they were face to face. “Can I kiss you, Matty?”

Matt couldn't do much but nod, as Mitch got closer and pressed against him, placing soft kisses on his lips. When Matt opened his mouth to let out a low moan, Mitch took the opportunity to gently dart his tongue inside. Feeling Mitch's erection against his, realizing how excited this simple kiss was making him, shook Matt from his stupor, and the intensity quickly escalated. He wrapped his arms around Mitch, bringing them as close as possible to one another. Mitch's hips had started rocking against Matt's. Tucking his feet under him onto the bench, Matt lowered his hands down Mitch's back to his unbelievably firm ass, slipping them inside the loose-fitting bathing suit. With the traction gained by his new position, Matt pumped his hips against Mitch's. Part of Matt just wanted to remove their bathing suits and slip his dick inside Mitch. Thankfully, the part of his brain that was aware it was the middle of the day, and Lexi and her nanny were in the house won out, and so they continued kissing and rubbing against one another, until Mitch came.

"Oh shit! I came in my pants," Mitch panted, incredulous. "What the hell'd you do to me, Matty?"

"I'm more concerned about me right now, Mitchy," Matt groaned, rocking his hips to make Mitch aware of his still-erect cock.

Mitch sat down on the bench, floating Matt over to sit on his lap with his back against Mitch's chest. He snapped the buttons on Matt's bathing suit, slipped his hand inside, and wrapped his hand around Matt's cock, lowering the shorts just enough with his other hand. He feathered the slit with his thumb, stroking him with long, slow pulls, which gradually became more vigorous. It wasn't long before Matt was thrusting into Mitch's hand as he came, trying, though probably not succeeding, to be as quiet as possible.

As they caught their breath, Mitch continued kissing Matt's back and running his hands through his hair. It felt loving, which was confusing the hell out of Matt. That didn't mean he wasn't going to indulge for as long as he could.

"Fuck, that was amazing. Completely high school, but amazing," Mitch murmured against Matt's ear. "Would have liked more, but I didn't think it was the place for it."

"Same here. Didn't want the nanny catching us."

"Me neither. Especially since the nanny's my mother... I might be almost thirty, but that doesn't mean I'd want her to see that," Mitch laughed.

Matt's eyes went wide, and he was extra glad his brain had prevailed over his dick.

"Don't worry, she's been warned to stay away until Lexi wakes up. She knows I'm trying to win you over."

"You've been talking? About me? Why would you? I'm no one..."

Mitch's face lost all trace of amusement. "Matt, are you saying there's something wrong with me for being attracted to you?"

"No. Doesn't mean I understand it... You could have anyone..."

"Yes, but there's something about you." Mitch raised Matt's bathing suit and moved to reach for his beer. Matt felt very sorry for having ruined things. "I'm kind of a relationship guy. I can do a one-night stand like the best of them, but I prefer to be with a good, steady person. I had that for the first six years of my last relationship. I miss it..."

"What happened?"

"Jamie, that's my ex, and I grew up together. We were inseparable. Last year of high school we became more than friends, and when I started the band he came along as our manager. When we hit it big, the record label told us we should get a professional who could manage all the details that went into running the band. They didn't think Jamie could do it. Who knows? Maybe he would've been able to. He got very upset. He stayed along helping Jess when she took over managing us, but he resented it, and since he wasn't so busy he had more time to do all the crap that's available so easily backstage... Fuck!" Mitch angrily pushed the water away, sending a big splash across the pool.

Matt was so sorry he had let his negativity ruin the moment they had shared. "I'm sorry, please forget what I said. You don't have to tell me this."

Mitch moved back towards him and held Matt's head gently between his hands, so he couldn't look away. "I want to tell you. I need you to understand why I like you, and why all those people you say I could have don't mean all that much to me."

Matt kissed him lightly on the lips and grabbed his hands, "Okay."

They sat back, shoulder to shoulder. Mitch kept playing with their joined hands, lightly splashing water. "Jamie had never been the cleanest guy, but it was under control. All of a sudden he's on coke all the time, and he's becoming a bit of a pain in the ass. I put him in rehab a few times, but he always relapsed." Mitch turned his head to look at Matt. "No one ever understands why

I stayed with him. But he was my best friend. I loved him. I had wanted to be with him forever. I felt it was my fault he was screwed up. Our band had always been fairly clean. We like alcohol and partying, but we always understood that getting involved with anything heavier would just get in the way of doing what we had to do to get where we wanted to go. Still, we play festivals, and we have opening acts, and so there was always a lot of shit available and I felt responsible.”

Matt started to object, but Mitch interrupted him, as if he knew what he was going to say. “Yes, I know, I’m not responsible for anyone’s actions. He did what he wanted to do. I can’t save everyone. Blah, blah. I get it. Doesn’t change things. By the end of things, he was sleeping with anyone who came his way. Then he told me he had gotten a girl pregnant. That was when I finally put an end to things. There was only so much I could take, no? I told him he had to leave, that I had no interest in spending the rest of my life trying to fix his.”

“Lexi?”

“Yeah. The asshole then had the nerve to OD. Lexi’s mom had left them, and Jamie could barely take care of her. I might have been mad at him, but I still cared and checked up on him once in a while. I showed up one day and found him. Lexi was alone in the house, in her crib, crying hysterically. I carried her and started rocking her until she calmed down and fell asleep in my arms. It was like she knew I could take care of her, and I pretty much fell completely in love.” Mitch’s face turned serene when he spoke of Lexi.

“Didn’t he have family? How did they let you keep her?”

“He and I had signed papers with powers of attorney for one another, and we were the beneficiaries in each other’s wills and all that. I had changed mine, but he hadn’t. There were provisions for who we wanted to care for our kids, if we ever had them. I was appointed guardian for his kids, and thankfully no one has tried to battle it. The adoption is going to be finalized soon, and I’m terrified every day.” Mitch sighed, reaching over for his warm beer and taking a sip that made him grimace. “His parents belong to some basement church that damns basically everyone to eternal hellfire, and they hate me. They blame me for turning him gay. I wouldn’t put it past them to cause trouble, though they haven’t so far.”

Even though Mitch was taller and broader than him, Matt wanted to protect him from all the shit he’d gone through. He might be rich, famous, and successful, but trying to fix an addict had broken far stronger men. The

possibility that Lexi could be taken from Mitch scared Matt. He placed his arm around Mitch, who leaned back against his chest.

“Even if they did, the fact that you’ve been caring for her has to count for a lot. I’m sure between that and the will, you should be fine.” Matt hoped his words were as true as they ought to be.

“Nothing’s certain till it’s certain. The roller coaster of expectation and disappointment I lived through with Jamie has taught me not to expect too much where he’s concerned. Even now.”

“I’m glad you feel you can trust me, telling me all of this. But I still don’t understand why me...” Matt was sorry to bring it up again, but if they were to have any hope, he had to know.

“You can’t imagine from what I just told you, why someone who is interested in me as a celebrity, the way most people I meet are, might not be too interesting to me? Why I might be more into someone like you?” Mitch got up from the bench, floating in front of Matt. “Judging from your reaction to my little revelation you are clearly into me, but you never tried to take advantage of your closeness. You just did your job. I admire that.” Mitch paddled back towards Matt. “So to answer your question, first I thought you were hot.” He held up one finger. “Then I realized you’re incredibly talented.” He raised another. “Then I saw that you’re responsible and committed. And then I watched you for months and realized none of it was a show.” Mitch kept on counting off the reasons. Finally he shrugged, “I don’t know Matt. You’re a good guy. I like good guys. It’s pretty simple, I think.”

Matt looked at Mitch, who had floated right up to him. He couldn’t say he completely understood what was going on, but Mitch seemed sincere. He took a deep breath and exhaled. “Ok. I’ll try to not question that.” He leaned in and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Mitch rewarded him with a sweet smile, then kicked off backwards into the pool, splashing Matt. “Good!”

After an hour of splashing around, a bit more kissing and talking about everything and nothing, Mitch grabbed Matt another beer.

“I was premed the first two years of college,” Mitch said, handing him the opened bottle.

Matt was surprised to learn Mitch's original major in college had been chemistry. He hadn't believed he had what it took to make it as a musician, so he wanted to do premed as a fallback. Who falls back on medicine? When Vain Affliction started gaining a greater following, he dropped out of college, but later got his bachelor's online. Although in live shows he mostly served as lead singer of the band, he could play every instrument, and every track they had ever recorded featured him playing at least one instrument.

Mitch was also incredibly devoted to Lexi. He felt that the road wasn't a good environment for her, but his mom connected them on Skype several times a day, and whenever there were two days between shows, he flew back to Los Angeles to see her. He was trying to figure out how to arrange things so that she could travel along on the next tour, without exposing her to the inherent dangers of life on the road.

Matt talked about his family and his wedding jobs. He spoke about the things he wanted to do to move away from event work, into more artistic photography, telling him his work for Vain Affliction had been the opportunity of a lifetime.

Just as Matt was becoming concerned about the possibility of permanently turning into a raisin, Mitch's mom, Diane, came out carrying Lexi, who had just woken up. The little girl was still groggy, but clearly excited to see her daddy.

While Mitch got ready, Matt started setting up for the first photos on the garden terrace in front of an amazing wall covered with azalea bushes. The white piqué dress with turquoise trim that Lexi was wearing would contrast beautifully with the hot pink background. When Mitch came back, he was wearing dark jeans and a white button-down shirt with the top buttons open and the sleeves rolled up. Once again he was barefoot.

"So where do you want us, Matt?" Mitch carried Lexi, who looked far happier now that she had been up for a while.

"Come over here and stand in front of this wall. Let's do a few with you standing, holding her, then we can do some sitting on the ground, and then a few with her on the ground doing her own thing. We'll repeat the whole thing out in the yard. We should get plenty of good stuff from that. Generally, trying to get toddlers to pose by themselves is impossible, so we'll just let her loose and I'll take a million pictures. There should be plenty to choose from."

“Perfect. Lexi, say hi to Matty. He’s going to take your picture. You like pictures right?”

Matt put down the camera and walked over to them. “Hi Lexi, how are you? You look so beautiful today, like a princess!”

Lexi gave Matt a smile that melted him completely. Her eyes disappeared, and she was showing all her baby teeth, framed by her red cheeks. By the time she stretched her arms out for Matt to carry her, he was in love. He grabbed her and her hands went directly for his glasses. “Oh, I see, it’s not me you wanted to say hi to, it was my glasses. Well, I’ll take it anyways!” Matt started blowing raspberries on her belly, and immediately the glasses were forgotten as she let out the sweetest giggles, which didn’t stop until Matt finally handed her back to Mitch, who had been standing back, watching them with a smile on his face.

“You’re amazing with her,” Mitch said.

“Ah, kids like me. And I like them, so it works out.”

Mitch’s mom came back with Lexi’s favorite doll. Diane was a youthful-looking woman in her early fifties. She was slim with short dark brown hair and she was wearing jeans and a white button-down like her son. She was loving and energetic, and Mitch was very lucky to have her. Matt’s mom had died when he was in high school and there wasn’t a day he didn’t miss her.

“Okay, boys what are we doing?”

“Diane, I’m going to need you to stand next to me and be bright and shiny. Make Lexi smile and laugh and look in my general direction. Mitch, I want you to just be natural and look at Lexi or the camera or wherever you feel like, but don’t worry about getting her to do anything. Just play and interact with her, and focus on having fun.”

“You don’t give so many instructions when you’re shooting the band,” Mitch laughed.

“Oddly enough, wrangling a one-year-old is way harder than dealing with rock stars. Don’t tell anyone, though!”

“You got it!” Mitch said, giving Matt one of those twinkly-eyed smiles that he just may have become addicted to in a matter of hours.

Matt looked down shyly, turning to look for his camera. No matter what he said, having the full force of Mitch’s attention turned on him was very overwhelming, and it would take some time for him to get used to it.

Chapter 3

Matt spent the next few hours photographing Mitch, Lexi and Diane, and enjoying every second of it. They were such a fun family and clearly very loving. Mitch and Diane hadn't stopped singing everything from the Beatles to Katy Perry, or telling jokes, except to kiss and cuddle Lexi. Even more than the idea of being with Mitch Miles, the rock star, Matt was hoping things would work out so he could spend more time with Mitch and his family.

Lexi had been a pro. Whereas most kids only lasted a few minutes before they got upset and started squirming and tearing off hair bows, she had happily played and smiled. Matt couldn't wait to see the results of the shoot.

As they were about to wrap up, Mitch called him over and placed Lexi in his arms. "So, if I trust you with my baby, do you think you can trust Diane with yours?"

"Huh?"

Mitch grabbed Matt's camera and handed it to Diane. "Take a picture with us Matty!"

Matt felt he should pretend he couldn't. That he should believe it was too early for him to be in a family picture. But he didn't even allow those thoughts to linger for long before he smiled shyly, and explained to Diane how to operate the camera. He wanted a photo with Mitch and Lexi. If nothing else, it would be proof that one of the best days of his life had actually happened.

Matt held Lexi, while Mitch stood beside them with his arms behind his back looking at the two of them. Lexi was playing with Matt's face, trying to stick her hand in his mouth, while Mitch laughed on. At one point he looked at Matt with such tenderness that Matt could barely meet his gaze.

After Matt had packed his equipment and was reluctantly getting ready to leave, Mitch asked him to stay for dinner. Diane was going out with friends and he had to stay home with Lexi, but he wanted to keep hanging out. Matt agreed readily, as he had no plans, and he couldn't think of anywhere he would rather be.

They spent some time with Lexi in her playroom, letting the little girl run back and forth, stumbling like a roly-poly, pint-sized drunk. She would spend a minute banging on her floor piano, quickly moving on to cuddling with a

stuffed dog that was larger than she was, and within seconds she was back, climbing up the wrong end of the plastic slide set up in a corner. After a while, Matt collapsed on the floor, and shortly after, Lexi came over, climbed up on his stomach and promptly fell asleep.

Matt looked over to see Mitch sitting on the floor, leaning against the sectional, contemplating them with a slight smile on his face. Matt gestured, silently asking if they should take her to bed. Mitch stood up and crouched down beside them, gently taking the little girl in his arms. Matt stayed on the padded baby-proof floor staring at the ceiling and thinking. It had been a long time since he'd had such a fun day. He was very shy and as a result had never made friends easily. His best friend was his sister. It was only when he knew a person well that he felt comfortable enough to relax and enjoy the experience. Generally with new people he felt so overwhelmed, wondering if he was saying something stupid or doing something wrong, that the stress and effort soured the experience.

He wasn't quite sure why he felt so relaxed around Mitch. The man was famous. Truly and completely famous. There were people in all seven continents singing his songs and making out with his shirtless posters. But spending the day with him and witnessing his love for Lexi and Diane, and their interactions, had made Matt momentarily forget that he was also that man. Looking at the last few months he had spent touring with the band, Matt realized that he had been so overwhelmed by Mitch's talent and looks that he had not realized what a great guy he actually was. This understanding, combined with a feeling that Mitch wasn't pulling his leg when he professed his attraction, excited Matt. He was looking forward to getting to know Mitch in a way he hadn't even considered with anyone else since his last relationship had ended, almost a year and a half earlier.

Mitch came back and flopped down on the couch. "She's asleep! Who would have thought such a little person could wipe out a grown man in his prime."

"She's amazing. Such a happy kid."

Mitch's face clouded, "Yeah, she is. I'm so glad I've been able to do that for her. I don't want to think about the day I got her and how she lived before then."

"She's very lucky to have you and your mom."

“Nah, we’re the lucky ones. Between the gay thing and my career, Mom had never figured on having grandkids, so having a little girl to take care of is the best thing that ever happened to her.”

Matt’s stomach took the opportunity to growl so loudly Mitch noticed. “Oh wow, you must be starving!”

Matt was quite embarrassed, but he decided to brazen it out. Today seemed like that kind of day. “I think you better feed me soon, or I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

“I’m so sorry. Shit. Well, we have a problem. I can’t actually cook anything... I was going to order something, but that might take a while. Can you wait a bit?”

“Mr. Famous Celebrity can’t cook... Such a surprise,” Matt teased. “Let’s go to the kitchen, I can throw something together if you want.”

“I’m the worst host ever. You’ll never want to do a photo shoot for me again. I make you cook and babysit...” Mitch tried to look chagrined, but his eyes were telling a different story.

Matt got up and leaned over Mitch. “This is one of my best shoots ever.” They stayed inches apart, just looking at each other. Matt then smiled, planted a quick kiss on Mitch’s lips, and headed back to the kitchen.

“You’re so easy,” Mitch said, following Matt.

“You have no idea,” Matt looked over his shoulder, giving Mitch a saucy grin.

Mitch stopped in his tracks, his jaw dropping. “What on earth has happened to you, Matty? Where’s my shy little squirrel?”

Matt gave him a mock glare. “Okay, Matty is kind of cute, I’ll give you that. But you cannot call me a squirrel!”

Mitch went over to Matt, putting his arms around his waist. “But you were my shy little squirrel, running away every time I tried to get close.”

Matt pushed against him, laughing. “I did no such thing!”

“You did. You think yesterday was the first time I tried to talk to you? Every time I asked you a question you would look down, blush, mumble something, and run away. You made me work very hard, Matty.” Mitch appeared very put out, milking the mock reproach for all it was worth.

Matt's attempts to playfully push Mitch away turned into soft caresses. "Well, duh, you're kind of a big deal, you know. You were lucky you had my kryptonite on you yesterday—Lexi, of course. Otherwise..." Matt made a face, laughing.

"I wish I'd known about that sooner." Mitch kissed Matt heatedly. When he finally broke away, his eyes were dark and intense. "Come on, cook something. Replenish your energy. Soothe the beast within and all that. I have plans for later."

Matt stared, his dick stirring. He grabbed an apple from the fruit basket on the counter and took a few bites, chewing and swallowing as quickly as possible.

"That'll do." He put the mangled remains of the apple on the counter and walked towards Mitch, pushing him against the refrigerator and kissing him like it was his job. He pressed tightly against him, his hands touching everywhere, from his hair to his face, down to his abs and ass, not resting for a second in any one spot.

"Come on. Let's go." Mitch grabbed Matt's hand and hurriedly led him across the house, down a long hallway and through a set of double doors. Without losing a second, he stripped his shirt and tore his jeans off. Despite his speed, Matt did not miss the fact that there was no other clothing beneath the jeans.

Mitch walked Matt backwards towards the bed, simultaneously kissing him and stripping off his shirt. When his legs hit the bed, Matt flopped back onto it. Mitch unbuttoned his pants, making quick work of removing them. He crawled up the bed towards Matt and kissed him, thoroughly taking possession of his mouth, before moving to lightly lick a path from his ear, down his neck. He continued downward, sucking and licking and biting and blowing on his nipples, until Matt realized the experience would be over far too quickly if Mitch continued at that rate. He sat up, flipped Mitch over and dragged him up the bed. He went down quickly, and before Mitch probably even had a clue about what was happening, his dick was down Matt's throat.

"Holy fuck!" Mitch's hips jerked up, which would have caused a serious problem had experience not taught Matt to expect the instinctive reaction. He moved back up, licking his way towards the head. He swirled his tongue around the slit, before taking him deep and swallowing around Mitch's cock.

"What the...? Anghhhhh," Mitch moaned.

Matt continued, alternating between long licks and deep swallows. Pumping some of the lube he'd gotten from Mitch's nightstand, he started massaging Mitch's tight hole with his slick index finger.

Mitch had not stopped babbling incoherently, as Matt continued probing with his finger. When he had breached the tight ring, he crooked his finger, while taking Mitch's dick deep and swallowing. Mitch let out a yell as he came down Matt's throat.

Matt sat up as Mitch collapsed, panting, "Matty, what the hell?"

Matt looked at him innocently, "What?"

"That. What was that?" Mitch limpidly gestured towards his groin.

"Oh, that. Did you like it?"

Mitch stared at him in disbelief. "Yeah, Matty. I think I liked it. Give me a few minutes, and I'll show you how much."

"That a fact?" Matt asked, turning to lie on his back next to Mitch.

"Yeah," Mitch extended one hand to grab the bottle of lube and a condom from a drawer. Without moving the rest of his body, he opened the condom and rolled it down Matt's cock. Pumping some lube in his hand, he stroked Matt gently.

After a few minutes he sat up, straddling Matt. Pumping some more lube, he used his fingers to open himself up. The sight was so arousing, Matt thought once again, he might lose control on the spot.

Removing his fingers, Mitch grabbed Matt's cock and slowly lowered himself against it, past the tight ring all the way to the hilt. When he was completely filled, he leaned forward to kiss Matt slowly, making small writhing movements with his hips, which, combined with the tightness surrounding him, drove Matt crazy. He needed more, yet despite his best efforts, Mitch refused to move more urgently.

"Mitch, if you don't speed things up..." Matt threatened, though he imagined his moans and groans were not providing the necessary muscle to get Mitch to move.

"What are you going to do, Matty? What's going to happen if I don't speed up?" Mitch continued his languorous swivels.

"I'm going to stop letting you be in charge."

“You are?”

Seeing the twinkle in Mitch's eye, Matt grabbed him and flipped him over. He took Mitch's legs and pressed them against his torso, leveraging against them to begin a punishing rhythm. Instantly, Mitch started moving to meet his thrusts. Both were grunting and moaning, completely in the moment and out of control.

Just when Matt thought he couldn't handle any more, Mitch wrapped his legs around his hips pressing their stomachs together, stimulating Mitch's trapped dick. Matt continued thrusting relentlessly, until he came so hard, he thought for a second he had gone blind. Seconds later, he felt Mitch coming between their bodies and collapsed breathless against him.

A while later Matt woke up, tangled in sheets and Mitch. He extracted himself quietly to avoid waking Mitch, and headed to the bathroom. When he was finished cleaning up, he grabbed his pants and went to check on Lexi. He wasn't used to having sex with an infant in the house, and he felt a need to make sure she was fine. He had seen the baby monitor in Mitch's nightstand, but he was still worried they might have missed her crying.

Heading towards her room, he found her sleeping peacefully. He leaned over, watching her and finding peace within her even breaths. Matt was struggling to understand how Mitch and Lexi had become so important to him in just one day. He had no words to explain the way he felt. Somehow, being around them felt like home, and Matt was scared that he was falling too fast. Matt felt that Mitch was a good man, who was being honest with him. Yet he was still a musician. His job was to travel the world making people fall in love with him. Matt didn't know what his place could be in such a life, and he feared his insecurities might betray him.

But he couldn't ignore the fact that the time he had spent with Mitch and Lexi had been incredible and among the best experiences of his life. Although part of him was scared, he needed to ignore his fears for the first time in his life and focus on his faith. He didn't have much in the way of facts to back his feelings up, but he had faith in Mitch. For once Matt was ready to jump in blind, sure within himself that he would not wind up splattered on the sidewalk.

Matt felt the door open and turned, meeting Mitch's eyes, as he walked towards him, wrapping Matt in a gentle yet fervent hug.

“I thought you had left...” Mitch whispered, stepping back.

“Why would you think that?”

“Don't know. It happens.” Mitch shrugged, not meeting Matt's eyes.

Matt planted a soft kiss on Mitch's lips. “I needed to see her breathing.”

Mitch laughed quietly. “I do that almost every night.”

“She's incredible. You're so lucky to have her. She's so lucky to have you.”

“How about you, Matty?” Mitch leaned against the crib, lightly caressing Lexi's cheek. “Are you lucky?”

“I'd like to be.” Matt placed his hand on Mitch's back, tracing small circles with his thumb. “Today it feels like I might be.”

Mitch turned, wrapping his arms around Matt, and kissing him possessively. When he came up for air, he whispered in Matt's ear, “Good answer, Matty.”

Chapter 4

Over the next few weeks, Matt basically moved in to Mitch's house, spending all his time with Mitch, Lexi, and Diane. Nothing they did would make any top-100 list of things one would expect to do with a rock star. Mitch's tour was on hiatus and the band had taken the time to focus on writing music for their next record, which for Mitch meant a lot of time in his pool house studio. During the day, Matt would head to work at his photography studio, taking portraits of kids and families, but more importantly, putting together a proposal for a project that he hoped would enable him to spend the next few months with Mitch, as the band embarked on its world tour. He had not discussed his plans with Mitch, not wanting to seem like he was rushing things too much. While they had become extremely close far quicker than most people would have, he was still cautious.

Not that he was too worried, as Mitch was the one who constantly wanted Matt to be everywhere he was. The first few nights they had spent together Matt had planned to eventually head home, but invariably Mitch would ask him to stay. It was a heady feeling, being with someone who seemed so invested, especially when it was someone like Mitch.

The only dark spot in their lives was the upcoming court appearance to finalize Lexi's adoption. Mitch couldn't shake the feeling that Jamie's parents had something up their sleeve. Until the papers were signed, he wouldn't rest easy. The court date simultaneously excited him with its promise of closure, while at the same time terrifying him with thoughts of all that could go wrong.

Matt had learned more about Mitch's relationship with Jamie, and it angered him so much to know how much the man had hurt Mitch and Lexi. It appeared that despite her parents' best efforts, Lexi didn't have any developmental problems, although she was small for her age. Of course, it would be many years before they had a definite idea of what lasting damage their drug use may have caused the little girl. Lexi's mom had, for the most part, cleaned up during her pregnancy, relapsing quickly after giving birth, and abandoning her child shortly thereafter. Jamie had stayed, taking care of the girl, but he had not been the kind of person who could provide the level of attention a newborn required, especially given his infrequent sobriety.

Jamie's parents had been far from exemplary either, more concerned with their place within their religious community. They disowned their son when

they discovered his relationship with Mitch, who knew that any effort they might make to get Lexi would be solely to spite him. They were convinced it was Mitch's fault that Jamie had turned out to be gay, and wound up doing drugs. They hadn't cared enough about their son to love him despite his perceived and real faults, nor to help him through his struggles, but they had cared enough about their hatred of Mitch to attempt to blackmail him a few years back. They'd asked for money in exchange for not divulging his homosexuality. Out of love for Jamie, Mitch had refrained from having them arrested, but had countered by assuring them, without a shadow of a doubt, that he would make sure they spent the next few decades in a federal prison if they ever approached him again.

The sheer insanity of their actions was proof of the degree of their hatred towards Mitch. He didn't know how far they might go, and signed court documents would give him far more peace of mind than the directives of a drug addict, who just so happened to be his former homosexual lover. Even in Los Angeles, drug-addicted homosexuals didn't engender much sympathy and support.

Matt was trying his best to be supportive, but he'd be lying if he said he wasn't worried. Losing Lexi didn't bear consideration, for fear of complete dissolution of any and all of Mitch's mental faculties. There would be no turning back from such a loss, particularly to such cruel people. Mitch would fight for her to the ends of the earth, but sometimes right didn't vanquish evil, and the alternative was terrifying. Matt was trying to focus on the day-to-day. There was nothing for them to do but wait, so he tried to keep Mitch otherwise occupied to keep him from going crazy over the unknown.

They spent a lot of time with Lexi in her playroom, which was the best therapy Matt had ever had. Lexi giggled so infectiously that dark thoughts had no place in her presence. After a hard day at play, she loved to fall asleep lying on his chest. The meditation practice he had developed after breaking up with his first boyfriend had nothing on the Zen-like feeling those moments brought him. He lived for them.

They went shopping and took Lexi to the park so she could play in the sandbox with other kids her age, but their outings were infrequent due to the constant presence of the paparazzi. Mitch told Matt he was through putting on a front for the outside world, but that didn't mean he could come out. He said he didn't care, but his record label had expressly forbidden it, making any time spent in public difficult. In the privacy of Mitch's home, they had quickly

gotten used to constantly touching one another. Matt's hands were always running through Mitch's hair, and Mitch never missed an opportunity to put his arms around him. Spending time together and being unable to touch each other was a special kind of torture they tried to avoid. They hung out with the band and other friends and relatives, but any time they stepped out of the house, cameras were waiting to catch them slipping, draining any potential for fun.

Today, they were taking one of their rare outings to the park. Mitch wanted very badly for Lexi to have the most normal childhood possible within their circumstances, so he liked to take her to the park himself, instead of relying on his mother all the time. They packed all the assorted bits and bobs that were necessary when traveling with a baby, even to go down the street, and set off immediately, encountering a gaggle of paparazzi the moment they stepped out of the gate.

The photographers immediately rushed towards them, cameras clicking nonstop. "Mitch, who's your friend? Is he your manny?" One photographer rushed in, getting far too close to Lexi for Matt's comfort. "Did you fire your mom? Give us a smile, Mitch!"

Their comments and questions all melted into one blob of sound, until there was no way to tell who was yelling what. Mitch flashed a quick smile at them, introduced Matt as a friend, and wishing them a good afternoon, walked away, pushing Lexi's stroller.

"I have no idea how you get used to that," Matt said, once they had walked a bit. The photographers had gotten in their cars, and he was sure some would follow them down to the park.

"You don't. You just draw on all your Zen reserves and hope they don't take it so far you explode. As long as I stay boring, I win. I react to their crap, they win."

"Trips to the playground without any acknowledgment from your part probably aren't very useful to them, I guess."

"Oh, they'll get something. By loving my daughter and actually spending time with her, people get to see that, 'OMG, stars are totally just like me!', so there's a few thousand dollars heading these guys' way for a photograph of our very mundane Saturday afternoon."

Matt laughed. "I guess you gotta laugh."

“Only way to keep from crying.” Mitch adjusted the brim of his cap. “Don’t get me wrong. Being me is an awesome thing. I do what I love. I’m surrounded by incredible people. But there are downsides.” Mitch looked back down the street they were walking along. “I wouldn’t even mind having them around if it wasn’t for all the secrets I have to keep. If I were holding your hand right now, I’d just turn and smile and answer all their inane questions. But everything has to be such a game, and that wears on me, I guess.”

“What would happen if people found out you’re gay?”

“Honestly, at this point I don’t know. We have such a huge fan base. Everyone just worries that all the girls who think they stand a chance with me would stop buying our music once they realize there’s not a chance in hell I’ll be fathering their babies. Who knows? Some might. If it were just me, I’d risk it. I enjoy my success, but I’d sacrifice some of it to live a more honest life. But I’m in a band. I can’t play with their income.”

“I’m sure they’d support you no matter what.” Matt had spent a lot of time in the last few weeks hanging out with the other members of Vain Affliction, and he was positive that the love between them was real. They wouldn’t begrudge Mitch his happiness.

“They would, but that’s a lot of responsibility to bear. What if we lose our record deal? If they find us in breach of contract, they could sue us. The record company I care less about, but they have a lot invested in us...”

“Well, whatever. Today is about us and Lexi and the park, so let’s think happy thoughts! Ommmmmm.” Matt stopped walking, closing his eyes and putting his hands up in a meditation stance.

Mitch laughed, “God, I love you!”

Matt’s eyes popped wide open, and he stared at Mitch, whose expression had turned slightly uncertain. “I love you too.” They kept looking at each other intently. “I really wish you hadn’t done this now, ’cause I really want to kiss you right now. Like a lot... I still love you, though.”

Mitch laughed, and turned to start walking, bumping his shoulder to Matt’s. “I guess we’ll just have to make up for the lost opportunity when we get home.”

They arrived at the park and placed Lexi on the baby swing, gently swaying her back and forth, loving her delighted peals of laughter. Some of the other parents took photos of them with their phones, but in general everyone was pretty respectful. They did the rounds through the bouncing caterpillar and the

baby merry-go-round, then took Lexi over to the lawn for group playtime, where a teacher would lead the parents and their babies through musical games. Matt had been attending the classes with them for the last few weeks, and he had come to consider it a highlight of his week.

They staked out a spot beneath the shade, making small talk with some of the other parents as they laid down a blanket and prepared for the class. Ms. Alice called everyone to attention and the class began. Since the kids in Lexi's class were at that age where they were just starting to get mobile, the scene quickly became vaguely chaotic, with babies toddling to and fro, while the parents sang "The Wheels on the Bus."

Matt was chasing after Lexi while Mitch took a video with his phone, when he heard a commotion in the distance. He quickly realized that Mitch was no longer recording them and was, instead, in the middle of a fight surrounded by photographers. Matt asked Ms. Alice to look after Lexi and quickly ran over.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked as he grabbed Mitch, who was pummeling a short, fat, bald man on the ground.

"This asshole said something about Lexi. I won't have that, Matt. They can say whatever they want about me, but they better fucking well leave our kid alone." Mitch was seething and it was taking all of Matt's strength to hold him back.

"Mitch, you can't do this. Chill out. Remember what we were talking about earlier."

"He asked me how I felt about raising my fag friend's crack baby. She's not a crack baby, and nothing about her is any of his goddamn business."

Matt's blood ran cold. It had never occurred to him that people would say such things about an innocent baby. He understood Mitch's anger and desire to beat on the man. Nonetheless, he needed to put a stop to it. He grabbed Mitch's head and looked him straight in the eyes, whispering, "He's an asshole, I get that. But you're creating a show that is making all of them very happy. You need to stop it. Right now. It's not helping anything." He kept staring at him, until he saw that Mitch was breathing more normally.

Mitch gave his hand a squeeze and nodded. "Thanks."

The adrenaline that had flooded Matt's system was just starting to recede, when Ms. Alice came over shouting, "Mitch, Matt. Lexi's gone!"

Chapter 5

Two of the longest hours of Matt's life had passed when they finally got home. The police had come and interviewed everyone, but no one had seen anything. In the chaos caused by the fight, all the parents had grabbed their children and left. Ms. Alice had looked away for a second to pick up another kid who was crying. His mom had attended the class with a nanny, but with triplets to care for and the confusion, the other kid had been left alone. Ms. Alice was desolate. She had just turned to grab the boy, and when she turned back Lexi was gone.

Mitch had shut down, not saying a word except to answer the cops' questions. He had called the private security firm that handled the band, and they had sent someone over immediately. The police had confiscated the paparazzi's cameras, but given that they had been focused on the fight, there wasn't much hope that there would be any clues.

Matt longed to console Mitch, but the guilt he felt was overwhelming. He had left Lexi behind. At the time, it seemed like the right choice. He couldn't very well take a little girl into a fight. The fact, however, was that he should have thought of protecting her, and he didn't. Matt was positive he would never forgive himself for his stupidity. He was sure that Mitch was blaming him as well.

"We got something from the photographer you beat up." John Sanders, the investigator the security firm had sent over, was a tall man in his early forties, whose eyes appeared to miss nothing. His entire persona inspired a great deal of confidence, and Matt was sure that there wasn't anything John Sanders couldn't do if he just set his mind to it.

"The guy said he was approached last week by a man when he was waiting outside your house. He said the man asked a lot of questions about your routine, and when he heard that you went to the park every Saturday, he offered the photographer five thousand dollars to create a distraction today."

"And I fell for it," Mitch said in a monotone voice.

Sanders looked at him. "Well, it was intended to get to you. The photographer said the man told him what kind of things he should say to really upset you."

“How could they know any of that? Lexi’s family history is not common knowledge.”

“Mitch, do you have anyone who you think might wish you ill?” Sanders asked.

“I’m a public figure. I’m sure there are many people who hate me.” It was killing Matt to see Mitch so beaten.

“Yes, but kidnapping a child requires a different level of hatred. I’m not talking about people who don’t like your music. I mean someone who has a serious grudge against you.”

“I...” Mitch stopped as soon as the first word was out of his mouth. His face turned incredulous. “They wouldn’t. They couldn’t possibly...”

“Who, Mitch?” Sanders asked in a soothing tone.

“Lexi’s grandparents. Her birth father’s parents. They hate me. They tried to blackmail me once. But how could they do this to her? She must be so terrified. Why would they do this?” Mitch was becoming agitated.

“Can you give me their information? You can freak out later. Let’s fix this first, okay?” Sanders placed a notebook in front of Mitch, handing him a pen.

Mitch wrote their name and address, searching for the phone number in his phone. Sanders immediately ran out, promising he would call as soon as he had any information.

“Oh my God, Matt, do you think they have her?” Mitch was quickly sliding into desperation.

“I don’t know, babe. I hope they do, actually. I’m sure they wouldn’t hurt her.”

“What do you mean, you hope they do?” Mitch turned angrily towards him

“I just mean, it’s better if she’s with them. That’s a clue we can follow. If they have her we will find her.”

“What do you mean we, Matt? What do you care? You couldn’t even look after her for a few damn minutes.”

“I’m so sorry, Mitch.”

“What good is that? I still don’t have my kid. She comes first, Matt. She always comes first. You should have let me kill that guy. As long as you were with her, she would have been fine.”

“Mitch, this was a planned attack. They knew what they were doing. I was just acting on instinct. You were in trouble. How could I know she wouldn't be fine with Ms. Alice? We're not always on top of Lexi when we go to the park. I couldn't have known.”

“You should have. She would be with me now if you had.” Mitch was yelling, unhinged.

“Mitch, I'm so sorry, you have to believe me. I would rather die than have something happen to her. You know that.” Matt was crying hysterically, his fear of losing Mitch crushing him.

“All I know is that I don't have Lexi with me, and it's your fault.” Mitch stormed to the front door and threw it open. “Get the fuck out of here! Right now. Get. The fuck. Out.”

“Mitch, please. Don't.”

“Out. Now.” Mitch bellowed.

Matt grabbed his keys and walked out, feeling as if his entire world had crumbled.

Matt got in his car and left the property, but he couldn't head to his apartment. He had to know what happened. He needed to know that Lexi was all right. He parked outside the gate, far enough to avoid the paparazzi that had multiplied since the news of the kidnapping had been broadcast. He was sure that the other paparazzi at the park must have recorded Mitch talking about “our kid”, and he didn't want anyone to notice him outside.

He sat in his car for a long time, thinking and waiting. He understood why Mitch had reacted as he had. Hell, he felt horrible about what he had done. But that was the problem with hindsight. His actions had seemed perfectly logical at the time. Who goes around imagining kidnappers? The more he thought about it, the more it made sense that Jamie's parents had taken her. He knew if this were the case that Mitch would get her back. These were not hardened criminals who couldn't be outsmarted. He had every confidence that John Sanders would get Lexi back very soon.

The moment he thought of the man, his car appeared, driving up to the gate. Matt followed him and got out, knocking on his window.

“Matt, why are you out here?” Sanders asked, surprised.

“He kicked me out. Says it’s my fault. But I couldn’t leave. I have to know she’s okay. What do you know?”

“We found them. She’s safe. My people contacted them pretending they needed help finding Lexi, and they admitted they had her. They don’t appear to be the brightest people in the world. They seem to believe that knowing Mitch is gay will protect them. They asked for ten million dollars and if Mitch accuses them or refuses, they will not only keep her, but they’ll out him publicly. It appears that while they might hate... uhm, let’s phrase it nicer than they did... homosexuals—and they really do hate them—they have no problem with their money.”

“What does he have to do?” Matt was so relieved to know she was safe, he felt as if he was finally breathing for the first time in hours.

“They want to meet at some motel in San Luis Obispo.”

“I have to go with him. He can’t do this alone.”

“Matt, I really can’t get in the middle of this, and if he kicked you out, it’s pretty much my job to make sure you stay out.”

“Please, Sanders. It was an honest mistake.”

“I know that.” Sanders sighed. “Look, I’ll let him know you’re out here, and try to get him to agree to let you come along. Mostly because I know you’re right, and he shouldn’t do this alone.”

“Thanks so much, Sanders.”

“I don’t promise anything,” Sanders said, as he rolled up his window and drove up to the house.

Matt waited for what felt like hours—though the clock on the dashboard assured him it had only been ten minutes—growing more and more scared that Mitch would never agree to see him. He was about to storm the house when his phone rang, Mitch’s name on the caller ID.

“Mitch, oh my God, what’s going on? What are you going to do?”

“Come on in, Matty, and we’ll tell you.” Mitch sounded hoarse, but considering the circumstances, fairly calm.

Matt drove up to the house in a flash, moving so fast he felt as if he was simultaneously shifting to park, shutting off the engine, and jumping out of the car.

Mitch was standing in the front door, and he ran towards Matt throwing himself against his body in a ferocious hug. "I'm so sorry about what I said. You didn't deserve that. I'm just... I just..."

"Mitch, I understand. *I* blame myself for my stupidity. Just 'cause I couldn't have known better, doesn't mean I don't feel I should have. But that doesn't matter. Now, we just have to get our baby back. How're we doing that?"

"They want me to go there and transfer the money to some offshore account, then they'll give me Lexi. Sanders said that the firm has contacts at all banks for just this purpose, which is really fucked up, but they can cancel the transfer as soon as we're out of there with Lexi."

"What's to stop these people from coming back for her, when they realize they don't have the money?"

"I'll have a little camera on me which will record them, and as soon as we're gone, the police will come in and arrest them. With the video, they should stay locked up for a very long while. Plus, I can still press charges for the blackmail. So they'd have a lot to answer for."

"Okay, so when are we going?" Matt asked. When Mitch made a gesture that implied he thought Matt should stay, he didn't even allow him to say a word. "I'm going. Even if you hadn't called me in, I was going. I need to see her. Don't even bother keeping me from going."

"Matt, it might be dangerous."

"Mitch, you and Lexi will be there. I could care less about me."

Mitch hugged him with all his strength. "I love you so much. I'm so sorry about earlier."

"I love you too. Let's go get our baby, and then we can spend the rest of our lives making up for our fuck-ups."

"Okay, gentlemen, we're leaving. I take it you're joining us, Matt?" Sanders asked, walking up to them with two necklaces, each with a circular black pendant about the size of a nickel. When Matt nodded, he continued, "Great, so you both will be wearing a necklace. It contains a microscopic camera that will transmit what it records to our headquarters. Once you guys are out, the police will go in and seize them. The police already have plenty of reasons for the well-padded warrant out for their arrest, but the video will be a nice bit of ironclad evidence against them. Mitch, when they ask you to do the transfer, just use your normal bank information. We have everything set up on our end to make sure you get the money back as soon as possible."

"I just want Lexi back and them behind bars for a long time, nothing else is important," Mitch said, squeezing Matt's hand tightly.

"We'll get her back. I promise," Sanders said.

Matt and Mitch drove up the highway, with Sanders in the backseat. When they neared their destination, Sanders would hide in the backseat and be their lookout, along with other backup units from the security company, which were already in place. No one expected anything dangerous to occur, but everyone felt better erring on the side of caution.

The drive was a quiet one, as they were all too keyed up for small talk. When they neared the motel, Sanders went over the plan and any unforeseen complications that may arise. Matt was certain that there were no possible scenarios left to contemplate. When they arrived at their destination, he felt he might explode from nervousness. It was six in the morning, and he had not slept or eaten for almost twenty-four hours. Once this was over with, the three of them were going to hunker down in their home, and if he had any say, no one would ever leave it again.

Matt and Mitch got out of the car and walked over to the room where they had been told to go. The motel looked rundown, the sickly-yellow paint peeling, and the grimy windows sending the message that cleanliness was not a priority in the establishment. Matt hated to think of Lexi trapped in that place with her godforsaken grandparents. Mitch raised his hand to knock on the door, but before he made contact, it opened, and a short, skinny woman in her sixties, wearing a frumpy dress and with her long, white hair tied back in a bun, peeked out.

"Who's he?" she asked, gesturing towards Matt.

"He's a friend. Lexi loves him very much and will be glad to see him," Mitch answered curtly.

She snorted. "Friend, I'm sure. Come in," she ordered them, the venom dripping from her words.

They walked into a small room decorated in dark oranges and browns, that did very little to disguise the grime impregnated on every surface. Matt nearly ruined everything when he saw Lexi laying on a bed, her red face and moist cheeks a sign that she had been crying. Sanders had told them to be as economical as possible in their movements, and not to go to Lexi until her

grandparents handed her over, in order to avoid any confrontations that might harm the child. That didn't stop Matt from wishing with every fiber of his being that he could just grab her already.

"She just fell asleep. You've turned my granddaughter into a devil-child, which isn't surprising, I guess. She's been crying like a banshee for hours."

"Well, being around strangers will do that to a child, Sheila," Mitch replied, his voice perfectly even, his anger evidenced only by the clench of his jaw.

She turned towards Mitch sharply, her eyes hard. "No, my Jamie was a perfect baby. He was the perfect son. Until he met you, and you ruined him."

"How did I ruin him, Sheila?"

"You turned him away from God. You made him an abomination," she said, shaking with barely suppressed rage.

Mitch sighed, realizing that continuing this conversation just risked their plan. "Sheila, I'm just here for Lexi. I have the money. I'd like to give it to you, take my child, and be on my way."

"I don't have anything to do with that. That's Bill's idea. I want to keep her, but Bill says she has the mark of the devil in her. He says there's nothing we can do for her, just like there was nothing we could do for Jamie. You have contaminated my whole family and stolen them from me. Why would you do that? What did I do to you?" The woman was now crying angrily. If their scheme hadn't been enough proof already, this would have been the point at which Matt realized she was actually insane.

"What's going on here?" A tall, portly man emerged from the bathroom, his cold eyes boring through them. "Why is my wife crying? What did you do?"

"He took everything from me, Bill," Sheila wailed hysterically. "He took my Jamie, and now he's taking what's left of him."

"Sheila, I know. That's why we're making him pay, no?" Bill placed his arm around his wife, though his eyes never looked at her.

"But why can't they pay, and we keep her? We can save her. Pastor James told me there are rituals we can perform to exorcise the devil from her." Sheila's blue eyes were shimmering with tears and hope.

"We talked about this. We can't risk it. If it doesn't work, she could contaminate us. We must walk the righteous path of the Lord until the day of reckoning, or there shall be no salvation. Her soul is already lost, poor child."

Though his words, and even his tone, appeared caring, his eyes only displayed calculation.

“Of course, you’re right, Bill. You’re always right.” Subdued, Sheila sat on the second bed in the room, staring longingly at Lexi, while at the same time keeping her distance.

“Thank you, dear.” Giving his wife a quick pat on the head, Bill turned to Matt and Mitch. “You have the money?”

“Yes, how do you want me to do the transfer?”

“Use this computer here,” Bill said, pointing to a black laptop on the coffee table. “It’s all ready. You just have to type in your information. I’ll warn you, don’t try anything funny. The man who set this up said it’s fail-safe. Don’t be underestimating me.”

“Of course not, Bill,” Mitch said in the same calm tone he had maintained since they had arrived. He sat down at the computer, pulling out the paper with his bank information from his shirt pocket.

“Why’d you have to bring your fag over? Can’t stay away from his ass long enough to rescue your daughter?” More than what was said about him, Matt was sickened by the disdainful tone Bill used when referring to Lexi.

“Bill!” Sheila appeared scandalized by his words, as she crossed herself.

“Sorry, dear. I apologize. You see, just a few minutes in their presence, and I’m uttering profanities. It’s the devil’s work.”

Matt met Mitch’s eyes, and although they were both doing their best to appear unmoved, Mitch’s gaze mirrored Matt’s feeling of incredulity at what they were hearing. They needed to get out of there very soon.

“It’s done. See? The money’s transferred. Can I have my daughter and leave already?” Mitch stood up.

“Not so quick. Let me make sure it’s gone through.” Bill walked over to the computer, and after a few minutes, stood up. “Pleasure doing business with you, Mitch,” he smirked.

“Right. So can I go?”

“Of course. A deal’s a deal.”

Mitch ran over to Lexi and took her in his arms, holding on as if his life depended on it. As they ran out of the room and down the stairs, they heard

Sheila wailing disconsolately. When they were halfway down the stairs, Lexi woke up, bursting into tears upon seeing Mitch, and clinging to him as tightly as he was to her, as she repeatedly shrieked at the top of her lungs, "Daaaaa!"

Chapter 6

As Matt had wanted, they spent the weeks following the kidnapping closed up in the house. Diane, who had been away in Las Vegas with friends when Lexi had been taken, went shopping for groceries and other necessities so Matt and Mitch were able to renounce the outside world and keep to themselves in their home. Matt had officially moved in, although he had not been able to bring his things over, as he had not wanted to leave Mitch and Lexi for even a second.

The kidnapping had been front-page news throughout the world. Bill and Sheila had been arrested, and identified as Lexi's biological grandparents, although no connection had been made linking Mitch and Jamie. No one had drawn any conclusions about Matt and Mitch either. Mitch had decided that when his next contract was negotiated, he would refuse to sign unless the controls over his personal life were eliminated. But for now he had decided he would live his life completely openly. While he would continue to refuse to comment on their relationship for the next few years, all of his actions would demonstrate who they were to one another. For Matt, just being with Mitch and Lexi was everything. The details weren't a concern in his eyes.

That night, after they had put Lexi down in her crib—which they had only moved back into her room a few days earlier—they went to bed, snuggling while they watched stupid sitcoms, and ate ice cream and cake. After they had turned the television off, Mitch turned to Matt, placing small kisses all over his face.

"I have some news for you," Mitch said between kisses.

"What? Are you trying to butter me up?" Matt murmured, enjoying the attention too much to mind.

"I have to head back on tour in a few weeks."

"I knew that. I know that eventually we have to leave the house again, as much as I might not want to..."

"Well, I asked the band and they want you to photograph the rest of the tour as well, so we can be together."

Matt sat up. "Mitch, that's great. But we can't both leave Lexi. I know she has Diane, but I feel we're creating something new, and I wouldn't want to leave her behind, especially after all that's happened."

Mitch reached up to kiss him. "I love you so much for loving her so much. You have no idea. Actually, I've decided to bring her and my mom as well."

"You did? Why? You've never wanted that." Mitch was genuinely surprised.

"Well, my priorities have changed. Being normal suddenly doesn't seem so important. Having her around and knowing she's okay, that's all that matters."

"What about security? We would always be worried about her in all those different places." If a simple trip to the park was beyond Matt's abilities these days, he couldn't imagine how overwhelmed he would feel touring the world.

"I talked to Sanders, and we would set up a security detail for her. Around the clock. I had already decided to do that anyways. We can just start it off on tour." Mitch pushed Matt back, straddling him. "I can't spend all that time away from you guys. You're everything. I wouldn't be able to function. I would be no good to anyone."

"Well, before this all happened, I had been trying to work out a plan to be able to travel with you... I've always wanted to travel the world, photographing people, telling their stories. I've sent out a few proposals for a book series, and there's been some interest. Put together with the chance to continue working with you guys, it's really an amazing opportunity for me."

"Good, it's settled!" Mitch bent down and kissed Matt with an enthusiasm that quickly turned far more intense and sensuous. Unlike their usual frenzied lovemaking, they seemed content to take their time; to celebrate what felt like a turning point in their relationship. While they had spoken of an indefinite future ahead of them, these were the first plans built around their desire to spend the rest of their lives together. It might be a few years before they could get married, but for now, knowing that no matter what, as long as they were together, they would always actually be together, was enough.

"I love you," Mitch said as he thrust languorously against Matt.

"I love you too. Thank you for not giving up on me."

"Matty, from the moment I met you, I knew we could be this great," Mitch whispered, in between kisses. "I'll never give up on you. I promise."

The End

Author Bio

Alex has sensed the muses flittering and fluttering about for the better part of her life, but had never heeded their call. It wasn't until the wondrous day she discovered the delightful world of M/M romance that the errant thoughts that had previously loped about her brain in a renegade fashion agreed to come together in a mostly structured manner and reveal themselves to the world at large. The alpha males and sensitive lads who had taken her imagination on delicious flights of fancy no longer beckoned for the lovely ladies who, to be honest, bored her. They were more than happy to play amongst themselves, and she was more than happy to bring their stories to life.

An all-around artsy person, Alex has been everything from an opera singer to a photographer. It is one of her greatest goals in life to write a novel, and boy, does she have a good one up her sleeve. Watch this space!

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