

STRANGERS INSIDE

Cheenu is in another world completely. He is oblivious to the amount of money that he has won. He continues to play. The noises coming from all the other machines are soothing him as well. It is like a sweet melody to his ears. He won a small jackpot again and slowly he is becoming aware of his win. But his face is screwed in bitterness. This is not a timely win. A little bit too late.

Had he won even a fraction of this a few days ago he would not be in the situation he is now. He hopes that he does not have to face the consequences for his actions. He smiles to himself bitterly. “That is fooling himself” he thinks. Every one has to pay for their actions good or bad. Karma is inescapable. As his dad always says- “One who eats salt has to drink water”. Hope it is not soon though. Hope he is able to escape. He is not happy with what he has done and yet he feels no remorse. The winning from the machine is

making him more feverish and irritated.

Suddenly Cheenu becomes very alert. Realization dawns on him slowly that his machine is the only one making all the noise. None of the other machines are being operated. The only noise coming from those machines is the usual music of inactivity. Something is not quite right. He turns his head slightly. The other machines are vacant. The people who were using those slots were not there any more. That is not the usual pattern for this place. Suddenly a shiver runs down his spine. He begins to perspire. He needs to get out. He is suffocating in here. The oxygen coming through the pipes is not enough anymore. A voice which conveys authority and intent comes from behind him. "This is the police. Kneel down on the floor with your hands behind you and don't turn around".

Eventually all the invitees have arrived and Venkat gathers them all around his daughter and mother-in-law. "Dear friends and family, Priya and myself welcome you to the naming ceremony of our daughter. Thank you for making the time to come and joining us on this auspicious occasion. Please bless our daughter with all your heart."

Venkat looks at his daughter with deep love and tenderness and speaks to her. “Dear daughter, welcome to our family. We consider ourselves the luckiest people ever. Thank you for providing us with the status of parents. We are very blessed to have a child like you in our life. You have filled us with all the happiness that wealth cannot buy and for that we have chosen the name Aishwarya. The name Aishwarya means wealth or prosperity. It goes beyond money. It encompasses happiness of the body, mind and the spirit. So Aishwarya, welcome my darling”. All the guests are moved emotionally. Everyone chants her name three times as is the custom. 'Aishwarya----' 'Aishwarya-----' 'Aishwarya-----'

Aishwarya gives a gurgle in response. Venkat looks at his wife and says fondly to his daughter. “We think that you really like this name.” Aishwarya smiles this time and wriggles up and down on her granny's lap.

The warehouse is bathing in the sunshine but is drowning in the wail of the siren from the police cars, the ambulances and the fire engine. The whole place is surrounded by police vehicles and people. A do-not-cross tape is hanging around the

periphery of the building. Detective Dev has arrived at the scene. He asks a lady police officer to come close by. “That guy over there was the one who discovered the bodies. The constable is taking down notes of his account of the discovery.”

Dev asked if the victims family been informed? Brenda replied, “Yes, they are on their way.” Dev moves into the building and Brenda follows him close behind. Dev is looking around the building. He turns around and looks at Brenda. “I want all the details at my table asap. Ask whoever was dealing with the kidnapping, to report to my office immediately.” Brenda agrees, “Yes sir.” Dev is a bit more polite now. “Thanks Brenda.”