

# 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.