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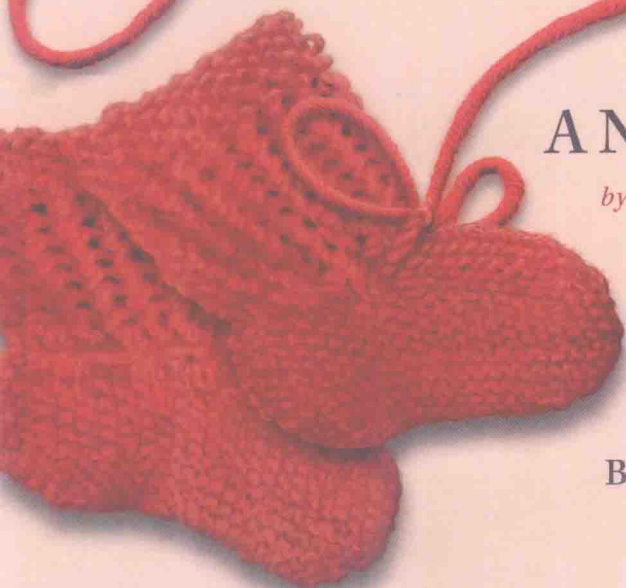
*a novel*

# the red thread

ANN HOOD

*by the best-selling author of  
THE KNITTING CIRCLE*

NATIONAL  
BESTSELLER



# THE RED THREAD

a novel



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More praise for  
**THE RED  
THREAD**

"In her engaging new tearjerker . . . the individual arcs are woven together beautifully. . . . Hood's sensitive depiction of her characters' hopes and fears makes for a moving story of dedication, forgiveness, and love."  
—*Publishers Weekly*

"Raw and riveting . . . the tale ends with a pleasing sense that the red thread is more than a myth."  
—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Hood offers a thoughtful novel about the yearning for a child that's primed to be a book club pick. Readers who enjoyed Hood's last novel or are fans of writers like Jacqueline Mitchard will enjoy this as well."  
—*Library Journal*

"Hood's latest engaging novel is a timely exploration. . . . Hood intersperses the stories of these diverse couples with the sad stories of five Chinese babies slated for adoption, resulting in part soap opera, part enlightening look at contemporary adoptions, and an altogether entertaining read."  
—Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

“The book is illuminating and heartwarming. . . . *The Red Thread* reminds readers of the joy and magic that come with welcoming a new life into your world, even if that life originally came from thousands of miles away.”  
—BookPage

“A poignant, compelling collage of voices, *The Red Thread* makes visible the invisible shared thread of longing for a child. Ann Hood’s latest novel is part symphony, part celebration. A deeply moving book.”  
—A. Manette Ansay, author of  
*Blue Water and Good Things I Wish You*

“This beautiful, elegantly structured novel should come with a box of tissues. Ann Hood has created a searingly moving story about the extraordinary, even magical ways that lives unravel, and then connect.”  
—Dani Shapiro, author of  
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“Ann Hood expertly weaves several stories into one enormously satisfying whole, each united by the heartbreaking fact of abandoned daughters. *The Red Thread* is a page-turning pleasure all the way from here to China.” —Jane Hamilton, author of  
*The Book of Ruth and When Madeline Was Young*

THE RED  
THREAD

ALSO BY ANN HOOD

*Comfort*

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**For Annabelle**



There exists a silken red thread of destiny. It is said that this magical cord may tangle or stretch but never break. When a child is born, that invisible red thread connects the child's soul to all the people—past, present, and future—who will play a part in that child's life. Over time, that thread shortens and tightens, bringing closer and closer those people who are fated to be together.

# ORIENTATION

A BIRD DOES NOT SING BECAUSE IT HAS AN  
ANSWER. IT SINGS BECAUSE IT HAS A SONG.





# 1

## MAYA

In her sleep, Maya dreamed of falling. But in her waking life, she was as solid as a tombstone. People relied on her. They trusted her for support and help and advice. That was why she sat in her friend Emily's kitchen listening to Emily complain about her marriage and her stepdaughter Chloe and her childless suburban life. The kitchen had been decorated to look like something in the French countryside, all exposed wood and large stones. The fact that Emily didn't cook made the kitchen even more ridiculous.

"Why are you grinning?" Emily asked.

Maya said, "You don't even like France and you have these big signs hanging here." Maya pointed to one with a huge pink pig and the word *cochon* written in white below it.

"I do like France," Emily said. "I just didn't like my so-called honeymoon there, driving around with Chloe in the backseat grumbling and getting carsick."

"I know," Maya said. She patted her friend's hand. "An eleven-year-old should not be on a honeymoon."

"We had to keep finding pay phones so she could call her mother and tell her how miserable she was. And those phone cards never worked." Emily sighed. "It has been downhill from there."

Maya looked out the window, to the terraced garden. The flowers there were arranged by color, all of the oranges together, then the yellows and pinks. Weren't flowers meant to commingle? she wondered. Hummingbird feeders hung above the flowers, swaying slightly in the late spring breeze.

"Do they come?" Maya asked.

"Hummingbirds?" Emily shook her head. "I seem to be able to keep everything small and fragile away."

Once, when she had lived in Hawaii, Maya had watched a variety of hummingbirds dart in and out of a feeder in her neighbor's yard. They were as tiny as bumblebees, those hummingbirds. Their heart beat, she knew, at a rate of 1,260 beats per minute. Like the racing heart of a fetus, she thought.

"Not like you," Emily was saying. "You give people life. You give them hope."

Maya Lange ran the Red Thread Adoption Agency. It placed babies from China with families in the United States. In the eight years since she'd opened the agency, she had heard about every fertility treatment available. She had seen more broken hearts than she could count. With over four hundred babies placed, a person might think that by giving these families their babies, her own heart would have healed. But hers still felt like someone had punched a hole in it.

"A woman in my Pilates class told me that I might be allergic to Michael's sperm," Emily continued. "There's a doctor in

Philadelphia who injects women with their husband's sperm to build up antibodies. She said that after ten treatments you can maintain a pregnancy instead of reject it."

Maya did not answer her friend. Long ago, she had buried her own secrets. They belonged only to her, and a man she no longer spoke to. Sometimes she wondered if he too remained haunted. Guilt did that to a person. It made you silent, afraid, alone. It made you listen to other people's pain but keep your own to yourself.

"You think that's weird," Emily said.

Maya shook her head. "Nothing is weird on the path to parenthood."

"You sound like your own brochure," Emily said.

"Do you know what I do find weird, though? The garden. Why are the flowers separated like that?"

"Like what?" Emily said, frowning.

"By color. One of the wonderful things about flowers is how orange looks good next to purple, and pink and red are beautiful together. If we dressed that way, we would look absurd. But flowers were meant to mix like that."

"The landscaper did it," Emily said. "It was all her idea."

The women were quiet, each gazing out at the sunlight-drenched garden, lost in their own thoughts. The expanse of the wooden farm table lay between them.

"Except the feeders," Emily said quietly. "I hung those. I wanted to bring hummingbirds here."

Maya thought again of those tiny hummingbirds in her neighbor's yard. "Once . . ." she began.

Emily looked at her expectantly.

Maya shrugged. "Just a hummingbird story," she said. "Not even a story, really."

The sound of the front door opening and the noisy arrival of Emily's husband Michael and his friend broke the somber mood. A familiar, uncomfortable feeling settled in Maya's stomach.

Emily leaned closer to Maya. "Your boyfriend's here."

Maya rolled her eyes. "Please," she said.

Emily had taken it as her mission to find a man for Maya, despite Maya's insistence that she had no desire for a relationship. Everyone needs human contact, Emily had argued. Even Maya Lange. That began a steady stream of mismatched dates that had gone on for too many months. On Friday nights, Maya drove from her house in Providence to Emily's home twenty minutes away in the suburb of Barrington. The town had curvy roads lined with stone walls, leafy trees, oversized houses set away from the road. The only parts of them visible were the turreted roofs and soft glowing lights.

Michael came into the kitchen, his necktie already loosened, the latest victim trailing behind him. When Michael bent to kiss Emily hello, Maya warily studied her date. All of the men seemed the same: balding, belly just beginning to stretch, nice suit and polished shoes. This one wore glasses, those narrow rectangular ones everyone wore to look hipper or smarter than they actually were.

"Jack," he said, extending his hand.

Maya shook it quickly.

"How about a Stella?" Michael called, opening one massive door of the stainless steel refrigerator.

"Sounds good," Jack said.

"Can you open a bottle of chardonnay for us?" Emily said.

Michael pulled out the beer and a bottle of wine and set about getting glasses for everyone.

"Why don't you have a seat?" Emily said to Jack, who stood awkwardly in the kitchen.

"Shouldn't we go into the living room?" Michael said. "Get comfortable?"

He placed drinks on the table, then returned to the refrigerator for hummus and dips, a platter of vegetables.

"Why don't you go on?" he said. "I just want to call Chloe and see how her game went."

"Lacrosse?" Jack asked, dipping a baby carrot into the hummus.

But Michael was already dialing the phone, and Emily had started to gather the food. Jack shrugged, and followed Emily out. For a moment, Maya stayed seated. She wanted to be in her own small house, safe from blind dates, the awkwardness of a goodbye kiss.

"How'd it go?" Michael gushed into the phone.

Sighing, Maya grabbed the wine bottle and her glass, and headed toward the living room.

THEY ALWAYS ATE at the same restaurant on these double dates, a dark, low-ceilinged place that claimed to have been there since the eighteenth century. The food was always off a bit, an onion jam that overpowered the meat, or a too-mustardy vinaigrette. But part of the charade was to pretend she loved the food, so Maya commented on how interesting it was, what a daring chef. She drank too much wine and talked too little.

While Emily and Michael discussed desserts, Jack caught Maya's eye and smiled. It was a warm smile, and it touched her, as if they might have something in common. Unexpected tears came to her eyes, and she focused on the dessert menu, with its complicated combinations of chocolate and brie, sage ice cream, and lavender crème brûlée. The oddities of the desserts, that strange need to mix sweet and savory, struck Maya as sad.

The image of her ex-husband struggling to make a perfect pie



crust came to her. She had craved apple pie, and to please her he set about making one. A scientist, he had worried over the temperature of the butter, the proportion of lard to flour, the use of ice water. This is why I study jellyfish instead of culinary arts, he had said to her. Sweat made his hair stick to his forehead and he looked boyish in that small kitchen. Outside the window, a palm tree stood guard, and the smell of frangipani turned the air sweet. He had kissed her then, his hand lingering on her stomach.

"You okay?" Jack asked her. His voice was low and he leaned across the table toward her.

"I was just thinking of apple pie," she managed to say.

He smiled, revealing crinkles at the corners of his eyes. "Good old-fashioned apple pie," he said. "Yes."

Maya tried to return the smile.

"I know a place where we could get some," he said. "Leave these two to their sage and lavender."

For a moment, Maya allowed herself to imagine it, eating apple pie with this nice man, enjoying an intimacy, a kiss, the promise of another date.

But she shook her head. "The drive home," she said. "Thanks, though."

Briefly, she saw the disappointment in his face, as if he had failed somehow. She wanted to tell him that he had done nothing wrong, that it was her inability to get close to someone again, that she destroyed things she loved. But the look passed from his face and he turned his attention to Michael.

Emily tugged on Maya's sleeve. "Ladies' room?"

Maya followed her into the small bathroom intended for one person, pressing against the wall so Emily could close the door.

"He's nice," Maya said. "The nicest so far."

"But you won't go get apple pie with him?" Emily said. She