

## One

Meenakshi arose early the day Parvati was born, for the infant in her womb had not allowed her to sleep during the night. Tiny knees and elbows thumped Meenakshi's sides in an odd, slow rhythm: *tai-taiya-tai, tai-taiya-tai*.

She did not know her daughter would arrive amid a change in the course of natural events, that fish would swim among the stars and birds would soar beneath the waters.

Meenakshi yawned and tied her sari around her swollen middle. She moved quietly to let her husband, Sundar, and their sons sleep while she went to the temple to offer prayers. Flies buzzed lazily in the leaden heat, and a trickle of perspiration rolled down the side of her face.

On a metal tray she arranged a coconut, bananas, and a champakam blossom with a fragrance as delicate as the pink at the base of each white petal. She laid another blossom at the feet of the statue of the dancing Shiva, which Sundar had carved of sandalwood and placed in a niche in the wall.

Meenakshi arched her back to ease it, and a pair of hands clasped her from behind and quieted the thumping against her ribs.

"You think he'll arrive today?" Sundar asked. Meenakshi turned and laid a finger against her husband's lips.

"Shh-hh, you'll wake the boys," she whispered, and pulled him out into the pale heat of the morning. "I told you," she said, smiling, "this one's a girl."

"But how can you be so sure?" Sundar asked, his head cocked to one side. Meenakshi smiled again and patted his cheek. He sighed and reached for the pail to milk the water buffalo while Meenakshi went to the temple.

For many weeks early in Meenakshi's other pregnancies, she had felt ill and was unable to eat. But this time everything tasted sweet and delicious, and she felt especially alive and healthy. She found herself daydreaming as she worked in the fields among the other women of the village of Anandanagar, planting rice and sugarcane. And her eyes filled with tears every time she saw a particularly beautiful flower or an unusually magnificent sunset.

Often Sundar asked, "Why are you smiling?" Almost always she was unaware that she had been smiling. But throughout her pregnancy she had felt inexplicably happy.

Meenakshi hurried to the temple at the edge of the village to perform her puja before her sons awoke. She wanted to feed them and her husband before Sundar had to leave to tend the elephants. This was a festival day, but her husband was chief of the Maharaja's mahouts, and he and a few other mahouts could not be spared from looking after the elephants while everyone else attended the feast.

It was the Maharaja Narasimha Deva's birthday. While most ordinary people did not mark their births on a calendar, a maharaja's birthday was one to celebrate. This year the Raja's birthday would be especially joyous, because the Maharani was expecting a child, and the priests

had predicted a son. Meenakshi did not want to miss the feast, but she was certain this was the day her infant would arrive. The gentle thumping resumed against her ribs: *tai-taiya-tai, tai-taiya-tai*.

Before India's independence some forty years earlier, the Raja's father had owned the forests of teak and sandalwood that spread from one end of Nandipuram to the other. The government of India owned the forests now that the rajahs no longer ruled, and the Maharaja Narasimha Deva was the government's agent for the timber. As a religious leader and the beneficent employer of many of his father's former subjects, he was supreme in the hearts of his people.

Each year the people gathered on top of the hill outside the Raja's palace as flutes warbled and the throaty voices of mridangam drums answered each other back and forth across the tree-covered valley. The Raja was weighed in his ceremonial robes, and the equivalent in gold was distributed to charities and the poor, to schools and temples throughout the region.

According to legend, the first clap of thunder of each year's monsoon was the signal that the gold had been fairly weighed and the gods were satisfied with the Raja's generosity. And the South of India, which had been parched through the long dry season, would prosper by four months of fruitful monsoon rains.

Meenakshi walked awkwardly, holding the offering before her. She smiled, thinking she must look as round as the gentle water buffalo she passed along the way. Monkeys scampered beside her, chattering and bickering over which of them should go first.

She arrived just as the priest, Mr. Balaraman, rang the temple bell. He wore an unbleached dhoti of soft cotton on his hips, three sacred threads over his left shoulder, three stripes of pale sacred ash across his forehead, and his graying hair tied in a loose knot at the top of his head. On legs as gnarled and creased as the trunk of the sacred peepul tree by the temple door, he stood before the stone likeness of Nandi, the soft-eyed bull that carried Lord Shiva from place to place. Incense burned in a brass dish, and perfumed smoke filled the inner chamber of the temple.

The priest took Meenakshi's offering and laid it beneath the kneeling Nandi's nose. Meenakshi tipped her face toward the priest, and he dipped his finger into a pot of red powder and gently pressed a small dot in the center of her forehead, a third eye through which to see the world more clearly. Meenakshi ran her hands through the smoke from the censer and rubbed it into her face, then turned to hurry cumbrously back along the row of coconut palms to her thatched house at the edge of the village.

She poured four cups of buttermilk from the sweating clay pot in the courtyard, and whisked a pinch of salt into each lassi. Venu, who was born just as the monsoon spread across the South of India two years earlier, and Venkat, who had been born at about the same time two monsoons before that, stepped from the darkness of the mud room, rubbing at eyes stuck shut with heat and sleep.

"When will the birthday celebration begin?" Venkat asked, squinting up at the sky, where the clouds had begun to roll gently, turning from the pearl of dawn to a deepening gray. A pair of clean but tattered shorts hung about his thin hips. His little brother stood naked, but for a black

string around his waist. A small silver disk with the likeness of the elephant-headed Ganesha, which was meant to bring good luck, dangled from the string.

“Just never mind. It will be soon enough,” Meenakshi said, not meaning to speak sharply to her son. In the heat that came before the monsoon rains, women had to bite their tongues to keep from scolding their children for no reason at all. Some were even tempted to talk back to their husbands.

The air was hot and wet and expectant that morning, and the smoke of a hundred wood fires hung over the village as women prepared special morning meals. The rich smells of idli steaming and spicy sambhar bubbling mingled deliciously with the smoky haze and the sweetness of jasmine and sandalwood and a breeze heavy with unspent rain.

Outside in the thorny thicket of acacia that separated the village from the fields where the women worked each day, a brain-fever bird shrieked its maddening ascendant call: *sweeip-sweeip-sweeip-swip-swip!* Meenakshi sat back from the fire where she was frying puri and brushed hair from her forehead with the inside of her wrist. The dough puffed up and sizzled in the hot oil. Sundar sat beside her, cleaning his teeth with a thin stick from the branch of a neem tree. He spat into the fire.

While her sons ate, Meenakshi hurried to feed the water buffalo that stood contentedly inside the courtyard, for she had much to do before Parvati’s arrival. She went to the well and filled two red earthen jars with water, bending slightly to one side because Parvati sat upside down in her middle.

Meenakshi returned to find Sundar talking to his sons and carving a likeness of Ganesha from a piece of sandalwood. He turned the pale golden wood this way and that, flicking away tiny bits of sawdust with his gouge as he worked.

“You will go to the festival with Uncle Sathya,” Sundar said. “I will come home tonight, after you are asleep. By then you will have a sister.”

“Will you bring her home with you?” Venkat asked. Sundar threw back his head and laughed.

“Nay, son,” he said. “Your mother will stay here and get her.”

“Why can’t you come with us?” Venkat asked.

“Because someone must look after the Raja’s elephants,” Sundar said. “I must do it, just as my father did, and just as you will do one day.”

“And will I miss the feat, too?” Venkat asked. Sundar laughed again.

“Not for many years,” he said.

Sundar had a tender affection for the gentle elephants, who returned his devotion with an uncanny knowledge of what it was he wanted them to do and enthusiastic performance of their work. He inherited this affinity from his father, who also had taught him to carve, and that was where his true talent lay.

Sundar awoke early each morning and went to work on the family farm before leaving to tend the elephants. All day they hauled sandalwood trees felled by cutters with axes to the riverside to cure. In the long evening hours after the elephants’ work was done, Sundar sat

among them and kept the fires burning. The elephants were hobbled with chains attached to logs that kept them from wandering far.

For in a time when tigers were endangered throughout India, and the rest of the world as well, in Nandipuram they still crept to the edge of the forest, sleek and golden and glowing with menace, their bellies just inches from the ground. From the center of the stable yard Sundar saw their eyes and long sharp teeth glint beyond the firelight. To pass the time in a way that kept his mind from the tigers, Sundar carved sandalwood statues of Shiva, Ganesha, Nandi, and other Hindu deities to sell to pilgrims who visited the ancient temples of Nandipuram. His carvings were elegant and graceful, and he became well known particularly for his statues of Nataraja, the dancing Shiva.

There were stories that people passing a niche in a certain wall of the village at an odd hour of night sometimes caught a glimpse of a Shiva Nataraja dancing there amid flickers of flame. But if they stopped for a closer look, they saw that they were mistaken, that the statue—which had been carved by Sundar—stood still, and perhaps the fire was simply a reflection that glinted from the wood in the dim light of a lantern beside the lane. Real flames or not, the statues Sundar carved were special in some way that was difficult to define, even if one did not believe statues could dance, and the demand for his dancing Shivas grew and grew.

Sundar stopped talking when he saw Meenakshi. He folded the sandalwood Ganesha into a soft cloth and dusted off his tools, wrapping them in cloth pouches, which he tied together with string. He put the carving and his tools into a cloth bag.

“Priya will be here if you need help,” Sundar said, setting his bag aside. The old ayah was a good midwife. He drew Meenakshi inside their small mud house and embraced her. “I’ll take the boys to Sathya,” he said, brushing the hair away from her face and looking into her eyes. “It will be good to have a daughter to help you with your work.” He pulled away then and went outside.

Meenakshi watched him go, holding a son’s hand in each of his own, the cloth bag slung over one shoulder and across his back, toward his brother’s house at the other end of the village.

Meenakshi poured water into a plastic basin and washed the breakfast dishes. She swept the courtyard, and went to the field to walk in the hope that she could dislodge her unborn child in time for them both to attend the ritual weighing of the Raja. She was pleased that her baby was to be born on such an auspicious day.

In searing heat under a leaden sky, Meenakshi walked. She sang and she held her aching back and she walked. She heard noisy throngs pass by the trees along the dirt track on their way to the celebration, happy voices and the jangle of silver bangles and ankle bracelets. And still Parvati did not arrive. And Meenakshi cried with disappointment, and she walked.

At about midmorning, when the white wet heat began to press downward like the heel of a giant hand, a crow alit in a palm tree at the edge of the field. Many palms stood between the fields, guarding the edges of the family plots, swaying, the wind clattering lightly through their fronds. Monkeys sat among them and ate bananas stolen from the trees below.

Meenakshi leaned against the trunk of the palm tree in which the crow sat to ease her back, which was stiff and sore from bearing the weight of her infant. The crow cocked his head at her.

“Do you have a seed for an old beggar, sister?” the crow asked, peering down from his perch. At that very moment Meenakshi felt the first pang that signaled the baby’s impending arrival.

“Go away!” Meenakshi said, pulling her sari forward to shade her face from the sun. Overhead the clouds tumbled and rolled in a fast-paced dance across the sky. Meenakshi stood still a moment, rubbing her back and waiting for the pain to ease. “Anyway, it’s not planting season,” she said to the crow. “I have no seeds.”

She gathered the end of her sari over her shoulder and set off again, looking for a quiet place to bring her child into the world. The crow flew down from the tree and hopped toward her with his lurching, stick-legged gait, over the furrows in the rich red soil.

“But I’m starving,” he said, cocking his head in the most beguiling way a crow can manage. The sun shone brightly for a moment, turning his feathers from dull black to a shimmering blue-green. “Surely that’s not an issue you can ignore!”

Meenakshi stopped mid-stride, and the sun shone on her face in another brief moment of illumination. An other-worldly, faraway look played about her dark eyes. The crow thought that Meenakshi had reconsidered and would take at least a crumb for him from the pouch at her middle, if only to stop his pestering.

Instead Meenakshi stumbled to her knees and rocked forward to rest her hands on the ground.

“Get away,” she gasped.

“Starving!” said the crow. “You can’t ignore a poor . . .”

“I have other things to worry . . .” But Meenakshi was unable to finish her sentence for the pain. The crow cawed indignantly and dove at her shoulders.

“What could be more important than a starving brother?” he croaked. He alit on the ground beside her and pecked at her hand splayed before her, then flew up and dove at her head.

Meenakshi tried to stand. But the pain staggered her, and she felt a rush of alarm as she leaned farther forward, stretching her back to ease it. The births of her two sons had not come on with such sudden intensity. The crow continued to peck at her. She ignored him and crawled slowly toward the purple-blossomed jacaranda tree at the edge of the field, and squatted with her back against its smooth gray trunk. The crow retreated to a branch over Meenakshi’s head and watched the whole time, cawing petulantly.

With a mighty surge of water and a startling clap of thunder that signified the Raja’s gold had been weighed, Meenakshi’s infant made her entry into the world.



Meenakshi told Parvati the story of the day of her birth many times as the child grew.

“Ah, Parvati,” she would say when she reached this point in the story. “I don’t know if the crow caused our troubles. But at least you were born, straight and fine and lovely!”

Parvati always wondered whether her mother hadn’t left something unspoken when she ended the story. Might Meenakshi have thought the trouble had started because of Parvati’s refusal to arrive in time for the Raja’s birthday celebration? Her mother never wavered from blaming the crow.

But make no mistake. Parvati’s arrival, whether an accident of timing or the cause, coincided with the worst calamity to inflict wind and water upon Nandipuram in living memory.