

Partner in crime

With guilty-pleasure series *Revenge* returning soon, Sarah Lang talks to Gabriel Mann – one half of TV's most dynamic duplicitous duos.

TALK ABOUT timing. Gabriel Mann was mere weeks away from quitting acting and leaving Los Angeles when he heard about a part – and a show – that intrigued him.

The new drama (well, melodrama) was called *Revenge*, and the role was that of a genius software inventor, billionaire entrepreneur and social misfit called Nolan Ross.

Mann, on the line from LA and as affable as they come, tells me how it happened. “I had no script, just the audition pages with all the Nolan themes and lines, so all I had to go off was this character and how I imagined playing him,” he says in an upbeat voice that’s nothing like Nolan’s sarcastic drawl. “I thought ‘if the script is as interesting as this character, this show has to be something really fun.’”

Getting the role was a “complete life-changer”.

“*Revenge* gave me a renewed appreciation for this [acting] world, and took on a life of its own.”

A ratings’ and critics’ darling that now airs in 39 countries from Argentina to Vietnam, *Revenge* pivots around Emily Thorne (Emily VanCamp), a beautiful young philanthropist who moves to the Hamptons. Well, that’s her cover story. Her real name is Amanda Clarke, and her real plan is to systematically and ruthlessly ruin the lives of those responsible for the death of her father David Clarke (James Tupper) and for framing him for aiding terrorists. Her main targets are Hamptons’ power couple Conrad (Henry Czerny) and Victoria Grayson (a brilliant Madeleine Stowe). In all this, Nolan is Emily’s ally and aide.

Keeping a promise to David to look out for his daughter, Nolan literally opens Pandora’s box by giving Emily 49 per cent of his company (David was Nolcorp’s sole investor), the news her father was innocent, and the box with information on his betrayers. “So Nolan’s sort of the creator, but then the relationship flips,” Mann says. Hacking and tracking on his laptop, he’s the Robin to her Batman. “The things she comes up with are so brilliant and fascinating that he’s in awe of her mind. He’s clapping his hands and thrilled she’s making these devious plans to commit illegal crimes in the name of vengeance.”

The Nolan of the early episodes – the guy who dressed terribly, tried too hard and attempted to buy friendship – came across as a needy, socially-awkward, pompous, snarky jerk. But as the show

progressed, and Nolan and Emily went from an uneasy alliance to a trusted friendship, he showed he was courageous, funny, loyal, and super shrewd. “Over the series, he becomes a sort of voice of reason, a moral compass,” says Mann, who likens Nolan to “a misunderstood puppy whose bite is bigger than his bark”.

Mann, 40, has thought long and hard about why *Revenge* is such a hit. “First, I think it’s good old-fashioned storytelling and melodrama. It’s fun to feel you’re peeking into the lives of the very privileged. It also appeals to a basic storytelling about family – obviously a strange, mega-wealthy, semi-evil, very flawed family – but family is a common denominator, something everyone can understand.” Plus, he says, the actors’ close friendships create great “onscreen chemistry”.

The chemistry turned explosive in the nail-biting season one finale, when Emily rescued Nolan from the White-Haired Man, broke up with Daniel (Josh Bowman), discovered that her mother’s alive and that the fake Amanda (Margarita Levieva) is back and pregnant to Jack (Nick Wechsler), the man Emily loves. But wait, there’s more: the plane Victoria boarded en route to testify against Conrad exploded, and their daughter Charlotte (Christa B. Allen) overdosed.

In season two, expect Nolan to step further out of the shadows — to actually do some work, have some romance, and yes, even dress better. Mann, a former fashion model for brands such as Gap and Calvin Klein, sometimes laughs out loud at Nolan’s “costumes”, which span pink pants, garish jerseys and polo shirts with turned-up collars. “His clothes are his psychological armour,” Mann muses. “The more popped collars and layers, the more he’s protecting himself. In season two he’ll learn to say more with less, with both his fashion sense and his self-confidence.” Plus, he says, Nolan and Emily’s relationship will “evolve dramatically”.

With that, our time’s up, but Mann suggests we talk again to see how season two goes down Downunder. He adores New Zealand, where he filmed *Legend of the Seeker* a few years back.

“It’s one of my favourite places in the world, and my obsession and constant craving for New Zealand flat whites is a bit of a problem for me living in LA.”

Not a bad problem to have, though, when you’re on a hit show and having a blast with your castmates. Emily VanCamp and Josh Bowman are a real-life couple, and the rest are close friends.

The TV special *Revenge: The First Chapter*, plays on TV2, Saturday at 8.30pm. *Revenge*’s second season begins on Tuesday, February 12 at 8.30pm.

