

Encore!

Hina Bhai was soaking in a hot bath when her sister Layla burst into her lavish boudoir. It took Hina by surprise.

‘What’s going on? You should at least knock you know, there could have been someone in here with me!’ Hina giggled.

‘Never mind! We have been invited to entertain at Amin Akbar’s wedding out in the country tomorrow, but we leave tonight!!! Can you imagine? He is the richest man I know. We will make a fortune!!’ Layla threw herself onto a huge sumptuous bed laid with a deep wine coloured satin.

‘We shall have to get ready quickly then!’ Said Hina.

A twenty-something sultry beauty with black shiny hair like mirrored silk, Hina was one of the more famous courtesans or dancing girls in Lahore’s largest *khota* (brothel). Her sister Layla was also a raven haired beauty and another firm favourite of the City’s rich and famous. Their asking price was high. Indeed, many a man had fallen for the girls and declared their undying love for them. But nothing ever came of it. It never did. Dancing girls were nothing more than temptresses who shimmied and swayed in front of an audience of drunken and doped up men. Whoever threw the most money at any of these girls would spend the night with her. No one wanted to marry a prostitute no matter how much they loved them.

Hina and Layla quickly got themselves ready. They were both wearing the same clothes as they would be dancing together; royal navy coloured dresses with heavy gold embroidery on the hemlines and the veils. They put flowers in their hair and

made themselves up with heavy smoky eyes and russet coloured lips. Lots of perfume and a whole lot of preening later, they were at last ready to leave.

Meena Bhai who owned the brothel, hugged the girls and told them not to take any 'private' requests from anyone. Being a courtesan was dangerous business, and leaving the brothel to earn money was done on rare occasions such as weddings and private parties. Courtesans who had dared to run away were usually beaten to a pulp and dragged back to the brothels when found. These were women that had been forced into it without much choice, often abducted and taken hundreds of miles from home. Many had been killed and raped when attending 'private' requests. But no one ever did anything about it. As far as people were concerned, these women were nothing more than filth and deserved what they got.

A horse-drawn carriage arrived to collect the girls who were giggling and smiling. It had been a while since they had gone out of their grounds, and the girls relished the opportunity. Tonight, they were going to do their best performances in the hope that other rich families would hire them too. They were their own advertisements.

Hina and Layla had already decided between them that they would try and seduce some young hopelessly drunk men in a bid to get more money out of them, but it had to be at their discretion when the main party was over. Meena Bhai had at least thirty girls working for her, and always took half their earnings. Sometimes if money was tight, Meena would take everything. So, in an attempt to redress this problem, the girls would try and make more money where they could without Meena finding out.

As the carriage plodded slowly through the city towards the country, the girls pulled the canopy of their carriage down so that they could see all around them. Cars hooted at them and men stared. Unlike some girls, Hina and Layla loved the attention. These two women were not only highly confident, but highly skilled in the art of seduction. They had a way with the men and made more money than anyone ever did. The carriage went through some back streets and men whistled at them. They loved it. As the carriage approached more greenery, a strange mist started to envelop them.

There was a sudden drop in temperature and the girls felt a distinct chill. They had brought heavily embroidered shawls with them and wrapped it round themselves and huddled together. It was starting to get dark now as well, and Hina began to feel uneasy as she felt the darkness close in around them.

‘Gosh, it’s gone cold and foggy very quickly, I hope the weather isn’t going to turn nasty.’ She said.

‘I don’t like this at all, it’s very eerie. And listen, it’s very quiet, I can’t even hear insects or birds chirping.’ Layla looked scared.

‘Driver!! How much further?’ Asked Hina.

‘Errm, I don’t know – I can’t see very well at all. I can see some lights in the distance, looks like a village. We can go towards there if you like?’ Came a voice out of the mist.

‘Ok, do that then.’ Said Layla. She would rather be around people than stuck on a dark country lane where there was always the danger of highway men and gangsters.

They started moving towards the lights, but as they moved on, they began to hear voices. At first, it was distant chatter, and they assumed that perhaps they were coming from the village ahead. But then the voices got louder and louder. All of a sudden, a group of five men appeared in the mist. They were all wearing white and were holding lanterns in their hand. One of the men approached the carriage. Hina and Layla both looked at each other, frightened as to what would happen next.

‘Are you Hina and Layla, the dancing girls?’ Asked the man. He was unbelievably handsome and had the most beautiful eyes that either of the girls had ever seen – deep green and very shiny indeed. In the light of the lantern, the mans’ eyes looked like brilliant sparkling emeralds.

Struck by the mans’ beauty, Layla leaned forward and smiled seductively at the man.

‘Who wants to know?’ She asked.

Most men would have melted, but unfazed by her advances, the man simply replied

‘Namil Shah.’

‘Who?’ Asked Hina. ‘We have been invited to dance for Amin Akbar tomorrow, but we don’t know a Namil Shah.’

‘He knows you and wants you to perform for his son’s wedding tonight. He will pay you handsomely if you accept.’ Said the man.

Hina and Layla looked at each other and conferred. If this was genuine, then the girls could make a lot of money tonight and then dance as agreed at Akbar’s wedding as planned the next day. They agreed.

‘How much will we be paid?’ Asked Hina.

‘Enough for you to break out of this work forever. You will never have to dance again.’ Said the man. The girls looked startled. They thought the man was lying, but when they looked into his eyes, he seemed genuine enough.

They thought for a moment and after several minutes, Hina replied ‘Ok.’

Layla looked shocked. ‘But what if he is lying?’ She asked.

The man gave the women a bag and nodded for them to look inside. They got the shock of their life when they did. Inside, the bag was filled with gold, jewels and money.

‘Yours as a deposit, if you will agree.’ Said the man. The other men smiled at the women who were in complete wonderment. After several minutes of discussion, the girls finally agreed. The man gave the driver some money and the driver stepped down from the carriage, allowing the man to take his place.

The other men disappeared into the night, along with the driver.

As the carriage started moving, the darkness seemed to envelop them completely. The lights from the village vanished and the mist seemed to thicken considerably.

After a few minutes, the carriage seemed to be going so fast that Hina and Layla started worrying that the wheels might come off.

It was then that Hina noticed something. ‘Layla! Listen! Can you hear that?’

‘Hear what? I can’t hear a thing.’ She said.

‘Exactly! We should at least be able to hear the sound of the horses’ hooves and we can’t hear anything. And not only that, but I get the distinct impression that we aren’t even on the ground!’ Said Hina.

Layla leaned forward and peered over the side of the carriage. She couldn't see anything – not even the ground, only darkness and fog. She gulped.

'I think you may be right. This is going to sound silly, but it feels as if we are in the air.' She said. Hina nodded. For the rest of the journey, the girls huddled next to each other, each wondering what on earth they had let themselves into.

After what seemed like forever, the carriage finally stopped. The handsome stranger got off and helped the girls down. He carried their bags, ushering them to follow him. It was still awfully dark, but the fog was starting to clear. As they followed the man along a winding path, the darkness in front of them disappeared and a huge mansion seem to materialize out of thin air. Hina gasped. She had never seen anything quite so exquisite in her life. It was at least ten times the size of the biggest house she had ever seen. In fact, it looked more like a palace. It was made of marble and adorned with lanterns and flowers. On the floor there were candles and rose petals strewn everywhere. It was truly a majestic site. The girls could hear laughter and chattering, but failed to actually see anyone.

'Follow me.' Said the man, as he led them up a huge white marble set of stairs into the palace. Hina and Layla were starting to feel anxious and nervous. They could hear what seemed like hundreds of people chattering and laughing, yet they could see no one. They followed the man into a large hallway decked with lanterns and flowers, all the way to the end where there was a huge door. He opened the door and all of a sudden, there was a deathly silence.

‘Namil Shah, here are Layla and Hina!’ Said the man. There was a round of applause.

The girls looked like someone had smacked them. Both stood there with eyes wide open and mouths hanging open. *There was no one in the room.*

The room itself was huge – at least the size of a basketball court and there were chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. At one end of the room were a set of five highly decorative chairs – they looked almost like thrones. All around the room were cushions on the floor and what seemed like a central area in the room – just like a dancing area. There was a small ‘stage’ to one side, and on it were a set of *tables* (Indian drums), a zither and various other instruments.

Then a voice came out of no where. ‘Welcome!! Come forward please, have a drink and lets get started.’ Hina and Layla gulped. The voice sounded friendly and welcoming, but considering that they couldn’t actually see who said it, they were beginning to feel a little frightened. They stepped forward and nearly jumped. Out of thin air, two glasses of juice appeared and hovered in front of the girls. There was a ripple of laughter. With hands shaking, Hina and Layla took the drinks and said a meek ‘thank you’.

‘I don’t know about you Hina, but I think we are in the company of Jinns.’ Layla whispered.

‘I think you might be right. I don’t think we will come to any harm here though, my heart tells me our fortunes are about to change.’ Said Hina.

When they finished their drinks, the glasses disappeared. The stranger nodded to the girls to take centre stage and begin. Hina and Layla slowly walked to the middle of the room. They could hear a lot of clapping. As the girls scanned the room, they

noticed that the cushions on the floor were all indented, as if there were people leaning and sitting on them. They watched as on the stage, the instruments began to move. Familiar music started to play. It was their favourite number playing! The girls could hear clapping in unison to usher them into dancing. They looked at each other and smiled.

It was now or never. Hina attached *ghungaroo* (ankle bells) to their legs and positioned themselves. Then they began to dance to the beat of the tabla. They moved this way and that and their ghungaroo tinkled. There was an awful lot of cheering and whistling going on, and out of nowhere, they could see money being thrown into the air. The girls smiled and danced as if their lives depended on it. The more they danced, the more money was thrown at them. The ‘crowd’ was loving it. They could hear chattering and whistling and a lot of laughter. When they finished their performance, there was a huge uproar and shouts of ‘Encore! Encore!’ from the ‘crowd’.

So Hina and Layla obliged. They danced all night and each number brought them more and more riches. By now, the girls had realised that they would not come to any harm, and so had totally relaxed. As the night drew on, the shouts of ‘Encore! Encore!’ renewed their vigour each time they felt tired and wanted to stop. They had several breaks through the night, but only for a few minutes to catch their breaths. The promise of good fortune kept them going until dawn, when the stranger arrived with two men.

They told Hina and Layla that they could go now, and that he would escort them to where ever they wished to go. The girls wrapped themselves in cloaks and as they left the great hall, they heard clapping and ‘thank you’. They heard Namil Shah thank them for coming, and even though they could not see him, they accepted his thanks and wished his son well for his wedding.

Layla felt emotional as she got into the carriage. Hina was awestruck. They had danced in front of Jinns and made a fortune. The two men put five large sacks full of money into the carriage. The stranger mounted the front of the carriage and asked the girls where they wanted to go. They looked at the sacks of money in front of them and then looked at each other and smiled.

‘Take us anywhere, as long as it isn’t back home.’ Said Hina. And so, the carriage moved on and then went straight up into the air. They *were* flying. No more dancing, no more men. The girls decided between them that there was nothing they wanted more than their own space and to get married and live happily ever after. And there is no doubt that they did.