

# Chapter 1 – The Leap

When I first saw Facebook in the late 2000s, I clearly remember thinking how dangerous it could become and how amazing it was that people willingly shared so much of themselves for free. I had no desire to tell the world, ‘What’s on my mind?’ as Facebook asked me to. I had no need to broadcast every thought I had, every meal I ate or any sorrow I pretended I was feeling. When you’re selling something, however, and especially when that something is *you*, a social media presence is vital. And my potential customers, more than anyone, needed reassurance that if they gave me their hard-earned dollars, I would provide them with the outcome they desired; perhaps even their wildest dreams.

Because my service was sex.

I signed up to Twitter in the early days of my new career, on the advice of a sex worker colleague. I’d churn out random tweets designed to reassure my growing audience that I was a sexy and trustworthy guy. Dignity and security are primary concerns for the women I see. Some of them have escaped from abusive relationships; others are lonely and want the safety net of knowing they can go out for a dinner-date, but won’t end up with a creep from one of the various dating apps. It’s a financial transaction, yes, but it’s also so much more than that. My services have been

everything from straight-out fun or a much-needed confidence boost to reconnecting lost, tired or scared women with a sense of themselves they haven't had in years.

All roles grow and my budding career was no exception. But as the months rolled on, I became more entangled in the lives of the women who booked me. I tuned in to their unique situations, listened to their confided secrets, absorbed their needs and desires, and eventually, (and perhaps inevitably) the line between personal and professional began to blur. Finally, on one particularly lonely and dark day, I reached out on social media to do something more than tell people I was an honest, caring and safe playmate. I suppose it was a cry in the dark: the need to be heard, or maybe even a way to unburden myself – and it was about Sam. Here's the message I posted on Twitter:

*I have a regular client who is suffering from early-onset Alzheimer's disease and she's only forty-six. She said she has about five years to live and is aware that she is declining rapidly. She has chosen me to be her companion in the last years of her life, as dating is pointless to her. To say I'm honoured is a vast understatement. She has a carer and supportive friends but an unsupportive ex-husband, and two young kids. She understandably needs sexual release but it's become far more.*

*She talks of making videos of us so she can remember me for as long as possible and I completely die inside. She knows she will never live to see her children become adults and the hopelessness of her situation becomes overwhelming.*

*I saw her last night and didn't want to stop holding her. The amount of time she books me for becomes irrelevant. I want to be everything and nothing to her at the same time. I guess I'm not really looking for advice as much as a few virtual hugs. I honestly can't stop crying.*

I was blown away by the compassion I was shown, and it helped me to understand that none of us work or live in a bubble and that our circumstances can change in the blink of an eye.

I'm Mitch Larsson, and this is my story.

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I'd always been flirtatious. By choosing sex work as a career, I was able to harness what I saw as a strength and turn it into a job that put a roof over my head, paid my bills, helped support my son, and yes, even paid my taxes. When women looked at the images of the Mitch Larsson persona I'd created, however, with the work-out body, the well-cut suit and the descriptive spiel that invited them to 'feel cared for and loved in the most genuine, non-judgmental way possible', adjectives mattered. And not the ones you would think. Yes, one needed to look good in this industry, but it was also much, much more important to be seen as safe. The most chiseled abs in the world won't get you booked if you aren't trustworthy and kind.

Mitch definitely didn't come cheap, but investing in your own safety, pleasure and self-worth wasn't meant to be. He was a man who respected, celebrated and adored women. Mitch was the guy that just about every woman wanted at some stage in their lives and in lots of ways, he was the man I always wanted to be. But Dan – the real me – came as part of the package, too, and I couldn't be one man without being true to the other...

I was always a bit of a fuck-up, really. I know, in many ways, that's how my family saw me too. Or, as my parents more tenderly liked to put it sometimes, I was 'always interesting'.

Dan the Drifter.

Dan the Dabbler.

Dan the Dreamer.

But I was also Dan the Dad. Dan the Married Guy Who Became

Separated and Single. And then finally, Dan the Former Lawyer Turned Escort.

I know it wasn't a 'normal' career trajectory, but ever since I received my first official bipolar diagnosis in my twenties, I've questioned what normal is anyway. For me, it was normal to think of a wildly ambitious goal for myself and wonder why it couldn't happen then and there. It was normal to focus every molecule of my energy single-mindedly on trying to make an ambitious idea materialise, at all costs, but then just as normal to feel like it was very suddenly too hard or, more accurately, too boring. It was also normal for me to dump that plan, wonder what the hell I'd done with my life, and then dream of a new, completely different plan. The 2.3 kid, 9 to 5 white-collar life, to me, sounded like absolute torture.

I'd always had the feeling that I wanted to try everything. A different career, a different adrenaline rush, a different sexual partner. I was a signed-up subscriber to the 'You Only Live Once' philosophy and for my wife at the time, that meant dealing with the revelation that I was thinking about other women after nine years of faithful marriage. I found it very difficult to hide my emotions at the best of times and after many turbulent months, it just had to come out. For me, being part of a married couple was something that felt like everything was fine and 'right' until it wasn't. It's a cliché, really. I know.

I'd been working out a hell of a lot to reshape my middle-aged body into something I thought was attractive. I wasn't happy, but I was strong and healthy. I wanted to be a superhero for my son, but I also wanted to feel sexy and alive and all the other textbook things people want to feel when they become unhappy with the decisions they've made and the person they've become. The trouble began when I started flirting with one of the mothers from my boy's day-care centre. After a while, this spilled over into sexy text messages, and my wandering mind was eventually exposed when my wife checked my phone. Like a complete

bastard, my first reaction was to blame her for invading my privacy. It wasn't her fault in the slightest, and I quickly realised that my anger was actually misguided shame.

It was never a physical affair, but the easy intimacy we were sharing in those words and emojis may as well have been dick pics and declarations of undying love because, from my wife's perspective, it was a betrayal. She was right, but acknowledging that didn't make it any better and it didn't stop me wondering how we'd arrived at a juncture that so many couples before us had reached. Neither did it help me understand which way we were supposed to turn. In nine years of faithful marriage, until that very point – and in the long-term relationships I'd had before her, I'd never been a cheater and had always despised such men with a passion.

Yet, there we were.

Like the couples you read about in magazines or self-help books, with one partner complaining about losing touch with their sexuality and spontaneity and the other one feeling like life was busy enough as it was, with no time or inclination to lose touch with anything. It had dawned on me – and far too late – that the marriage vow of being with only one woman was part of an unsettling resentment that was churning me up. I felt like I'd lost my freedom but, like so many mid-life crisis-riddled men before me, I couldn't see clearly enough to know that what I was actually looking for was a sense of purpose.

When my wife read those text messages, my reaction was to feel violated but, really, it was a defensive distraction from a much deeper issue. So, we talked about it and, together, we tossed up the possibility of opening our marriage up. Actually, to clarify, it was me. I tossed it up – as more men seem to be doing these days. Did she really want to? Probably not, but after thinking carefully about it for a while and reading of others' experiences, she agreed to do what many other women have done before her and sanctioned my quest for sexual exploration with people who weren't her.

My sexual appetite had always been voracious. Sex, for me, was an all-consuming multi-sensory pleasure that was addictive and energising and, I must admit, I became pretty excited.

After the conversation about opening our marriage up to other people, I tried out Tinder and didn't pull any punches with my profile. I made it clear that I wasn't looking for long-term, as I already had that, but that I was there in the search to learn how to be the best lover I could possibly be. From my perspective, it was true. I hadn't been with anyone new for almost a decade and I wanted to test my abilities. I'd already graduated from law school, but now I was presented with a new type of education I was very happy to enrol in. For the women reading the online description of me, it had its own attraction, because it told them that I was a guy who was happy to help them discover their own sexual epiphanies as well. I was a guy who wanted to learn how to bring them joy – physically, at least. And to my surprise, quite a few chose me and swiped right. In the back of my mind, though, my Tinder foray had the potential to be something more, and I viewed it as a kind of apprenticeship, where I imagined myself clocking on to study at the coal-face of female desire.

The woman I'd had my text affair with had opened another door as well. She once commented on how connected I was to my sexuality and wondered if I'd ever been a stripper or an escort before.

An escort?

I suppose most people might hear someone ask that and feel kind of amused by the notion, then let the comment go just as quickly but, for me, it became a concept that started occupying my thoughts. I'd worked my way through a succession of career attempts already, but maybe this time I'd find what I was really looking for. I'd left one steady job after another over many years and returned to university to get my law degree. That gamble led to some volunteer work with a community legal service before I accepted a job at a small legal practice in country NSW. Then,

when we fell pregnant, the seemingly obvious decision – who was to be our son’s primary caregiver – was made to enable my wife to return to her own more established and far more lucrative career in medicine.

After four years of changing nappies and mind-numbing playground visits, I was left with the feeling of being far too removed from legal practice despite all my hard work, and that realisation became the catalyst to recreate myself as the professional photographer I’d dreamed of becoming since I was a child. But, aside from an attempt to specialise in the fitness industry aspect of the commercial photography world, that hadn’t really worked out either. Contributing to the family coffers through the lens of my camera was a constantly frustrating hustle from one low-paying gig to another and at forty-one, I didn’t want to go back to the law, even though my all-too-brief dalliance with it probably gave my parents a taste of what it looked like to have a son who was stable, ambitious and ready to function in regular society.

So, one morning I woke up after a particularly long and restless night, and I decided to take the plunge. I put the idea of getting paid to have sex with women for a living to my wife, and when I asked her if it was wrong, to my amazement, she only had one question:

‘Is it wrong that I don’t think that’s wrong?’

Was she really happy about it or was she just loosening the reins in an attempt to hold onto a marriage with a frustrated (and frustrating) husband? From where I stood, already plotting my take-over of the world of male escorts, it appeared she was genuinely by my side and seemed to be even just a bit titillated at the idea of me hawking my sexual wares as a career path.

For a conservative professional, who’d grown up in an affluent part of Sydney and followed the conventional path of ticking off the desirable list of education, ambition, marriage and family,

I believe that my proposal was intriguing to her on some level. Or possibly she saw it as a paid extension of the open marriage she'd only just managed to accept. I was sure a lot of it was out of love and care for me too, though. Mental health was a tightrope I'd struggled to balance on for years. I had looked for new ways to escape and push the boundaries of Dan throughout my life, and now I had permission to create an alternate version of me, an alternate reality where I could see whether living someone else's life would make me happier than living my own. Both of us were curious about where it might take us, but neither of us, naively, expected it to take such a toll on our relationship.

I chose the name Mitch, after Mitch Rapp, the protagonist in a favourite book series of mine by Vince Flynn. In the novels, he's an arse-kicking, bullet-proof assassin, and to form my own new identity, I added a surname that I envisaged as a kind of cool, classy Nordic *nom de plume*. Larsson. Mitch Larsson.

On paper, Mitch presented as more of an exhibitionist than Dan. He was happy to talk openly about sex and his love of it, which is something I'd spent my adulthood trying to silence. But honestly, there wasn't much difference between Dan and Mitch and because I was a guy who was straight down the line and didn't handle pretense for too long, it usually didn't take long before my clients saw right through my Mitch visage. I knew of no other way.

I've spoken to a lot of female sex workers, and for many of them, protecting their real lives from their sex worker identity is something they are meticulous about. They have their 'work name' and they stick to it. I came to fully understand why very quickly after I began when one of my early clients became downright nasty when I didn't reply to her many messages. It's much easier reading hateful messages directed at someone else so I was glad Mitch was around. Having a few female admirers push the boundaries is, at most, unpleasant for us guys, but for the girls in the industry, things can often get scary – and in some



cases, much, much worse. I therefore always stuck to being called Mitch for a first booking, but once I felt safe I preferred to use my real name because the truth was that if I tried to embrace Mitch as a character, I would feel like I was putting on a costume. And I felt deceptive. As Mitch, those were the moments when I looked in on myself as if I was watching a scene in a movie, and it was in those moments I lost connection to my partner's body. In (im)practical terms, I could also lose my erection as a result. I was breaking the mould of what a detached escort was meant to be, and I knew it meant I was crossing a line and giving myself another tightrope to criss-cross my other father/husband balancing act.

I've tried performative sex (more about that later) and, although I'd have to employ it as a skill every now and then with a client I didn't feel a true connection with, the reality was that I had to feel an actual *affection* and form of love, in order to make love. I had to feel that in a relationship and I had to feel that with a client, even if it was just a one-off three-hour booking. Playing a part didn't work for me, and it was often to my detriment.

I know some of the other guys out there are capable of walking into a job, doing the deed and walking out. But that wasn't me. Dan might've been part Mitch, but Mitch was more parts Dan.

And that was about to cause problems.