

## **Maneki Neko**

**(Excerpt from Chapter 4 of *Thicker Than Blood*)**

**Chicago, 1998**

Andrea held Pearl's hand while crossing Foster at Broadway, on their way to Argyle Street for lunch. As they passed the Dunkin' Donuts, the Vietnamese Center for the Elderly, the African-Jamaican grocery store, and the cluttered vacant lot, Pearl jabbered happily about first grade, her favorite activities, things she had learned.

"Mama," Pearl said. "Can I have my birthday party at American Girl like Maya?" The store had just opened downtown and had become the "it" spot for upscale girls' birthday parties.

"I don't know," Andrea said, surprised that Pearl would even be interested in such a girly place. She was a Legos-and-clay kind of kid, not one drawn to dolls. Andrea's niece, Blair, had several American Girl dolls, including one that had her same upturned, freckled nose, blue eyes, and pale blond hair. Andrea found the frozen, plastic likeness unsettling. Appealing to a girl's narcissism by a mini-replica seemed creepy, and they were ridiculously expensive.

"We'll talk about it when it's closer to your birthday," she said, cupping Pearl's cheek in her hand. But there was no way she'd have that kind of party. Too expensive, too patently commercial. She'd hoped to get away with a small group at home with cake and games. But would that make Pearl stand out from the others in her class? Because she worked, Andrea couldn't invite girls over after school the same way as other mothers or their full-time nannies, so Pearl didn't go on many play dates. Her friend, Willa, had come to their apartment once on a Saturday, and Pearl had gone to Willa's a few times. The balance was off though, and it worried Andrea that Pearl might not be included by the others.

Andrea had chosen Crofton School for its good reputation and progressive mission, which strived for racial and economic diversity. The

school's high tuition meant though that Andrea and others in the same boat had to vie for the few financial aid slots.

Early on, Andrea explained to Pearl about her adoption, but Andrea didn't know how much Pearl understood about racial differences. Now with school came issues of money and class, and Andrea worried about how Pearl would react both to looking different and having less. Pearl liked school though and talked about girls, particularly Willa, so Andrea felt she'd made the right decision.

Pearl swiveled her head left and right as they crossed at the light. "Hey, Mama," she said, pointing to her favorite store, a tiny gift shop on Argyle whose window was stuffed with gaudy items. "We can look for Maya's present there." So much for American Girl.

"Well, we can look at least," said Andrea, certain they wouldn't find anything that would be appropriate for an American Girl party.

They entered the shop and were enveloped by the tang of incense, which Andrea feared would aggravate Pearl's asthma. From floor to ceiling were shelves crammed with Chinese and Japanese trinkets—Buddhas next to Hello Kitties, plastic flowers next to Bonsai trees, jade elephants facing down gold-painted plastic cats. Row after row of rooted bamboo stalks stood like sentries. "Mama, look." She pointed to a display of cats with hinged arms, their paws saluting like the faithful at a rally. "This is what I want to give Maya." The hand-painted sign read "Maneki Neko— Beckoning Cat." The Go-away-or-I'll-scratch-you gesture looked more like a rebuff than an invitation. On the side of the box, Andrea read, "Inside attaching poly luck-beckoning lyrics, sticking them for immediate realizations." Hmm.

"I'm not sure this is Maya's kind of store." Pearl looked at her, puzzled. Andrea liked that her daughter didn't require high-end toys, that she'd be happy with an inexpensive Japanese cat. She hated falling prey to the pressure to buy something too expensive just for Pearl to fit in among her classmates. Still, she couldn't let Pearl be the only one to give a tacky gift. "Do you think Maya would like this?"

"Yes, she loves cats."

Andrea knew that Pearl loved cats. “Listen, I think we need to keep looking, okay?” Pearl stood transfixed in front of the bobbing cat paws. “I could buy you a small one.”

Pearl looked at her and smiled. “That one.” She pointed to a large cat painted a lurid gold, its face, stolid and foreboding.

“I think this one might be better.” Andrea picked up a smaller ceramic cat, white and black with pink features.

“But the arm doesn’t move.”

“I know, but I’m afraid the other one will break. You couldn’t play with it. It would have to stay on your dresser.”

“I want this one.” Her face clouded over, and Andrea knew that Pearl was digging her heels in for a struggle.

“Come on, now.”

Pearl’s jaw was set. “I want a real cat.”

So that was it. “Oh, Pearl. I wish we could. But you’re allergic.”

“I don’t care.”

“The cat would make your asthma worse. We can’t have that,” she said, pulling Pearl close to her, flashing on a memory of Pearl at fourteen months, gasping for breath as Andrea rushed her to the hospital in the middle of the night.

“Then I want that one,” she said, pointing to the big cat.

On the way out of the store with the box in a plastic bag, Andrea said, “So let’s go to lunch. Thai Avenue or Tank Noodles?”

“Tank!”

Andrea preferred Thai Avenue, but she was in a mood to indulge Pearl. “I’ll bet I know what you’re going to order.”

“Wonton soup!”

“I was right.” She followed Pearl, who had run ahead of her to the corner restaurant.

As was her ritual, Pearl knelt before the miniature plate of plastic food in the corner of the entry, her fingers itching to play with it. Andrea had forbidden touching it, having seen the owner crouch down before the plate

and pray before unlocking the restaurant. They weren't toys. "Are you sending a good wish?"

Pearl shut her eyes and nodded.

Asian families huddled at round tables over big bowls of Vietnamese Pho topped with basil leaves and wedges of lime. When Andrea and Pearl walked in the door, the customers looked up from their soup and stared at them, a white woman with a black child. Andrea glared back and steered Pearl to a table where she could look out on the street and not face those rude stares.

As soon as they sat down, Pearl took her cat out of the box. "You should wait until we get home to do that," Andrea said. "And there's no battery in it yet."

"I want to see how it works." Andrea agreed to let Pearl place it on the table for a couple of minutes until their food came. Pearl started pumping her arm the way the cats had in the store.

Andrea looked at her daughter, her pudgy tummy bowed out, her sturdy brown fingers curled over the palm. That morning, Andrea had oiled and parted her hair into quadrants, then made braids, attaching pink barrettes. Pearl hated having her hair styled—every day brought a struggle, with tears--but Andrea refused to let her go off to school with it unbraided. She planned to take Pearl to a place where she could get a professional braiding so it would stay in place and they could skip the battle. If she wanted it natural, when she was older, it would be her choice. Pearl loved to comb Andrea's straight, fine hair. Did Pearl believe this hair was better than her own?

"I can call it Hello Kitty."

"Okay, it is a Japanese cat, but we bought it in a Chinese store, and now we're in a Vietnamese restaurant. Maybe we can look up some name when we get home."

"Hello, Kitty," Pearl chirped, patting it on the head. Andrea wished they could have a cat. Pearl would welcome the companion.

In addition to wonton soup, Pearl wanted a mango bubble tea. Andrea ordered Pho with beef, the most basic soup, careful to avoid extras like fish maw and tripe.

Andrea enjoyed the sun streaming in the windows as Pearl burred to her cat, "Hello, Kitty, hello," as she hoisted her water glass, taking a sip. An old Vietnamese woman at a neighboring table had continued to stare. Andrea turned toward her and fixed her with a fierce glare until the woman looked down at her plate.

"Mama? Mama? Look." Pearl was pointing out the window at a boy, about eight or nine years old, standing at the bus stop with a young, dark-skinned woman. His face was scarred, no doubt from burns, with patches of tan covering his brown face, as if someone had splashed bleach on him. Andrea felt a swoop of sympathy in her gut. Poor child.

"Pearl, don't point. I'll explain." Pearl pressed her face to the window. "Sit down, please." She laid her hands on Pearl's shoulders. "Come on." The woman, who looked to be in her early twenties, had a beautiful, angular face with prominent cheekbones. She turned and saw Pearl gaping at them, then frowned and turned away, craning her neck in the direction the bus would come. "Sit down," Andrea said. "You don't want to make him feel bad."

"But what happened?"

"He was burned, and his skin healed that way."

"How did he get burned?"

"I don't know." Pearl sat back on her heels, but kept staring at him.

"Pearl, look at me. Now."

Pearl turned her head toward Andrea but looked out the corner of her eye toward the boy, who was unaware of being watched. "But what is he?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is he black or white?"

She took Pearl's hands. "Pearl, ssh. Listen, he's black, but his skin was hurt, and he has scars that took away the color."

The waitress came with their food. Pearl speared a wonton on a chopstick, took a bite, then let it splash back into her soup. A young couple sat in the corner, wormlike noodles trailing from their mouths. A young Vietnamese man lined up the bottles of pepper, soy, and oyster sauces, and the ancient woman pushed up from the table, her spine curved like a crook,

her head dipping below the shoulders. She shuffled toward the bathroom in the back of the restaurant.

“Will the scars go away?” Pearl asked.

“No, I’m afraid they won’t.”

Pearl stole another look at the boy, who was bobbing his head to music streaming in through his earphones.

“Pearl, please. I asked you not to stare at him.”

“Did it hurt?”

“I’m sure it did.” She touched Pearl’s cheek, guiding her back into eye contact. The softness of Pearl’s skin. What would she do if Pearl were burned? Black skin was so vulnerable to scarring. She remembered the half-moon scars that peppered Daniel’s back. He told her they were the work of the police back in his native Uganda, but he’d refused to say more than that. She ran her finger over Pearl’s cheek and smiled at her.

The young woman picked up her bag and called to the boy, who was studying a parked BMW. The bus pulled up and she slapped her thigh, shouting at him. He shuffled over, following her onto the bus. Andrea saw the boy plunk down in a seat before the bus lurched forward.

Pearl sat back in her seat. “Mama?” she asked, her face serious. “What am I?”

“What do you mean?”

“Am I black?”

“Well, yes, of course.” She pushed the bowl aside and wiped her hands. “We talked about your birth mother, right? That she was AfricanAmerican and so are you.”

“Am I a little bit white?”

Andrea always tried to be honest with Pearl, particularly about her origins, what little she knew of them. “Probably some. A long time ago, some of your family came from Africa. I don’t know what country or what area. And you’re probably part white also.”

Andrea had put up maps around the apartment. In the kitchen, next to the table, she’d posted a relief map of the world that Pearl stood in front of, running her fingers over the bumpy mountain ranges. Andrea had made a

point of telling her about Africa in particular, about the refugees she worked with at Breadbasket and where they'd come from. Pearl could name the continents and locate countries like Bosnia, Somalia, and Sudan on the map and she'd spent many hours in daycare playing with the children of these refugees. With no clue about Pearl's birth family, Andrea had nothing to go on except her skin color, a beautiful chocolate brown.

"Are you a little black?" Pearl asked.

Andrea sat back. "Sure. I may be a bit black. Most of my ancestors came from England and Ireland, but some might have been African." It was way too early to talk about slavery. Or genetics. Or racism. Or sex. How would she deal with those questions when it was time? Andrea thought for a moment. "What do you want to be?"

"I want to be like you."

"Oh, Pearl, we are alike. We both love animals and ice cream and grilled cheese. And we're both ticklish, hm?" She spread her fingers like claws and Pearl squirmed, giggling.

Pearl went back to eating her soup, struggling to wield the chopsticks before giving them up for a spoon, intently fishing for meat and wontons in the broth. When Pearl smacked her lips, Andrea gently tapped her own mouth to remind Pearl, who promptly clamped her mouth shut, then took a few deliberate closed-mouth bites. Andrea took a mint leaf from the garnish and tore it, dropping it into her water glass, taking a sip. Tapioca balls lay at the bottom of Pearl's bubble tea glass in a scrim of foam.

Pearl put down her spoon. "How did that boy get burned?"

"I don't know, sweetie, but it was an accident, I'm sure."

"Was that his mama?"

"I don't know. She's pretty young. Maybe his sister." Or his mother. "Hey, if you're finished, let's get going." She handed Pearl a second napkin.

"Okay." Pearl wiped off her face and reached for the cat, patting it on the head. Andrea helped her replace the bubble wrap and put it back in the box. She paid the bill and they left.

At the corner, they passed a middle-aged black man standing outside a convenience store, counting coins in his hand, and Andrea felt guilty about

not giving him some change. Didn't everything make her feel guilty? Pearl went to a private school. Unlike the children of her immigrant clients who attended the Chicago public school in the neighborhood with overcrowded classes and too little money, its students milling around a broken slab of concrete during recess, Pearl had art and music and plenty of her teacher's attention. Of course, Andrea wasn't willing to make an example of Pearl by placing her in a public school. She knew the district school wasn't up to snuff, and Pearl hadn't gained one of the coveted spots at a magnet school in the CPS lottery. It wasn't fair, but she couldn't sacrifice Pearl to an altruistic ideal.