



the
Mystic
Market

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Other Bella books by Ruth Perkinson

Sterling Road Blues

Other Spinsters Ink titles

Breaking Spirit Bridge

Piper's Someday

Vera's Still Point

For Heather

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All my love to you, your animals, and your families.

About The Author

Ruth Perkinson lives in Richmond, Virginia with her dog, River. She is the author of *Vera's Still Point*, *Piper's Someday*, and *Breaking Spirit Bridge*. She is currently working on her fifth novel. You can read more about her at www.ruthperkinson.net.

CHAPTER ONE

Growing up on Hansen Street in the small tourist town of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, I learned quickly to question priests, politicians and prayer. Prayers especially because, even though I recited many and fumbled with the knots on a mail-order rosary, I found they did not work.

For me, it was terribly personal combined with a generous supply of the common hurts and hindrances: bloody noses, failing tests on fractions, monsters behind my closet door—an occasional spanking to yield better results in cleaning my room, paying attention, and not saying “Go to Hell!” to my brother. Then at night, when I was feeling less sorry for myself, I thought of the whole world and the inordinate amount of head-turning by God to the poor, the dejected, the afflicted, and the tortured. The American debt I didn’t understand, nor the starving children

in Africa, the polar bears swimming in vain to make it to the next iceberg. I placed a pillow over my head and asked, why?

Simple enough. Why?

After several years of half smothering myself, one Sunday during a scripture reading of Luke, an unexpected answer struck me directly in the head and heart. I heard the priest read the gobbledy-gook I did not understand till he got to the part where it said, "*Even the hairs of your head have all been counted.*" It was a perfect solution to the *why*. I'd been staring at the back of Carleen Proust's head and neck when the words emerged. He's distracted with the counting of our hairs? I thought. Hair. Yes, hair. Perfect solution. The Alpha and Omega at the corner hair salon of the universe doing hair like a paint by numbers. Then in my small inconsequential childlike mind, I thought, does he count our leg hairs, too? Or just the tops of us all including the likes of Osama bin Laden or George Bush or Muammar Gaddafi or Fred Phelps? I'd read the newspaper for clues to how these people got away with hate and murder. Did Hitler's head get counted twice or Mussolini's, perhaps Stalin's? I bet he got slowed up with counting the hairs on their chinny chin chins. Our God, God love him, is apparently mired in the infinitesimal details with endless creations to count.

Scripture says he counts hair. God, apparently, has OCD. I might have been wrong but it certainly sounded so.

He must be completely lost in his own affliction.

But, I guess people pray anyway. Like the mystical women at the market where my bungalow houses me and my paralyzed brother, Aaron. I was sure God was counting bricks in the Great Wall of China the day Aaron was born. Or perhaps He was counting miracles and men smoking cigars and whacking each other on their respective backs as if their small sperm had ridden on saddled cowboy cannonballs to the womb creating what they did in the three-second orgasm it took in getting it there.

My brother was born in a hospital an hour south of our home in Jackson Hole. It was the same day I got home from school and found my dog, Gretchen, dead underneath the kitchen table—poisoned by neighborhood boys. Eight years later, Aaron became paralyzed after a trip to Disney World—heatstroke after

too many bounces on a trampoline. Mom, the good Catholic dutiful wife, said it was not our affair after she found me in a closet screaming at God, “You son of a bitch!” I was wailing into a tea towel pilfered from the kitchen. She said to be thankful and to pray and that we had to surrender to God’s will and count our blessings. Count. Sometimes bad things happened to good people, including the fact that Aaron now sounded like Stephen Hawking as he had to speak through a keyboard. She would say this and rub the top of my head and then put the back of her hand on my cheek and slide it down to my chin. Dad was too drunk to care about my great young crossroads in life.

Surrender to God? And get lost in the count? Screw that.

God out. Blair Wingfield in.

I figured out early on that I was an agnostic, a nonbeliever. In my past life, I was an agnostic, too. I’m a paradoxical moron.

I became a deputy sheriff for Teton County at a fairly young age. Might as well take life into my own hands if God was *in absentia*. Latin was my better subject in high school, but I failed my final exam my senior year because I was making out with a woman ten years my senior behind the outbuildings of the rodeo stables. Her hair was yellow and gold and her husband would have surely shot me. Her tongue felt swollen and hard, her lips small and silky soft. My knees buckled and I was glad to be conjugating her mouth and not Latin verbs. When she pushed her thigh into my crotch, I felt my first involuntary response of throb and release, peak and valley. The wet ran down my legs and into my dirty socks.

I graduated anyway. *Cogito ergo sum—I think therefore I am*. *Cunnilingus et puellae—women and “swabbing the deck.”* My first glimpse at another dimension—some people call it heaven. Others call it the little man in the boat. If you ask me, I don’t want a man in my boat, little or not.

I liked uniforms and guns and cars with blue lights and sirens. Deputy dyke Fife it was for one Blair Wingfield. At twenty, I passed my entrance exams and graduated second in my

class at the police academy behind Oneida Darden, my Hispanic African American sidekick. We were like the Lone Ranger and Tonto but without the mask and Indian outfit.

For the next fourteen years, I watched my mother and father divorce, our country go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and our first African American President get into office during the worst economic meltdown since the Great Depression. My best friend Margie, who had taught me how to drink and smoke cigarettes, moved to California to find tattoos, men and her dream of making money. I tried sex once with a man and felt like I would puke. Then, I got in and out of two relationships with women, one straight and experimenting, one alcoholic. Soon after, I became the sole proprietor of my life and my brother's, too.

At thirty-four, two things changed.

Emma Jacobs reappeared in my life after a long hiatus, and the small town of Jackson Hole got its first taste of God truly turning His head in the spring of 2011.

Saturdays meant going to Aaron's favorite place, Flapper Jack's, and then to the Jackson Drugstore for homemade ice cream. I donned my old Amelia Earhart bomber hat and rode my bike into the town square while Aaron motored his wheelchair with the rainbow flag on it behind him. His gallant show of support for me. For the most part, I'd stopped hiding my sexuality the Christmas after high school when I got into a fight with my mother after coming out to her and my dad. It was a grand drunken holiday dinner and I ruined it with the old, "I'm gay, pass me the mashed potatoes" routine. Mom cried for six months and Dad told me it was a phase. She told me to my face that she'd rather have me in a wheelchair like Aaron and stricken with some sort of spina bifida than have the plague of homosexuality. So, in reverence for their support of me, I cut my hair shorter, held hands with my straight girlfriend and went to gay anything: festivals, meetings, organizations and bars. But, you had to go to Denver to find a gay bar. Not a single one in the

entire state of Wyoming. That's, of course, because there were no gay people in it. We were just pretend gay people.

Jackson Hole was a hole. A depression of land and log cabins and lights lying flat in the middle of three gargantuan mind-blowing purple mountain majesties behind the skyline of the Grand Tetons. The pompous old western canteen of a town nestled in a quaint stretch of valley known as the gateway town to Yellowstone National Park, a national treasure and part and parcel of the old and new frontiers. A billion tourists a year came to ski, hike, climb, fish, goggle the views and tube the Snake River. But, who was counting?

The town square in Jackson Hole is just that—a square. But, on each corner are the famous hallmark elk horn arches. You can sit on the cement foundations of anyone of them at any corner of the day and see the Gros Ventres Mountains on the east and the Wyoming Range on the south that created the hole Jackson has found itself in. Just around the bend on Highway 22 you could drive five miles west and become catatonic from the majesty of the brilliant Teton Mountains that jut up toward the sky at altitudes of thirteen thousand feet or more. The mountains cut into the air in large jagged peaks that have open air spaces cut out in between like missing pieces in a jigsaw puzzle.

The mystery of the Tetons goes back millions of years ago. When the tectonic plates beneath the ocean clashed like the Titans and the ground and rock swelled up through the water and dirt to breathe its first breath, to unveil its mystery to the world, nature must have bent down in dumbfounded reverence.

Native Americans were the first to see the awesome gallantry of the mountains. Today, visitors from all over the planet visit here to get their fill of horses, stagecoaches, rodeos and the grandeur of the lesser mountains Jackson owes to the grandeur of the Tetons that poets came to write about and artists came to paint. Everyone is a sucker for the Grand Teton, the one in the middle that's the peak, which from the right view is cocked a little to the left as if it were looking down at the fauna and flora and people and asking the same mystical question: who are you littlings? You tiny creatures that like ants crawl on me and study my face, my shadow, my image?

I cackled at my dumb thought and yelled at the Hawk to hurry up. “Can’t you pop a wheelie, Aaron, and get your mobile home to move faster?”

My brother was too busy moving his wheelchair to type his Stephen Hawking answer into his keyboard but I saw his head roll back in laughter. Once we got to the northeast corner of town square, Aaron stopped and began waving to a woman on the street like he had cerebral palsy. I stopped my bike and got off and began hooking it over as I heard a voice call, “Hello, Aaron.”

When I looked up, I squinted because the sun was momentarily in my eyes. Then they landed on Emma Jacobs, daughter to the Mystic Market’s Antichrist, Fannie Crabwell. The town’s one and only psychotic Tarot reader you either loved or hated. I hadn’t seen Emma in five or six years, not since she’d finished school and gone off to Yale to teach us all a lesson that we should study words and Pythagorean theorems. Her IQ was off the charts. I think she finished high school at twelve and law school by twenty, but I was bad at numbers.

“Hey, handsome, Aaron. How are you?” She walked across the street from the Jackson Drugstore. She held a large bag of groceries and was wearing a green North Face jacket, light enough for the sunny March air.

“Emma, smarty pants, Jacobs! How are you?” I yelled at her but she kept her eyes fixed on Aaron.

She knelt down next to Aaron and I swear he swooned. He typed into his keyboard, then hit the enter key. “I’m. Fine. How’s. Your. Cat?” The Hawk’s words dulled out into the air like metallic iambic pentameter.

“Oh!” She stood up and continued to ignore me. “He’s fine. Just a bad limp. Dr. Evans put him on some medicine to help his joints. I read your first draft, Aaron. I really enjoyed it.”

“Hey, Emma...” I said weakly, taking a step forward and removing my flappy bomber hat.

It took her a second to look at me, then I figured it out. She was mad, irritated.

“Blair,” tersely.

For only a split second she glanced my way and then looked

back at Aaron who I thought would have an apoplectic fit while conversing with her. I could see why. Emma was classically beautiful. Her long sandy blond hair was parted in the middle and did a sweet cascade down the symmetrical sides of her face. Her light crystal silver-blue eyes were huge. I could barely stop looking at them. Emma had grown up gorgeous. And she wore no makeup and needed none. The porcelain skin glowed like an aura or a light or a candle...I could not think. It was part of the magic that was making Aaron faint all over himself.

At five foot eleven and a hundred and sixty pounds, I towered over her five and a half foot slender frame. I stepped a bit closer and she looked up at me. "Blair," she shifted her groceries, "I see you and Aaron here are out for a Saturday walk in the park." Her lips were pursed downward and tight and she kept shifting her eyes to Aaron who began typing again on his keyboard.

"We've only got wheels, Aaron has four. I've got two. Welcome back to Jackson. Haven't seen you in a while. I guess Yale was good, eh?"

"Yes, I found out a lot about life at Yale. But I'm glad to be back with Mom. I'm working at the old Allen Law Firm, and teaching writing at the rec center. You still at the sheriff's office? I haven't seen you in court." Her clipped pithiness was funny and sexy all at the same time.

"Emma, I'm flabber-busted. I didn't know you were an attorney. Wow, at what, twenty-five? What's next—NASA and the moon? And, yes, I'm still at the sheriff's office on patrol mostly but have been working the jail for a bit. I'm surprised our paths haven't crossed before now. Sometimes small towns are big enough, I guess."

Aaron hit enter. "Where's. Your. Boyfriend. Emma? Have. You. Broken. Up. With. Him. Yet. For. Me?"

"Evan's over in Wilson mucking stalls for one of his buddies and taking some spring tourists out on the trails. I'm almost twenty-seven." Emma looked at me then didn't say a word.

"Emma, you sure are more vocal these days. How did that happen?" I thought, oh no, not Evan Adams. My best friend Margie's old boyfriend from high school. The town's answer to the Marlboro man.

“Talking more to people I like and less to people I don’t. You just happen to be a witness today to someone I like.”

What a weird trip. I looked at Aaron who was smiling at me and then at Emma.

“What did I do?” I asked.

The Hawk broke in. “You. Arrived. With. Me. Good. Emma. Is. My. Teacher.”

“Blair,” she whispered and then took me aside, her arm under my elbow as if we were slightly cordial. “Diana tells me that you and Mom fight all the time. What’s the deal?”

“For some reason, she hates me. She’s the Antichrist, Emma. When did you not see that one growing up? How did you get to be so normal in such a cataleptic insane household?”

“Same way you got to be gay in yours.”

“Ouch. For a woman of few words, you find the stinging ones. Shall I give you an Indian name? One Who Flaps Wild Winging Words?”

“Good. Blair. Good,” she said, then readjusted her groceries.

I put my hat back on. “See what I mean. See what I mean? Aaron?” I raised my arms up into the air.

“Your brother is a good writer. I’m glad to have such a good student in my adult class. Aaron, I look forward to more.” She smiled at him and he gave his okay sign and I wanted to throw up.

“Get a room, you two.” I laughed then walked over to Aaron, moved his keyboard into his side holster and then sat on his lap. An act that seemed to surprise Emma.

Her words came out in both disdain and surprise. “Aren’t you going to crush him?”

“Come down to the Mystic, Emma, and I’ll buy you a beer. Now that you’re back in town, you need to come and see the place more often. Bring your boyfriend.”

“He doesn’t like the place. Says it’s too airy fairy for him and his religion.”

“Well, maybe you need to quit dating the Christian loser and come and date Aaron.”

I wiped the drool off Aaron’s face with his neck towel and he turned his mobile motor home toward Flapper Jack’s where we’d

spend some money on clothes, music for the bungalow, and play poker in the back with six or seven of the town cronies. Emma walked away with her large sack teetering in her small arms.

Most notable about our first meeting in quite a while was how the spirited energetic shift in her saw the spirited energetic shift in me. At least that's how I perceived it, thinking on it later. Her growing up and becoming a Yale graduate, an attorney, and a creative writing teacher returnee to her roots—me a community college graduate, sheriff's deputy and keeper of the Hawkmeister. Egads. What a dueling dynamic difference. So, alliterative. So dumb. But, I smiled anyway.

Once inside and at the back of Flapper Jack's, I held Aaron's cards and he pointed to the chips and what to do. Emma lingered in my mind for quite a while as I tried to figure her out. Another straight cutie who confused me. As I picked up cards and chips for Aaron through the dinge of smoke, I began to see her more and more in my mind's eye. The memories of Emma were few. I could see her with her Aunt Diana, the owner of the Mystic Market, and her crazy mother Fannie—head psychic in charge. My memory of her while she was growing up was how she didn't say much but was sober and cute and loved to eat Cheerios cereal straight out of the box, pinching them into her mouth one at a time. On occasion, we'd played checkers while she drank chocolate chip milkshakes. Once or twice, I remembered helping her with a hard puzzle Fannie had laid out for her on a card table in the corner of the tiny library inside the market. Fannie would shake her finger at me and say, "She'll beat you every time. She knows how and doesn't miss a trick. That's why God put her right here in front of you."

When we got home from our Saturday outing, Aaron put his hands to his head. A migraine. He got them about once a month and sometimes I waited too long to give him his medicine because it would make him sick to his stomach. Everything, it seemed, made him feel sick.

"It. Feels. Like. My. Head. Is. Going. To. Ignite." Aaron flipped out of his chair and got in bed. I closed the blinds then turned off the mute button on my cell. It whirred that it had a message, but I ignored it while I was trying to help Aaron.

“Here, take this vitamin C powder. It will make you feel strong and virile. I promise.” I put the glass to his lips and he drank it. It took twenty minutes to get it all down and then I put a wet cloth around the back of his neck. He smiled a faint smile at me and closed his eyes. He lay in a slight, knee-up repose and I pulled the blanket over him.

“You want a little light music to help your head, or just the quiet?” I asked.

His keyboard was at his side and he used one hand to type. “Birds. I. Just. Want. To. Listen. To. Them.”

“Gotcha, bird man from Jackson Hole,” I said, then leaned over and kissed his forehead lightly. I slid his favorite music magazines over to the edge of his side table and looked out the window at the side of Cache Creek Canyon.

I stepped gently away and spoke under my breath, “Don’t mess with him, God. Do you hear me, God. I’ll take you to court over this one...and, you won’t win. I promise.”

I went into my bedroom and lay on my bed. I stretched out fully clothed and put both arms out to the side of the bed. “I will sue you for messing with my brother, God. If you can hear me. I will. I will sue your sorry satanic ass in front of the whole freakin’ universe. The jury will be me, God. You won’t win. I can promise you that. You will not win.”

While Aaron tried to sleep off his headache, I deliberated some more and got up and decided to go down to the Mystic Market to talk to Diana about my troubles with the Archbishop of Devildom, Fannie. And, how her niece Emma, could be so thoughtful and smart and her mother the exact polar bear opposite.

I changed shirts and looked in on Aaron. I put some covers over his feet and then placed my hand on his side and let my eyes cover his body with a sisterly love. I looked out the window to see a red-tailed hawk resting on the split-rail fence just in back of the bungalow. I noticed its large beak and the regal eyes. Two robins landed in the small yard where old piled snow still melted into the mud and grass. Suddenly, I longed for something deep inside me to come alive and to sense the aliveness of the nature around me. But, when I looked down, I thought, how could I sense the

aliveness, the vibration of nature in its own brilliance when my brother lay imprisoned in his own head, his own body?

Feeling sorry for birds, and brothers, and my lonely single self, I went to the market in search of solace, perhaps to figure things out. The whys of mothers and fathers, religion and elusive sex in the two partners I'd had since graduating from Teton High School.

The ancient Mystic Market looked like an old log cabin with several additions attached to it and several rustic outbuildings. It lay on a large stretch of spacious land next to Cache Creek. The wood itself was charmingly old, yellowed and splintery. Built as a fisherman's outpost in Jackson in 1938, it became more of a market in the fifties because of the supply and demand of hunters, skiers and tourists who needed food and a place to rest. It looked like a lodge and the current owner, Diana Tucci, had established the country cove as a place to do just about anything—shop, eat, hang out, get your palm read. Anything. Tourists from all over were attracted to the market for its long history as well as for its excellent food, great wares and magical lore. Cache Creek cornered its backside around a line of pine trees where the last of summer inner tubing took place in the last week of August. My favorite sporting activity—anything in water.

The Mystic Market had everything you needed in a town with a lot of regular bored people in it: regular market stuff like Fritos and Mountain Dew and a small counter that served breakfast, lunch and dinner. Then there was the mystic stuff: runic stones, gems and geodes, Tarot cards, psychic drivel and palm reading, candles that smelled like everything from vanilla to Roman Catholic ass, and books. Books about The Presence, The "I Am" Discourses, Buddha, the Unveiled Mysteries, Taiwanese Sex, Chinese herbal medicine, Irish Catholic diatribes, Taoism, Islam, Mohammed, the Spanish Inquisition, the Irish Potato Famine, chicanery wiccan, real wiccan and just the extemporaneous wiccan. The outside of the A-framed log cabin was drizzled with glowing lights of yellow, purple, blue and white. There were statues of the Virgin Mary, Columbus, Walt Whitman, Curious George, St. Augustine, St. Germain, St. Everyone plus Sacagawea and Sasquatch.

The smell of the market was infused with grease, sweet breads and incense of sandalwood. Whenever I smelled this, it made me go inside to a place hollow, long forgotten, like unknown, yet home. The pathetic poet in me was starting to emerge. I really must be hungry.

Down the middle of the market were three glass tables where gem stones and geodes were displayed, small soapstone trinkets of Buddha, rocks of all types and amulets. On the left side of the market was the lunch and dinner counter as well as two aisles of snack foods, beer, wine and fishing tackle. In the far back behind the velvet curtain, Fannie Crabwell and her sister, Diana, would read cards, palms and sometimes psychic energies. Horseshit. Just like God but in a different guise.

Diana, whose silky gray hair contrasted with her dark velvet dress, was bent over figures and complaining about money when I arrived for a glass of beer and some food. Diana was an old Italian hottie, slender and moody and revered by the townies as an adroit businesswoman with a panache for attracting men, women, and most anyone into believing everything she said. I'd known her since I was a kid. She was a surrogate mother and landlord to me since my mother went off to Florida to find a better state, Anita Bryant, and her second husband. Fannie was Diana's sister and icy nemesis to me.

"Did you hear about your dad today?" Diana took off her reading glasses and leaned back in her chair. Three people entered from behind and the wind nearly blew my Amelia hat off.

I grabbed a beer out of the refrigeration cooler and plopped down next to her on a stool. "No, I've been with Aaron all day. My cell's been off. I can't stand the thing when I'm not working. Why? What's up?"

Diana took the beer away from me and took a swallow then stared through the window momentarily. Her newest pooch, which she affectionately called Anika, was romping by the old outbuilding with another neighborhood dog. At the look on Diana's face, I unzipped my jacket and reached for my phone.

When she spoke, the tone was tight, edgy. "He's okay...but, the rest is not good news. I just spoke with Oneida. She called looking for you. She came by about a half hour ago."

My hair stood on end all the way up the back of my neck. “What is it? What’s going on?”

“I figured you must be with Aaron playing poker or out riding around listening to music...” She took another hard swallow. “Blair, your dad found one of the female students at Teton High hanging by a rainbow flag underneath the basketball hoop around lunchtime today. She’s dead, Blair. A small ladder was kicked over on the floor.”

“What! What! Who was it?” I demanded. “I know it’s my day off but something like this? Why wasn’t I notified? Shit. Aaron must have turned my radio off. He does that sometimes to listen to his music.” I shifted in my seat and leaned closer to Diana. “Who was it?”

“Grandy Martinez’s daughter, Mary Louise. Evidently, she was the star of the basketball team. I guess she was a lesbian considering how she tied herself up. And, you know Coach Palonski’s policy on lesbians.”

My stomach turned sick and green and twisted till I thought I might burble up some vomit. “I thought Coach Palonski was cool with the gay girls by now.” I stared through the window at my and Aaron’s bungalow.

“Emma told me she once saw on the locker room wall ‘no alcohol, no drugs, and no dykes,’” Diana said, then replaced her glasses on her nose.

“Sounds like Coach Palonski went to Penn State. They had the same reputation till the coach finally resigned some years back. Quite the brouhaha. Did Oneida say if her parents have been notified?” I watched two or three locals meander into the bar. One headed to the back to get a psychic reading, the other approached the library to peruse the books.

“Your sheriff pal, Oneida, went over there after your dad called the police and told them. Evidently her body is at the coroner’s office because they have to rule it was accidental.” Diana grabbed my beer and drained it.

I was stunned. An image of Mary Louise hanging from the basketball hoop flung itself into my brain. A very public display of death by hanging in a public arena. Holy cow. The awfulness of it all crept into the thickness of my chest, right in the middle. I

covered it with my hand and felt a press like I'd never felt before. Then my stomach rumbled more green and melancholy.

I'd seen her play ball the year before at the state finals in Casper. Her three-foot jumper from the baseline extended was impeccable.