

THE DRAGON'S EGG



ALISON
BAIRD

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Ai Lien

Ai Lien Feng ran home through the sunny September afternoon, full of excitement. She was running because it was her birthday, and because her parents would be home from work early to help her celebrate it. She could hardly wait to get there.

Home was a small house in downtown Toronto, which she shared only with her father and mother. She had no brothers or sisters; there was only her grandmother, who lived in her own home next door. The Feng family was Chinese, though only Mr. Feng and his mother had actually lived in China. Ai Lien and her mother had both been born in Canada.

Mr. Feng often talked fondly of China to his daughter.

He had several big beautiful books filled with photographs that Ai Lien liked to pore over on rainy days, gazing at the oddly shaped green mountains, curly roofed pagodas, and boats called junks with their sails that looked like half-opened fans. Mr. Feng had promised to take her to China someday, when he went on one of his business trips. He had just been there recently, Ai Lien knew, and she had a feeling that at least one of the presents waiting for her had been brought from that faraway land.

It was her ninth birthday, and this year the presents were especially nice: there was a new doll from her grandmother, some interesting-looking books from her mother, and an embroidered robe with a pair of matching slippers, which her father had, indeed, brought all the way from China. He had brought her something else, too: a smooth grey stone, which he had picked up on the bank of the Yangtze River when he went there on a boat tour.

"A little piece of China for you to keep," he told her as he put the stone in her hand. Then he leaned close and added in a low voice: "There's something special about that stone. It looked just the same as all the other stones, but when I picked it up in my hand it had a strange *feel* to it — something magical. I wouldn't be a

bit surprised if it turned out to be a dragon's egg!"

"A dragon's egg!" Ai Lien repeated.

He nodded, his eyes twinkling. "You remember I told you about Chinese dragons, how very different they are from the dragons of the West. They don't breathe fire or eat people. Chinese dragons are very civilized. They can talk, and cast magic spells and change their shapes whenever they want to. They don't live in caves but in beautiful palaces at the bottoms of rivers, where they rule over all the fish and water-creatures. And when these clever dragons lay their eggs on the river bank they disguise them as stones, to protect them from anyone who might find them."

Ai Lien thought that was a lovely idea. When she went up to bed that night she placed the stone reverently on her dresser, next to her bowl of goldfish. She had three goldfish, named Pearl, Jade and Plum Blossom, and she was extremely proud of them. Her father had told her that it was the Chinese who invented goldfish, breeding them from much bigger fish called carp. Ai Lien's fish were very beautiful, with long delicate fins and scales that gleamed like gold coins. She gave them their food, said good night to them, and got into bed, turning out the light.

She was awakened in the night by a noise.

Opening her eyes, she saw that the sky outside was flickering with brilliant blue-white lightning. Thunder crashed and boomed overhead, but oddly there was no rain. And Ai Lien couldn't help feeling that it wasn't the thunder that had awakened her, but something else; a cracking, splintering noise, as if something in her bedroom had fallen and smashed on the floor. She sat up in bed and turned on the light, rubbing her eyes. Outside the thunder rumbled, more softly this time, then faded away. There was no more lightning. The house was very quiet: her clock said a quarter to twelve. What could have made that noise?

Then she saw that the stone her father had given her had fallen to the floor and broken into a dozen pieces. At once she jumped out of bed and picked up the broken bits. Her precious stone, that Daddy had brought her all the way from China! What could have happened to it? She turned the pieces over in her hands, seeing from the shape of them that the stone must have been hollow inside. And, strangely, the pieces were *wet*.

At that moment she heard something — a strange scurrying sound on the other side of the dresser. It sounded like something alive — a mouse, perhaps? Ai Lien went over to investigate.

The little animal she saw huddled on the floor was not

a mouse. It looked more like a little snake, though still unlike any snake that Ai Lien had ever seen. Its scales were red and golden, it had a green fringe around its neck like a mane, and there were two little knobs on its head, like the buds of horns. Ai Lien wasn't afraid of animals, even the ones that make some people shiver, like snakes and toads. She went right up to the little creature, gazing at it curiously; and then suddenly she realized what it was, and cried out in amazement and delight.

"A dragon! So it really *was* a dragon's egg!"

The baby dragon was startled. It had been blinking in the sudden light, and now when it heard Ai Lien's shout it slithered underneath the dresser. Seeing that it was frightened, Ai Lien spoke to it in a gentle voice.

"Come out, little dragon!" she called softly. "I won't hurt you!"

The tiny creature looked out from under the dresser, decided that she meant what she said, and came out again. Ai Lien bent down and picked it up, very gently.

"I'll put you into my goldfish bowl for the night. Dragons like the water, don't they? And I know you won't eat up my fish — Daddy said that dragons are related to carp, just like goldfish. I'm sure you wouldn't eat your own cousins!"



Ai Lien bent down and picked it up, very gently.