

[Master Zhang's childhood name of "Shuxia" is used in
this chapter.]

CHAPTER 1

An Unusual Child



Dragon Birth

ONE DAY, A BABY GIRL WAS about to be born in the small village of Xiaoyingzi in the Liaoning province of northeast China. The young mother already thought there might be something special about this fifth child because she had felt so much better than she had during her four previous pregnancies. In fact, ailments that had plagued her for years strangely vanished while carrying this baby. The mother's name was Du Lanrong, and she was preparing to give birth at home.

The weather had become more and more unusual that day. It was sunny on one side of the sky, while dark with heavy rainfall on the other. The baby was just about ready to arrive. Suddenly, something that looked like black smoke bolted down from the heavens amidst thunder and lightning, flew into the birthing room shattering the window as it entered, and swiftly flew around in a circle over

Du Lanrong. Then, it went back out the window as a ball of fire! A moment later, the little girl was born.

Alarmed neighbors, after hearing the window shatter and seeing the black smoke, came running over thinking the house was on fire. But of course it wasn't. Strangely, the young mother was calm. She felt she had been visited by a black dragon, which to her was a very good omen. Her upbringing had taught her that animals—whether real or mythical—were used as symbols of certain traits or concepts. Dragons were always considered the *highest* representation of power and luck, which was why through much of China's long history, only emperors were allowed to take the name of a dragon or wear images of dragons on their clothing. Du Lanrong knew that dragons were considered the highest animal form of spirit incarnated on Earth. She also knew that dragons were always from Heaven. Yes, it was a very good omen.

The newborn was named Shuxia (pronounced "SHOO-sya"). She turned out to be a very happy baby whom everyone liked. But for some reason, she had very dark skin, much darker than anyone else in her family. Her skin color lightened quite a bit as she grew older, but while young, she was called, "the little black girl." None of her older siblings or the three younger sisters she would later have had this dark skin color, and some have wondered if this was related to the black dragon that came in through the window just as she was born.

Shuxia's mother, Du Lanrong, was tall, elegantly beautiful, and had been born into a rather rich family. She had grown up the daughter of a landlord and was very cultured. She'd even studied some of the classic literature. But her own mother had passed away when she was young, and her stepmother did not like her. As a result, she was married off to a poor commoner without any care for the hardship this would cause her.

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Thus, Du Lanrong had been forced to marry Shuxia's father, Zhang Benxue (pronounced "ZHONG ben-Shway"). Zhang Benxue was a good man. But he was extremely poor, six years older than his wife, short and small in stature. Overall, he was of undistinguished appearance. Because of having to marry such a poor man, Du Lanrong was sentenced to a difficult life. She felt wronged and never went back to visit her father or stepmother again.

But overall, Du Lanrong was a good woman. It was just that China was going through very hard economic times and her new life was one of stark poverty. Her husband had to find odd jobs and work in the fields as well as take on carpentry work to eke out a very poor existence. The family had raised several chickens and one dog, but that was all they had. Good food was not always available year round and they subsisted mainly on corn buns, kaoliang gruels, and salted vegetables.

Green vegetables were rarely on the table and Shuxia's mother always felt bad that her children had to make do with so little. She often quarreled with her husband when the children weren't around. As a result of stress and unhappiness, this once beautiful woman had become thin and worn to a shadow by the time she was pregnant with her fifth child. She looked more like a fifty-year-old woman than someone in the prime of her life. She had also thought of committing suicide more than once. But when she was five or six months pregnant with Shuxia, Du Lanrong experienced a vision. In the vision, she saw the door to a temple open up and heard a voice say to her,

Do you still want to die? What about the four children you have now and the one inside you? In the future, you will be very well-respected and taken care of.

So Du Lanrong did not commit suicide or have an abortion as she had considered. She trusted her vision. Luckily, as her pregnancy developed, she felt better and better physically and mentally. Later, she told her daughter Shuxia,

When I had you in my pregnancy, my health had become very poor, and I worried very much about this pregnancy. Several times I thought about abortion. However, I finally made up my mind to have you, because no child should have to suffer from the poverty of the mother. Let it be with destiny. Strangely enough, while you were in my womb, I became rejuvenated. Everybody who saw me would say that I had become fresh in appearance and strong in my health. *Oh, my elder sister, what kind of good nutrition have you had that makes you look so bright?* they would remark.

Once I was dozing off to sleep and it seemed that in the western sky there happened to be a bright lightning, like a fireball. I thought it must be the Goddess of Mercy bringing brightness and hope. I felt so open-minded and did not think of committing suicide after that.

I remember clearly the day of your birth. It was in 1962, the second of August of the Chinese lunar year. Since then, I have always been healthy and suffered no illnesses. I think it was you bringing me luck. It's really our fate. Your birth got rid of all my sufferings and illnesses. Maybe you were born to be an angel to resolve the pain and suffering of others.

Of course, little Shuxia was too young to understand her fate.

Shuxia's family lived in a rural area near the Dalinghe River at the base of Nuluerhu Mountain. Their village was a place of mixed heritage, with more than one hundred Han and Mongolian