



Please enjoy this
sample chapter from
Birds in the Air

A novel by
Frances O'Roark Dowell

Preface to Chapter Four

Emma Byrd is a newcomer to Sweet Anne's Gap, a small town in the mountains of North Carolina, and at the beginning Chapter Four, she's still finding her footing. She's moved into the house

of her dreams, her husband is happy in his new job, her kids love school, but Emma's still trying to figure out where she fits in.

When she discovers an antique quilt in her attic, her neighbor encourages her to take it to the Sewing Room, Sweet Anne Gap's local quilt shop. But Emma's interest in quilts is limited—not surprising given that the only quiltmaker she's ever known was her Aunt Nora, a chain-smoking sourpuss who pieced her quilts out of brown and yellow polyester. Finally, with encouragement from her sister Holly, Emma takes her mystery quilt into town. As we begin Chapter Four, Emma is getting ready to step out of her front door and into a brand new world.

For more of the quilting life on the written page, please visit QuiltFiction.com.

4.

On Friday Morning, after the kids have gone to school and Owen has left for work, after she washes up and puts in a load of laundry and feeds Homer and makes the beds, after she glances in her study and feels a twinge of guilt for not working on her nonexistent novel, Emma gets ready to go out. She stands in front of the bathroom mirror and runs a brush through her shoulder-length brown hair, ignoring as best she can the few worrisome strands of gray. She'd love to cut her hair short, something chic and vaguely French, but Sarah and Ben shout her down every time she mentions it. Worse, Owen tells her he thinks she'd look cute with short hair. But she doesn't want to look cute; she wants to look glamorous, mysterious. Emma scowls at her reflection. Much to her regret, she's not really the mysterious type.

She pulls on her coat and goes searching for her gloves, finally finding them in the living room serving as sleeping bags for Fashion Fever Barbie and Bandmate Barbie. She sighs as she pulls each doll out and sets it naked on the coffee table. Before she had children, Emma had vowed no daughter of hers would grow up believing that normal women looked like this, the torpedo breasts, the feet molded

to fit into high heels. Her daughter would play with Amelia Earhart dolls, Sojourner Truth action figures. To Emma's dismay, Barbie entered Sarah's life without warning via a Buzz Lightyear gift bag on her fifth birthday, a present from a preschool friend. Sarah has never looked back.

Slipping on the gloves, Emma flashes the Barbies a dirty look, grabs her purse and the tote bag that holds the quilt, and steps out the front door. It's cold, but not bitterly cold, and the sky is clear. Since moving to Sweet Anne's Gap, Emma has been told at least ten times that if she doesn't like the weather, all she has to do is wait ten minutes. As she turns toward town, she ducks her head against the steady wind and shoves her hands into her pockets, hoping that in ten minutes it will be a balmy seventy-five degrees.

The center of town is a five-minute walk past a stretch of houses that span a wide range of architectural styles, first Mrs. Byers' strange concoction, then three ranch houses, each with a camper parked in its side yard, two Victorians, a lovely Cape Cod, and finally a doublewide trailer. Right after the doublewide, an ancient Mobil station raises its head and Emma breathes in a deep whiff of gasoline, one of her favorite smells ever, even if she knows she's probably stripping her lungs of valuable lining with every inhalation. She passes the phone company, the Sweet Anne's Gap Historical Society, crosses over Route 15, the anemic two-lane highway that runs through the middle of town, and looks up at the courthouse clock. It is five minutes before ten.

The Sewing Room opens at ten, and Emma doesn't want to be waiting when the clock strikes, bombarded with offers of help by a cheerful store employee as soon as the door opens. She'd rather have a few minutes to wander around

the shop on her own, admiring the fabric, mulling over the pattern catalogues as if she had any idea how to use a sewing machine. So she walks down Oak Street, stopping to peer in various windows, killing time. She’s been to mountain towns that would rank higher on the quaintness scale than Sweet Anne’s Gap, that’s for sure, towns where there seems to be a concerted effort to make every building a monument to coziness or folksiness or just general nostalgia. The buildings that line Oak Street have a certain historic appeal — all red brick facades and corniced roofs — but they seem slightly neglected, the brick chipped and dirty, the paint peeling. Maybe it doesn’t matter, Emma thinks, when all you have to do is lift your head and see the mountains that ring the town, beautiful even in the dead of winter.

Will’s Antiques & Such sits on the corner of Oak and Route 15, and Emma notes the high price tags on the pieces on display, a doll-house and a primitive-looking table. Tourists’ prices. Emma can imagine her mother-in-law, Linda, cooing over the dollhouse, its tiny, precisely hewn furniture, the darling tea set laid out on the dining room table. She’d buy it, ostensibly for Sarah, then find an excuse to take it home with her. Linda has always been generous, especially with herself.

Next door to Will’s is a pottery shop with an uninspiring batch of cups and plates in its front window, all beiges and grays, inexpertly thrown. There’s no listing of hours in the window, and Emma wonders if it’s not a shop at all, but instead a studio. Or maybe like other businesses around town, its hours are erratic until the summer tourists and snowbirds return to the mountains in the early weeks of June and there’s real money to be made.

The public library's display window houses a family of teddy bears in rocking chairs, each with its own copy of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Scattered around their feet are other classic children's stories, *Little Red Hen*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and much to Emma's delight, James Marshall's silly version of *Red Riding Hood*. To the side of the main entrance, beneath the outdoor book return, someone has put out a box with a sign reading "Free for the taking!!" taped to it. Emma peers in and finds a pile of *Reader's Digest* condensed books and a few back issues of *Popular Mechanics*.

Helen's Café sits across the street, and Emma considers going in for a cup of coffee. She wonders what the mid-morning crowd at Helen's is like. Maybe the old men who congregate inside every morning have wandered off to Jim's Amoco, the gas station and convenience store a few blocks down Route 15, and taken up their positions in the white plastic seats outside the door. No sooner does she think this than an octogenarian wanders out of the café, cigarette in hand, and lights up. He gives a tip of his baseball cap to Emma, and she waves a few limp fingers back.

After the library, Oak Street becomes less interesting — insurance agent, dentist's office, Community Bank & Trust. Past the bank, Emma turns right and walks down a steep hill that tees into Trade Street. Owen, a geology major in college, has taught Emma that downhill slopes like this more often than not lead to creeks and rivers, and sure enough, Emma can look over Trade Street and past the railroad tracks to where the Toe River runs, gray and listless.

Trade Street houses a mishmash of concerns. The *Mountain Times* office is here, as is The Rainbow's Attic, a

secondhand store that supports the battered women’s shelter, Beloved Books, a Christian bookstore, and a low-end antiques store that Emma has never once found open. The Sewing Room is the last shop on the corner, right before the street inclines sharply and circles up to meet Oak.

Emma checks her watch. 10:05. Go time, she thinks. Now or never.

A bell chimes as she pushes open the Sewing Room’s door, and a clipped voice from somewhere in the back of the store calls out, “Make yourself at home, please! I’m watering the plants at the moment. At least, I’m watering the ones I haven’t killed yet.”

Whoever this Ruth is, she’s not Aunt Nora. Looking around the store. Emma almost laughs as she realizes that Holly was right, she has been expecting the Sewing Room to be the sunroom, filled with an army of Aunt Noras, cigarettes dangling from their lips as they sew away on polyester quilts. If there is polyester here, it must be hiding. All Emma can see is row after row of crisp, bright cotton. The shop is large, well lit and has a lovely, fresh smell, lavender maybe, a hint of roses. In spite of its size, it has a cozy feel, helped in part by the armchairs positioned here and there, at the end of aisles and tucked into corners, each one with its own quilt, the better to warm you up on a rainy afternoon, Emma supposes.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” the voice calls, and Emma realizes it’s an English accent she’s hearing, or else the voice of someone from one of those clans hidden way up in the hills where outside influences haven’t been able to infiltrate. Though, weren’t they all found a hundred years ago by ballad hunters and cultural thrill seekers?

Doesn't everybody have cable and the Internet now?

"I'm just going to look around for a bit, if that's okay," Emma calls back. "This is my first time here."

"Please do," the voice says. "It's a bit of a mess. We had a class here last night, and I was too tired afterward to do anything but close up shop. So now everything's at sixes and sevens and, worse luck, my African Violets are wilting."

Emma moves through the store, finding it hard to focus on one thing. Bolts of fabric line the walls, sit on tables piled one on top of the other, and fill up aisle after aisle. She begins to feel a little drunk on all the color she's absorbing, the bright oranges and pinks, the deep blues, the chocolate browns.

"Now then, what can I do for you? I'm Ruth Holland, this is my shop, and as you can see I have loads of wonderful fabric just in. Makes February a little less gray, don't you agree?"

Ruth has come up behind her, and Emma twirls around, knocking into a row of fabric, causing a bolt printed with huge orange and blue flowers to tumble to the floor. She fumbles with it as she attempts to put it back in place.

"Never you mind that," Ruth says, taking the bolt from Emma and expertly gliding it into its spot. A tall woman wearing a pink shirtwaist dress, navy blue cardigan and penny loafers, her legs bare, she has a slightly military bearing, as though she never got the memo that she needed to slouch in order to appear more feminine. Her snow-white hair is pulled back into an elegant chignon, and there is a flush of pink powder across her high, broad cheekbones. "Tell me who you are, and then you can tell me how I can help you."

Emma gives her name, mentions that she’s just moved to the area. “We bought the Buchanan house.”

“Your husband works for the state highway department? I believe that’s what I’ve been told.”

Emma laughs. “Yes, but who did you hear it from? I’ve hardly met anyone since I’ve moved here. I know maybe five people. Did Shana Martin tell you? She’s the realtor we worked with.”

Ruth shakes her head, puts a finger to her lips, thinking. “No, not Shana. I believe it was Charlotte Stengle, the young librarian. She’s in here three or four times a week, always has all sorts of interesting information to share. Of course, the children at school tell her everything, but Charlotte is very discreet. She never uses last names.”

Charlotte of the green glasses? Emma is momentarily dumbstruck. “Really? She hardly ever says a word to me. She’s so shy.”

“She *is* terribly shy,” Ruth agrees. “It’s taken me ages to bring her out. Tea helps. She’s homesick, you know.”

“But I thought she was from this area.”

“Not precisely. She grew up in Banner Elk. Are you familiar with it?”

Emma nods. “We had lunch there once. It’s really not that far from here, is it?”

“Less than sixty miles as the crow flies, yet nearly a two-hour drive.” Ruth leans past Emma and tucks in a swath of fabric that’s come loose from its bolt. “It’s a very different community. There’s a college there, a resort. Sweet Anne’s Gap is a bit more insular, rougher around the edges. I remember moving up here thirty years ago with my husband, who grew up in these parts, and it simply took me

ages to figure things out. You'll learn after you've lived here awhile. Now, tell me if there's something I can help you with. I'm very good helping people choose fabrics."

"Actually, I need help with something I've found." Emma pulls the quilt from the bag, but doesn't unfold it. "It was in a trunk in my attic. My neighbor Lettie thought you might know when it was made."

Ruth claps her hands. "Ah, a mystery quilt! Follow me to the back room and we'll spread it out properly and take a look," she says, leading Emma toward the rear of the store. "I'm not a textiles expert by any means, but I can make a guess. I suppose you don't have any idea who made it, if you don't know when it was made."

"I'm afraid not. I know a little of the family history, but not much."

Ruth shows Emma into what appears to be a workroom of sorts, six long tables, three to a side, filling up most of the space. "Let's see," Ruth says, taking the quilt from Emma and laying it on the table closest to her. She steps back, then walks around it, stopping at each side of the table to lift the quilt's edges, examine what's underneath, run her fingers over the fabric. "Well, we really should have Barbara look at this," she says after a few minutes. "She'll know much more than I, but if I were to hazard a guess, I'd say it was made sometime during the Civil War era. The browns were most likely Turkey red in their prime, and the grays Prussian blue, very popular colors in the mid-nineteenth century. It's a well-preserved piece. The pattern is called *Birds in the Air*."

"*Birds in the Air*?" Emma echoes. "Really?"

"I'm quite sure," Ruth says, sounding stern, as though

she’s not used to being second-guessed. “There’s nothing else it could be.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’re right, it’s not that,” Emma stammers, not wanting to be misunderstood. “It’s just that, well, I’m a bird. A *B-Y-R-D*. Emma Byrd?”

Ruth laughs. “Oh, so indeed you are! How lovely then that the quilt hiding in your attic is this particular sort. Very poetic.” She begins to fold the quilt. “There’s a guild meeting here next Monday night, and Barbara is sure to be in attendance. She never misses. Why don’t you bring the quilt back then? She can take a look at it and give you an expert opinion.”

Ruth hands the folded quilt back to Emma. “Now, shall we get you started on a quilt of your own?”

“Oh, I don’t quilt,” Emma tells her, almost embarrassed to admit it, though she’s never considered her lack of quilting skills a shortcoming before now. “I don’t even know how to sew.”

“Ah, but I saw how you looked at the fabric,” Ruth says, putting a hand on Emma’s shoulder and steering her to a wall of pinks and oranges. “You like it, don’t you?”

“Well, yes, of course,” Emma admits. “Who wouldn’t? It’s beautiful. But I’m not very crafty. It doesn’t seem to run in my family. Well, my mother did needlepoint, but nobody does that any—”

“Can you cut in a straight line?” Ruth asks, arching an eyebrow, and Emma nods mutely. “Then that’s by far crafty enough. If you have an eye for beauty and can cut out fabric into squares, then you can make a quilt. You don’t even need a machine, though I can loan you one if you’d like to give it a try. It’s a bit like driving a race car, I’ve found, using a

sewing machine. Very addictive when you start hitting the high speeds.”

Emma can't think of a single thing to say. She can't just keep repeating the words *I'm not crafty* over and over, can she? And yet she feels this is one of the most definitively true things that she knows about herself. Does she believe in God? Maybe, mostly, but not always. Is she a Republican or a Democrat? A little bit of both. What's her favorite food? Too many favorites to count. Is she crafty? No, absolutely not.

“I'm left-handed,” she offers to Ruth's back. Ruth is pulling out bolts of fabric from the wall, striped fabric, fabric printed with tiny florals, huge roses, polka dots, stripes. “I think that's why I'm not that good at making things. Also, I'm terrible at math.”

“You'll get better as you go along,” Ruth says, not turning around. “And now they make all sorts of quilting calculators. Simply amazing things. I'm assuming you like pink, but please stop me if it's really not for you. We'll need to pick out other colors as well, for contrast, and then fabric for the border and the binding. And the back, of course. I'm envisioning a very simple four-patch for your first quilt. Lap-sized, no triangles involved whatsoever.”

“My mother tried to teach me to knit,” Emma goes on, feeling a little desperate. “I couldn't even figure out how to cast on, and when she cast on for me, I dropped all the stitches. I'm not making that up.”

Ruth pauses in her search to look at Emma. “The wonderful thing about making quilts is that they never come out the wrong size. They may be longer than you had intended, or wider, but they always fit. I gave up on knitting years ago, after my fourth or fifth sweater that sagged and bulged and

pulled and finally sent me weeping to the sherry bottle.”

It takes thirty minutes to choose all the fabrics. Once Emma realizes there is no way out of this, that she will be making a quilt whether she wants to or not, she joins Ruth in selecting the colors and prints. She could make Sarah a quilt for her new bed. And then maybe she could make a quilt for the couch in the living room, a quilt with lots of creams and reds. Suddenly her head is filled with visions of all the marvelous quilts she’ll make.

“But I don’t even know how to sew,” she says aloud. “This is ridiculous.”

Ruth looks at her watch. “I’ve got an appliqué class coming in at eleven, and another class this afternoon. But I’m absolutely free tomorrow morning before the shop opens. I know Saturdays are busy times for parents, but if you could come in around nine, we could spend an hour getting you up to speed on one of our machines in the back. I teach hand piecing, so that’s something you can think about, but I find for the beginner that machine piecing is so much more satisfying. You can have a quilt top done in a week, sometimes a weekend.”

Emma finds herself agreeing to come in Saturday morning. Ten minutes later she’s back on Trade Street, several large bags with “The Sewing Room” printed on them dangling from her wrists. She has fabric, a rotary cutter, a green self-healing cutting mat, one long ruler, two different sizes of square rules, and a book called *First-Time Quilting*. She also has a receipt that caused her to pale when she realized how much she’d just spent.

That woman did a number on me, Emma thinks, walking up the steep hill to Oak Street, the wind snapping at the back

of her legs. She'd gone in hoping to get a few facts about a quilt, and now, somehow, she has become a quilter. That's some kind of magic Ruth has, she thinks, and suddenly she can't wait to get home and start cutting out fabric.