

The Cost of a Dream

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Liz, young and naive, came from the countryside to the city with big dreams. She was a natural beauty, with pretty blonde hair and blue eyes and had been told her entire life she could have been an actress and she was hoping to be discovered and become a huge movie star. But reality proved to be different. The city was full of other ambitious young women with more charisma and confidence than Liz and audition after audition blurred into a series of "No, thank you"s, her hopes dimming with each rejection. Maybe she lacked the connections, or the portfolio, or the sheer beauty, she thought, starting to doubt herself.

Soon, desperate for a foothold, she found herself accepting an agent's help. After a while, he presented her with an uncomfortable proposal. "Would you do anything to succeed in they world?" "Of course!" "Then you should start in adult films" he suggested, an idea that made her flinch. "Porn movies?" "No really, more like third-tier production with a focus on adult scenes. It's a first step, it's easier to get noticed, many actresses took it. Look at them now-famous." She hesitated but didn't want to return home empty-handed. "Maybe you're right," she agreed, her voice soft with doubt. "I'll do it. I don't want to be a failure."

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Make up artists taught her how to highlight her features with heavy makeup. They trimmed her brows, plumped her lips. She barely recognized herself in the mirror, she looked hot, confident. She had to admit she looked much better. Her first roles were as a hot college student who gets invited to a party degenerating into sex scenes. She tried hiding her embarrassment and performed decently well. However, the role of the pretty blonde was a common one but common were also the blonde actresses. And Liz was a bit flat-chested for a main role. She got a few minor parts, but she was not taking off. Certainly not enough to get noticed by an actual movie producer.

Her agent told her bluntly, "Listen, I know this is a bit unexpected but... if you want better roles, more pay, we'll have to alter your appearance. I got a deal: an adult movie offered a big contract including a loan for cosmetic surgeries, to give you an exotic appeal, you'd pay it back through your work." "Exotic appeal?" - she asked. "Why would I want to look more exotic?". "Think about it, being a mysterious brunette would give you the confidence and sexual charisma you lack. And then you could perform more freely on the set. No risk of pictures leaking to your family, your friends with a new look."

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Reluctantly, she agreed, knowing she had no choice.

They began reshaping her look from the ground up. First, they took her blonde hair and sliced it down to a blunt, sleek bob, transforming it into an inky black. She stared at the stranger in the mirror, struggling to recognize herself. It did make her blue eyes pop out more, though. She looked more confident, charismatic. Liz didn't completely like it, but her contract left her with no choice. She was left to stare at her reflection, forced to see herself framed by the dark, severe strands that seemed to belong to someone else entirely.

But they weren't done. Her agent explained that her piercing blue eyes were too striking, too "cold," as they put it, for her new look. "Brown eyes will soften you," he said, indifferent to her protests. "They'll look better on camera. You would have a wider appeal. 80% of the population have brown eyes, did you know that? A large chunk of online audiences are into that!" She fought it. "But my blue eyes—people love them. I love them." He only shrugged. "They have to go. I'm sorry but you have signed a contract!"

With no choice, she endured the procedure.

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A new technique, permanent and irreversible, stained her irises a rich, dark brown that swallowed the icy blue she'd known her whole life. When it was over, she looked into those dark eyes, almost black, the once-vibrant blue lost. Her gaze, warmer and strangely gentle, left her feeling hollow. She spent an evening staring into that new reflection, tears welling at the stranger looking back at her—soft and inviting but, to her, alien. “Oh my God, nobody in my family has brown eyes, I look like Dua Lipa! As if my mum had a daughter with a Mexican man! How can I show up at the next Christmas dinner looking like this?”. “Don’t worry about that now, what matters is that you have beautiful bedroom eyes!” her agent quipped. Liz felt a flush of embarrassment. “I think my eyes looked just fine before!” “Nah, blonde, blue-eyes actresses are out of style nowadays! Your new look rocks!”

Then came the tanning sessions. In keeping with her darker look, the last trace of her original self, her fair skin, deepened to a warm bronze. The naive pretty blonde girl who had come to the city full of hopes was gone, replaced by an alluring stranger with dark hair, dark eyes, and bronzed skin.

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The final touch was permanent makeup. Mainly eyeliner and shadow—a detail meant to add depth and allure, they said. Her brows were reshaped, thickened, and angled, giving her the dramatic look of a Middle Eastern model.

When they started mentioning breast augmentation surgery Liz drew a line. “I’m not doing that to my body”.

Her agent bargained on behalf of the producers. “If you refuse to be augmented in other ways, we’ll need to at list get a lip filler.”

“A lip filler?” Liz asked, desperate. “I don’t want huge lips!”

“It’s a very delicate touch-up. Just a few ccs!”

“Oh God! Ok, fine, but nothing too dramatic, ok?” she conceded reluctantly.

“Great,” he nodded, then leaned over to the beauticians and murmured, “And let’s add some collagen, a little Botox, maybe touch up her nose...”

By the end, her agent took a step back, surveying her with a look of pure satisfaction. “Hmm, looking very exotic!”

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"My cheekbones! My nose! I look like an Arab woman! What have you done to me?" she asked, mourning the loss of her innocent features. "Only a few minor touch-ups, many actresses get botox injections these days!". She'd come to the city hoping to show herself to the world, not to hide behind this plastic Arab beauty. And she looked like a convincing one! Sure, her face was heavily worked on and she felt like everybody could see though that, but the truth was that, other than her heavy makeup and fillers, nobody saw anything weird in her looks and could suspect she was actually a blonde white woman under the layers of melanin and brown pigmentation. Her lips, plumped beyond recognition, barely let her close her mouth fully. She tried to smile, to frown, but her expressions felt tight, frozen. The sparkle in her once-blue eyes was buried under the dark, sultry irises, their brightness muted.

"I can't even smile or frown anymore! How am I supposed to become an actress now?" Her diction itself was slightly hampered by her massive lips.

"Adult movie actresses don't need facial expression," her agent said coldly, shrugging.

"But I don't want to become a pornstar!" Liz cried.

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As she went over her new portfolio, her agent brought up a final change. "The producers said you look perfect. You just need one last thing—a new name. Layla Samaha."

Layla's heart skipped a beat. "A new name?"

"You don't look like a Liz Sanders anymore, that's for sure. And we don't want people digging into your past; it would just lead to... complications. With a name like Layla Samaha, you'll look like who you've become: an Arab new talent, a fresh face with a believable backstory. We'll say you grew up here in the States from an immigrant family. People love that kind of story."

"So, like an artsy pseudonym?"

Her agent shook his head. "No, they're talking about a legal name change."

"What? They can't do that to me!"

He raised an eyebrow. "Actually, they can. It's in the contract; you gave them carte blanche."

Layla opened her mouth, searching for the words, but nothing came. "But... but..."

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Her voice trailed off. What had she gotten herself into? She barely recognized the reflection staring back at her. Now they wanted to take away her name, too? Her agent's gaze was steady, almost indifferent. "Look, this is what you signed up for. Liz got you up to this point. It's time to let her go and embrace your new, better self! You're becoming a star. This is your ticket."

Layla's throat tightened. Letting herself go? She had come to the city full of dreams, yet here she was, slipping further and further away from the person she once was. And the worst part? There was no way back. She stared at the mirror. Liz was nowhere to be found. Even her body language, the way she moved and posed, had started to adapt to the star she was becoming. Maybe he was right. Time to let Liz go. "Ok" - she replied, defeated. "Call me Layla from now on. It will take some time getting used to it!"

Her agent continued, explaining her why her DNA had to be rewritten. "Now, Layla, there are several reasons for this change," her agent explained. "Firstly, to stabilize melatonin production. You wouldn't want to rely on melanin shots forever just to keep that beautiful black hair, brown eyes, and tanned skin."

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"So, I'll always have black hair and tanned skin? Permanently?" Layla asked, scared at the permanence of the change. Her pretty blonde hair would be gone forever, not just hidden under the hair dye.

"I'm afraid so. And there's one more thing, imagine someone wants to prove you're a scam and not who you pretend to be. If they get a DNA sample from a cocktail glass at a party we're screwed."

"I see..." Layla murmured, realizing that this meant her children would also be Arab or mixed-Arab by genetics. Her entire lineage would permanently lose its original whiteness. Her family was very proud of their English and German ancestry. Now, that would lead to a difficult conversation. She thought about calling her family, updating them on what she'd become. But where would she even start? And maybe, it was already too late.

She woke up from the procedure with Arab blood coursing through her veins. The first changes she noticed were how her pubic hair also turned black, and her natural aroma took a new scent. What her agent hadn't mentioned were some of the subtler effects, like a slight increase in her libido.

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Within a few months, Layla was attracting no small amount of attention, mostly due to her unique appearance. Her agent was quick to position her as a “Mia Khalifa 2.0,” explaining that she had the perfect profile for success in the new era of streaming, where audiences were willing to pay subscriptions for more elaborate productions. “You could have the luxury of a movie star without the grind of traditional acting,” he explained. She went along with it, adjusting to the role and amassing a dedicated fanbase. At first, it wasn’t easy, but she learned the nuances of playing the passionate lover, the coy sub, or even the domineering partner. Sex scenes became more and more second nature to her. The shy, reserved girl who would blush for a kiss would now have sex with multiple men every week without batting an eye. Yet, as her fame grew, so did her desire to step out on her own. She eventually expressed a desire to set out on her own and begin building her own career. At that moment, however, she was reminded that her debt for the extensive cosmetic surgeries remained unpaid. Yet, seeing her growing ambition and appeal, her agent made her an enticing proposal: he had talked with the producers and they offered her to star as the female lead in a history blockbuster they were producing. If she did so, she could work off her debt.

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Layla was thrilled, feeling like this was her chance to break away from her past in adult films. She could hardly believe it; she'd be portraying a powerful female Pharaoh, a true sovereign, in a serious production. It was the break she'd been waiting for, the path toward the career she had dreamed of from the start.

Layla arrived at the fitting session, excited to try on the costumes and makeup for the new role, she got wavy black hair extension, makeup and a Egyptian pharaoh outfit but midway through, the wardrobe and makeup team paused, exchanging hesitant glances. After a brief discussion, they explained, with some embarrassment, that she was missing a bit of the "physical presence" needed for the part. "You see, other actresses are also interested in the role... and they, well, they have the assets to fill it out," they stammered. They were referring to her breasts.

Afterward, her agent pulled her aside, gently broaching the topic of breast augmentation. "It's really not a big deal these days," he said, his voice smooth and reassuring. "Most actresses have them done, and they'll look completely natural." He went on, explaining how this final touch could secure her the role and enhance her on-screen presence. Layla felt a pang of conflict—she'd already changed so much, had compromised herself so many times. But after a long pause, she gave in, nodding reluctantly.

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Layla sat in the waiting room, fidgeting as she heard her new name called out. She felt like everybody was staring at her because she looked plastic. Truth was, men generally stared at her because she was hot and the women because they were envious. Well, she was so hot she even awoke a bisexual side in some young women.

“Layla Samaha?” The nurse’s voice snapped her back to the present. She still wasn’t used to her new name and hesitated a beat before standing up. “Yeah, that’s me, sorry!”

Entering the procedure room, she was greeted by her surgeon’s practiced smile. He explained the details, reassuring her there would be no visible scars and that, despite the substantial augmentation, the results would look “perfectly natural”. Layla gulped, looking at the size of the implants. She was already a plastic beauty, why bothering so much about one more surgery? She tried to relax as anesthesia was administered to her, realizing she would wake up as a busty Arab model with plump lips. She wondered if there would be anything left to recognize once she opened her eyes again.

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A few weeks later, Layla returned for her costume fitting, now painfully aware of the weight of her new silicone-enhanced breasts bouncing around at every move. "I have the body of a big-breasted bimbo, my movements are all off" - she told herself. Her producer however nodded approvingly as she entered in the skimpy outfit. Her producer looked her over, nodding approvingly as she stood there in the skimpy costume. "Much better," he remarked, eyes glinting as he took in the changes. "You're really filling that top now!"

"Uh, thanks," Layla murmured, feeling a surge of insecurity as she tugged at the top, acutely aware of how exposed her augmented chest was. She cleared her throat, eager to change topic. "I went over the script while I was in the hospital. There were a few things I'd like to discuss..."

But her suggestion was met with a dismissive wave. "We're already on a tight schedule. Just share your ideas as we go, alright?" Layla forced a smile, swallowing her disappointment, as she prepared herself to take direction without question.

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Layla stepped on the set, catching everybody's attention, with her curves in full display.

She immediately noticed something was off. For the first scene, she was seated on a throne, portraying the regal character she had envisioned. She tried hiding her breasts with her arms, but the costume left little to the imagination. One of her guards entered, an actor she recognized immediately. "Wait, you're here too?" she asked, unable to hide her surprise.

He shrugged. "The pay's good. Figured I'd give something different a try."

He wasn't the only one. Many of the actors and extras starring in the movie were her colleagues from the adult movie industry. She had personally had sex with a good half of them, if not more. "Oh shit" - she thought - "Why does this feel more like an expensive set for a porn movie? The actors, the costumes, everything is so over sexualized!"

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A few scenes in, she read the next part of the script and felt a jolt. Her character was to be “rescued” from a snake by one of her guards, whom she would then reward with an explicit sex scene. The guard was another former co-star, and they had filmed together before in similar situations.

Concerned, she approached the producer. “I was just... surprised. I thought this was a historical film. Why the explicit scenes?”

The producer barely looked up. “This was never going to be a family movie, Layla. You’ve seen Babylon, right? Sex sells, and blockbuster films are no exception.”

Layla hesitated, biting her lip. “I get that, but wouldn’t a queen reward a rescuer in other ways? Like a golden necklace, or some land... This sends a rushed message to young women... it feels a little off, don’t you think?”

The producer's face hardened. “We’re keeping it as is. This is the role, Layla. Stick to the script, alright?”

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Her concerns brushed aside, Layla took a steadying breath, trying to push her reservations away. She had come too far to back down now, but the price of this success suddenly felt steeper than ever.

In character, Layla transformed into the part of the seductive queen, a woman with insatiable desires, eager to please the men around her. She flirted with her guard, her voice low and suggestive, promising him in reward “A flower few men get to touch” she purred, smirking. The tension crackled between them, and before she knew it, she was letting herself be led, almost dragged, to the royal bedroom. There, she surrendered completely, her character’s desires on full display as she begged him to take her. As they filmed the scene, Layla felt a wave of shame, a part of her recoiling. But there was a strange realization lurking beneath that discomfort: it came to her so naturally. She had been playing these roles for so long that slipping into this persona required little effort, her body responding to the cues without a second thought.

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“Hmm, I will guide you to... victory!” - Layla called out, her voice wavering slightly as she rode forward in a skimpy warrior costume that clung to her body. The outfit was absurd, its intricate but revealing details making her look more like a concubine than a leader. The skimpy thong she’d been instructed to wear made the experience all the more uncomfortable, the saddle pressing against her labia as she rode the horse in a way that was distracting and almost humiliating.

The fact that dozens of muscular, half-naked men were standing around her, their glistening bodies poised with weapons, didn’t help. Layla tried to focus, but the entire set felt more like a high-budget adult film than the historical epic she’d once imagined. Deep down, a part of her that had grown in recent months wondered when the next sex scene would be. She had grown a taste for the idea of being taken by strong men while on camera, while another part of her hated it, feeling her dignity slip further with each indulgence in her role.

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Following a crushing defeat in battle, the script called for Layla's character—the proud queen—to become the bride of a Nubian chief in a political marriage, a bond forged to secure peace between their warring nations. She stood before her people, her voice steady but resigned. "I will sacrifice myself for the good of my people," she declared, her face a mask of noble determination.

Yet, as she was led to the ceremonial tent where the marriage would be consummated, the lines between her character and herself blurred. The role required her to embrace the chief with submission, to yield entirely for the sake of the storyline. With each line, each scripted glance, she felt herself sinking further into the persona they had created for her. She was no longer the strong, ambitious woman she had once aspired to be; instead, she was a queen sacrificing herself, body and soul, for a kingdom.

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As she was guided into the tent, reality and fiction became inseparable. The script called for her to submit, to yield for the sake of peace, each exchange and every choreographed gesture pulling her deeper into a role that felt suffocating. She felt the symbolic weight of it—her ambition as an actress diminished, overshadowed by the character she embodied: a queen offering herself, body and soul, to safeguard a kingdom.

Her former role as a powerful pharaoh was now reduced to that of a glorified concubine. The scenes called for more than she was prepared to offer—marriage to an enemy chief who kept her as a queen in name but without true authority. Her purpose had narrowed to producing an heir, one who would tie the new ruler to Egypt's legacy and serve as a bridge for a bid to claim the throne.

Layla had once dreamed of playing strong, inspiring female characters who were symbols of resilience, not to play the part of a woman whose only talent is to sleep around with every man of power she encounters, looking like a teenage boy's wet dream.

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The plot took a dramatic turn as Layla's character, the once-proud Egyptian queen, found herself reduced to the role of a consort queen for the enemy's chief—a calculated political maneuver to strengthen his claim to the throne of Egypt. Stripped of her agency, her only purpose became clear: to produce a son, a bloodline heir tied to both ruling factions, who could serve as a pawn in her husband's ambitious bid for power.

And so it happened, with the queen getting pregnant after long sessions of lovemaking. The makeup artists outdid themselves, transforming Layla's toned, sculpted physique to appear as though she was truly carrying a child. The prosthetics were flawless, capturing the rounded weight and taut skin of pregnancy in a way that was hauntingly realistic.

However, the story did not linger on maternal bonds or childhood milestones.

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Layla returned to the screen as the queen, aged gracefully to appear in her 40s through the expert touch of makeup and prosthetics. Her character made a triumphant return to the land she once ruled, now standing by her son's side as he ascended to the throne. The boy, now a teenager, bore the striking features of his mixed heritage. Once the powerful pharaoh who ruled with unmatched authority, she now stood as the wife of the enemy chief and the mother of a foreign conqueror. The scene painted a stark contrast to her former glory; her presence was both symbolic and tragic.

Flanked by Nubian warriors, they entered the palace, his every move watched by those who knew he was little more than a puppet, manipulated by his powerful father and an ambitious court. The queen, once fierce and sovereign, now took her place in a ceremonial role, her influence confined to symbols and tradition.

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Despite its weaknesses, the movie was a massive box office success, drawing audiences in droves and turning an impressive profit. Layla received her fair share of wealth, basking in the financial rewards of her hard work and the role she'd sacrificed so much for. The critics, however, were far from kind. Reviews called the film shallow, exploitative, and dismissed its storyline as thin and predictable. Yet, a few critics begrudgingly acknowledged its impact, calling it a daring response to classic blockbusters like the Marvel Universe series—a bold, if controversial, attempt to redefine the epic genre.

The movie's success sent a clear message to the industry: high-budget adult films, crafted with blockbuster polish, could pull in as much money as mainstream hits. Layla Samaha's name rocketed to fame, but not in the creatively fulfilling way she had once dreamed. Instead, she became a household name as the star of an extravagant, genre-bending adult epic that had made history. Her new identity was cemented, her name known worldwide, her image iconic. And as time passed, it only seemed fitting that a decade after Mia Khalifa, it was another Arab woman who now held the title of the world's most popular

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Having risen from relative obscurity—her only credits a handful of minor adult roles—to the status of international star, Layla’s producers decided it was time to introduce “Layla Samaha” to the world. They arranged a carefully crafted interview with *Vogue*, presenting her as a proud daughter of Arab immigrants, grounded by family values. To complete the image, her team hired actors to play her “family”, an old couple and a younger brother, creating the picture-perfect parents for Layla to shower with gratitude.

In the article, entitled “Why My Family Supports Me”, Layla was photographed buying a beautiful new home for these “parents.” Her “mother” beamed, her “father” proudly saying, “We’re so happy our little girl takes care of us. Any occupation that brings this much success—we’re proud of her for it. Times have changed and we are not judging her.” The PR move was flawless, positioning her as not only a glamorous star but a devoted daughter, achieving her dreams while staying true to her roots.

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The reaction of her real family back home was one of pure shock and bewilderment. They flipped through *Vogue* in disbelief, staring at the images of Layla embracing these strangers in an affectionate hug, laughing over their shared memories of her "upbringing." They couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry at this total fabrication, complete with proud parents and a perfect immigrant backstory that was worlds away from reality.

Not stopping there, Layla's team booked her a feature spread in *GQ* and a glossy "Inside My Life" video on YouTube. The video was an instant hit, racking up millions of views, showing her home, her glamorous lifestyle, and, of course, her loving "parents." Her real family watched in silence, taken aback as Layla presented her life on camera, fabricating her identity with hugs, laughter, and staged affection for these paid actors. They could barely recognize the girl they knew in the poised, artificial figure smiling at the world—caught between amusement and a strange sadness as they realized just how much she had left behind.

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The room buzzed with excitement as the family gathered around the dinner table for Christmas, everyone eager to see Liz—now Layla—who hadn't been home in nearly a year. A sleek limo pulled up outside, and, with a practiced, graceful step, Layla emerged, her designer heels clicking on the frosty sidewalk. Her parents exchanged a glance of mixed emotions. Her father, trying to hide a touch of pride, muttered, "Well, she's certainly done well for herself." Her mother, less impressed, struggled to hide her disappointment. The young girl who had once shyly left for the city had returned transformed into a polished, dark-haired Arab beauty with an air of practiced allure, dressed in an expensive coat and a dress that clung to her new, curvaceous figure.

Inside, Layla greeted everyone with a dazzling smile, oozing confidence. "Told you I'd become a star," she said, her tone light but self-assured, as she looked at her parents, raising an eyebrow at her mother's tight-lipped smile.

The younger girls of the family, wide-eyed, glanced at each other, barely able to contain their awe as they took in her flawless hair, her striking eyes, the smooth warmth of her bronzed skin. The boys, nearly as starstruck, stumbled over each other to greet her, their adolescent crushes obvious as Layla flashed them coy smiles. Layla was used to being the center of attention, and she basked in it, tossing compliments and subtle flirtations as she spoke, as if she were back on a set.

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She took some time to visit her old bedroom and try on an old outfit but her body has changed too much. And her fashion taste had too. Sometimes she could barely get the straps up or the zip would not close. Why was everything she used to wear so fucking plain? "I was so boring, jeez! No wonder nobody ever noticed me! Why was I so stupid and naive? I need to take this off, it makes me feel so bland!"

Frustrated, she changed into something more fitted and dramatic, a designer outfit that clung to every new curve. As she stepped out, her mother was waiting, arms crossed, a look of pure exasperation on her face.

"Who do you think you are?" her mother demanded, her voice strained. "And what was that *Vogue* interview with that fake family? We are your family, Layla!"

"Mum..." Layla replied, her voice softening. "It was just part of the story, part of the image my producers wanted to create. It's nothing personal."

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"Nothing personal?" her mother's voice broke with hurt. "Are you ashamed of us? Because that's what it feels like sometimes. I'm sorry, but it's like you're ashamed of your hillbilly roots. I get it, you're a big city girl now, and somehow you've let them turn you into this exotic femme fatale. But the fake family? That's where I draw the line." She gestured angrily. "You've made up this entire story, this fake life, and we're just supposed to sit here, watching you pretend we don't exist? Well, guess what? We'll go on TV too. Tell the world who you really are!"

Layla seemed unbothered by her mother's outburst. A sly smirk spread across her face as she reached over to her desk, pulling out an old photo. She held it up, a blue-eyed, blonde-haired girl with a shy smile, unmistakably her younger self. "Really?" she said, her tone cool and mocking. "You think anyone's going to believe this girl was me?" Layla continued, her voice dripping with arrogance. "Look at me now. Do you see any resemblance? Come on. I'm a pure-blooded Arab woman now. Me—a spoiled little blonde brat?" She tossed her head back with a laugh, the confidence in her voice cutting through the tension. "You can't make this up!"

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To lighten the mood, Layla's cousins decided to take her ice skating, knowing it had been one of her favorite winter activities back in the day. Layla hesitated, feeling a pang of nostalgia but also apprehension. Stepping onto the ice, she moved cautiously, her body unsteady. Her breast implants and the shift in her weight distribution threw her off balance in ways she hadn't anticipated. "I suck at this!" she exclaimed. "How is this even possible? I used to play ice hockey regularly!" Her little cousins, some as young as nine, zipped around her with ease.

As humiliating as it was for someone with the athletic prowess Liz once had, Layla had to admit defeat. After just 15 minutes, her legs ached, and her energy waned. Her new workout routine, focused on sculpting her glutes and maintaining a flat stomach, had left her with little muscle strength or endurance.

She skated over to the edge, gripping the barrier as she caught her breath. "Oh God, this is embarrassing," she muttered under her breath. Watching her cousins zip by again, she straightened up and added, "Anyway, this is some silly hillbilly leisure activity. I don't need to do this anymore." Her tone was dismissive, but the faint blush on her cheeks betrayed her frustration.

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Layla strolled through her old hometown. It was during this reflective walk that she bumped into someone she hadn't expected—her ex. He had broken her heart back in the day. He froze when he saw her, his eyes widening in shock. "Layla?" he asked, it was clear he didn't recognize her as the girl he had once dated. She smirked, tilting her head slightly. "Well, well, look who it is," she said, her voice dripping with playful malice. "So... tell me. Did you jerk off to me on your PC?" The redness creeping up his face and the way his gaze darted away told her everything she needed to know. She laughed. "Oh my God, you did, didn't you?" For a moment, she considered giving him a parting gift, something to remember her by. But before she could act on the thought, one of her bodyguards appeared, his imposing presence a reminder of the world she now belonged to. Straightening up, she reached into her purse and pulled out a delicate pair of panties, tossing them lightly into his trembling hands. "Here," she said, her tone dripping with mock pity. "Have this." She turned and strutted away without another glance. "What a pathetic little loser".

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Eventually, Layla's white family made their claim public. It gained significant traction on the internet, as many conspirator theories do, so her agent arranged a staged interview on TV for her.

"Are you aware that a white American family from Arkansas claims you are their daughter?" - the interviewer asked.

Layla, wearing slightly less makeup than usual to look more natural and genuine, smiled smoothly. "Some people will do anything for attention. It's one of the downsides of fame," she said, her tone light. "People try to link themselves to you all the time. But honestly, it's pretty clear I'm not the blonde baby girl in those photos." She paused, her face shifting into a look of practiced sincerity. "I'm proud to belong to the Arab American community."

"Some people have pointed out that no trace of you exists online before last year. No school pictures, no social media..."

"I was a very private person. My family was quite strict about social media, and I'm thankful for it now. But I did bring a few old photos to share with your audience! This is me at 4!" - she said showing a photo of a little Arab girl in a hijab "Wow, you dressed very modestly back then!"

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"I did," she said confidently. "But then I grew up and decided for myself. I believe every woman has the right to choose how she wants to dress, and no man should interfere with that." She stared directly into the camera, her rich brown eyes radiating poise and conviction. It worked. The tension eased, and her charm carried the moment.

She was invited to another TV show, where she elaborated on her past a little further. "As I said, I was a very private person. But I understand people want to know me better, so I brought something to share with your audience! This is me at 8!" - she said as an analog color video started playing on the screens behind her, her face glowing with a carefully rehearsed smile. A little Arab girl playing football. The camera wobbled, likely in the hands of a proud father.

"Wow, you played football! Can you still play?"

Layla chuckled, leaning back. "I'm still athletic, still have stamina," she replied, knowing it was all fake. She never played football and she definitely had no stamina for any sports now, "but let's just say my body's too soft and feminine for it now. And a bit too valuable for that kind of activity."

THE COST OF A DREAM



Layla found herself on the set of her next production, portraying a Muslim princess in Al-Andalus. The set was opulent, adorned with intricate mosaics and fabrics in deep jewel tones that captured the grandeur of the era. She wore an elaborate dress decorated with delicate gold embroidery that shimmered under the warm lights. The design, however, left her feeling uneasy—its plunging neckline revealed more than she was comfortable with.

“A Muslim princess would never dress like this!” she protested, tugging subtly at the fabric as she settled onto a throne-like chair.

To her left and right stood guards or attendants, partially obscured by the scene's shadows, their dark robes adding contrast to her ornate attire. She glanced around, catching sight of familiar faces—many of the same actors from the previous film were present, now playing new roles in this historic reimagining. “I hope this is not going to be more of the same...” It turned out to be even worse, with a Viking raid resulting in her capture and enslavement.

THE COST OF A DREAM



In her third feature role, Layla once again captivated audiences, this time portraying an Italian princess from a small, sun-soaked coastal kingdom in Sicily. Set in the medieval era, the story unfolded in a time when Normans, Greeks, and Arabs coexisted on the island, blending their cultures. Layla's character, with her unmistakably Arab heritage, stood out as an integral part of this rich history. The princess embodied elegance and innocence, a cherished daughter of a modest yet proud court.

But the tranquility was shattered when the Ottomans launched a swift and merciless naval raid. Layla's character was taken captive, her royal silks exchanged for the delicate and exotic fabrics of the harem. As a foreign captive slave, she endured all sorts of humiliations to break her spirit to ensure her acceptance of her new status.

The production captured the transition from a proud Sicilian princess into a humbled harem girl.

Critics might have raised their eyebrows, but for the usual reasons, Layla's performance and the film's daring narrative kept viewers mesmerized.

THE COST OF A DREAM



As Layla's fame grew, so did the media's relentless scrutiny of her private life. The occasional use of paid actors for family photoshoots wasn't cutting it anymore. Full-time replacements for her family members were needed. Layla sat with this thought, picturing herself surrounded by strangers who would play the role of her parents and siblings. Sure, she would be less lonely but it would be awkward.

Then, an idea struck her—why not recruit some of her real family members, the more open-minded ones, to join her in this fictional life?

She had left a small impression on some members of her family and it was pretty clear that some of her younger relatives were eager to jump on the same boat. First of all, however, she needed a senior figure to give authority to her family before convincing others to join her.

Her mind drifted to Aunt Mel. She had always been nice to her, and was the most open-minded of the three sisters. Sure, at 42 she was a bit on the younger side compared to the previous photoshoots that had already been released, but nothing a little surgery couldn't fix.

THE COST OF A DREAM



Layla talked to her, explaining her the situation. Mel listened, stunned by what she was hearing. She'd spent most of her life single, except for a handful of romantic adventures with Brown men. At her age, having kids was not possible anymore and something she had always missed. The idea of stepping into the role of a mother, not just to one but to three children, was irresistible and the idea of embracing a more exotic look didn't bother her. In fact, she found it intriguing. But the thought of aging herself take on the guise of a woman in her 50s gave her pause. She'd worked hard to stay fit and youthful. Sensing this, Layla added: "Don't worry. You can still be fit and toned for your age; it'll just be hidden beneath a black abaya."

"I understand, of course, it's their culture..."

When the day came for the procedure, Mel felt no fear as she lay on the sterile operating table. Instead, she felt a calm excitement. She knew she would wake up looking a decade older, with skin that carried a deep, rich tan, hair as black as night, and warm brown eyes. But none of that mattered. What filled her heart with joy was the idea that she would finally be a mother.

THE COST OF A DREAM



When Meg opened her eyes, she immediately noticed the changes. Her arms were darker, a rich brown tone that looked natural against the bandages that covered her chest. The sensation of her long, black hair brushing her shoulders was new yet comforting. It was a strange combination—feeling refreshed and rejuvenated despite the more mature, matronly appearance staring back at her in the mirror across the room.

Before she could take it all in, the door opened and Layla stepped inside, her eyes bright with anticipation. “Hey Meg, how are you feeling?”

“Bretty good—oh...” Meg paused, frowning slightly at the unfamiliar sound of her voice, softer and tinged with an accent that hadn’t been there before.

Layla’s expression shifted into an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Meg. The producers wanted someone with an authentic Arab accent, so the surgeons worked on your larynx and vocal cords. I hope you’re not mad at me.”

Meg’s face softened as she took Layla’s hand, squeezing it reassuringly. “No broblem, sweetie, I understand,” she said, the new accent rolling off her tongue as naturally as if it had always been there.

THE COST OF A DREAM



Layla's eyes glistened with emotion as she nodded, a hint of awkwardness creeping into her voice. "Okay... Mahir. Mum, I mean."

They exchanged a smile, the tension melting into a quiet moment of understanding between them. "We'll get used to this... habibti" Mahir said, testing out the affectionate term, her new voice adding an unexpected weight to the word.

Layla's expression brightened even more. "You know, your DNA has been altered too," she said, leaning closer, her eyes shining with excitement. "You're fully Lebanese now. And I'm half Lebanese, half Saudi. I'm your biological daughter now," she added, her brown eyes gleaming with joy.

Mahir's breath caught in her throat as the significance of it all washed over her. The warmth of the new reality settled in her chest, and a broad smile broke across her face. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes, glistening as they began to fall. "I have been waiting for this moment my whole life, I'm so habby right now!" she whispered, her voice trembling with happiness.

THE COST OF A DREAM



Mahir sat patiently as the last touch of her transformation was completed: an additional dose of lip filler, giving her lips a full, rounded appearance that matched her new look.

When it was done, she glanced at her reflection, taking in the subtle enhancements. Her features suggested she had been a beauty in her youth. Her gaze then shifted to the wardrobe unveiled before her—rows of abayas in rich fabrics, mostly black, some shades of grey and brown, and a few intricate, special ones for Eid celebrations. It was a far cry from her usual jeans and shirts, but it felt oddly comforting.

She lifted an abaya from its hanger, the modest cut and traditional design filling her with an unfamiliar yet grounding sense of simplicity. Mahir stood before the mirror, carefully draping a black hijab over her head and adjusting it until it sat perfectly. She practiced tucking the fabric and positioning the dress just so, studying how it transformed her posture and presence. The woman looking back at her was no longer Meg, but a matronly Muslim lady with an air of calm dignity. It was different—simple, modest. Not the vibrant, independent style she was once known for, but not bad either.

THE COST OF A DREAM



Mahir got ready for leaving the house in an Abaya for the first time, impressed with the way she looked. She walked through her old neighborhood, getting used to the feeling of wearing an abaya and noticing the looks from neighbors who seemed stunned to see an Arab woman there. Jerry, one of her neighbors, asked in a rude tone "What's your business here?" "I'm moving here," she replied. He squinted at her. "Where are you from?" "I lived in LA for over 20 years," she said. "You don't sound like it. Where are you really from?"

The question offended her, and she thought back to her new life: she had lived in Lebanon for 32 years before working hard to reach the U.S. and finally gaining citizenship at 38. She wasn't going to let some small-minded local dismiss that. Jerry's eyes had a strange look as he said, "I like women with fight". The comment offended her; she felt loyal to her husband. Back in her old life, she could wear a bikini in her garden without anyone paying attention, but now she saw men staring as if trying to mentally unwrap her. She felt grateful for the safety of the abaya, hiding her figure from the more depraved parts of society; any hesitation she had about wearing it vanished. "Let these animals have their perverse imagination the only one who can see this is my husband"

THE COST OF A DREAM



Now that Layla had a mother, it was time to extend her family and complete the illusion. Her thoughts turned to Hannah, a cousin who had recently been intrigued by Layla's glamorous lifestyle. They arranged to meet in one of Layla's apartments, tucked away from prying eyes. Layla's voice was confident as she laid out her plan. "What if I told you that you could share in the wealth and fame I've gained by being publicly acknowledged as a member of my family?"

Hannah hesitated. "But... you don't want to be associated with us! You've made that clear."

"Not as you are, no. But what if we gave you a complete makeover and transformed you into my younger sister? You'd fit perfectly into the new narrative."

"Me, as your sister?" Hannah's eyebrows shot up, curiosity sparking in her gaze.

"Think about it," Layla continued, her voice taking on a persuasive edge. "Living a life of luxury as a beautiful Arab model, with me, your big cousin, as your sister. We could be the new Kardashians!"

"I don't know, Layla... it's kind of tempting, but..."