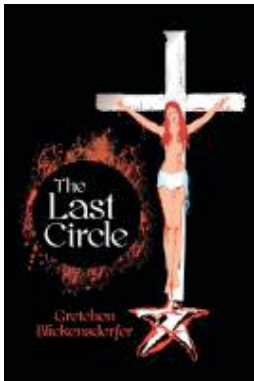


The  
Last  
Circle

Gretchen  
Blickensderfer



*"If you will not be saved, there will be consequences." Based upon platforms and quotes from Conservative political and church leaders, *The Last Circle* chronicles the rise to power of a United States Evangelical theocracy and the small group of Pagan and LGBT friends who must escape the country to survive. A terrifying chase through the southern states tests the limits of their friendship and someone from among them is secretly tipping off their pursuers.*

## **The Last Circle**

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7202.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

**Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!**





# The Last Circle

Gretchen  
Blickensderfer

© 2013 Gretchen Rachel Blickensderfer.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

This is a work of fiction, set in a dystopian future. Names, characters, appearances, actions, places and incidents are either used fictitiously or are solely the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to persons living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

*Story and copyediting: Colleen O'Connor*  
*Original cover artwork: Eric Dinse*  
*Enhanced cover artwork: Esteem People Inc.*  
*Cover and book design: Hannah Kenny*  
*Electronic artwork: Greg Adkins*

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-62646-840-5

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-62646-841-2

Printed in the United States of America.

*To my beloved wife Sarah, my selfless mum Sandy, my courageous son Fred, my conscience Dev, my greatest teacher David Longest, the angels on my shoulder Mr. and Mrs. Mike and Pat Koldyke, and to my circle of friends: Ron, Jill, Jesse, Sue, James, Bruno, Lane, Bobby, Eric, Melissa, Georgia and all and to my editor Colleen and designer Hannah. Thank you all for being a family who never stopped believing in me.*

*To anyone who has suffered a bully because of who they are, what they look like or what they believe, to their fight, courage and memory, *The Last Circle*, is respectfully dedicated.*





# Prologue

“Tell me about America.”

The studio around the journalist was dark except for a chalky glow that encircled the statuesque woman sitting in front of him. Her broad hands picked at her jagged fingernails, clumsily varnished with deep crimson polish. Her eyes darted from the journalist to the shadowed cameraman behind. Her dry lips parted for a moment and then were pushed shut.

The journalist placed a tentative hand on the arm of her pinstripe suit. “I know how frightened you are.”

The woman’s eyebrows raised and she spoke in a guttural murmur. “Are you gay, Mr. Edmond?”

“No,” he replied plainly.

“Then you’ve no idea how frightened I am.”

Edmond nodded. “We don’t have to go into Director Langman or Ms. Salway right now.”

He was answered with silence and momentarily glanced at his cameraman before returning to the woman. “Gwen, maybe you can just tell us about your wife and child. Are they still trapped in the

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

United States?”

The woman caught her breath and she brought a trembling hand to her face. Still fixed upon her, Edmond called behind him. “Can we get her some tissues please, John?”

Gwen shook her head. “No, I’m fine.” She gingerly pulled away a strand of curling auburn hair that was matted to her cheeks. “Thing is, I’m only here because I promised I’d keep the faith. That’s ironic.”

“Why?”

“I’m still an atheist.”

Edmond patiently waited until Gwen’s dark brown eyes raised to his. “Look, the Palmer government’s trying to quell world opinion about his policies. The tide’s coming in and it’s growing deeper every day.” He leaned forward. “Maybe you can be the drop of water that finally drowns him.”

“Emotional blackmail, Mr. Edmond?” Gwen asked, tilting her head.

“Mmm Hmm,” he admitted with a chuckle. “And call me Louis.”

Gwen fell back into her seat. “I used to be really good at that. Well, Sally always said I was. I’d show her these websites with pictures of cute babies, you know the kind. Any concerns she had were caved then and there.”

### The Last Circle

“We’re rolling,” the cameraman murmured.

Gwen regarded him sternly. “You don’t have to whisper, Sir. There was enough whispering before all of this started.” Her voice gradually softened under a wistful smile. “Sally and I did, every night when we dreamed about adopting. She had this niggling fear that the Family Research Council would show up one day with a posse, all torches and Bibles. She thought they’d take our baby away but I told her she was just being silly, you know? That the culture war was just the usual political rhetoric.”

Gwen swallowed down the lump in her throat and scoured the darkness in front of her for the face of her wife.

“Truth is I’d’ve done anything for her. It was always her eyes. They were...they were like the emeralds I once saw in the Smithsonian, especially whenever she said she was going to change the world through music. Then there was the Thursday we both met our daughter, Mary. It was on the seventh floor of this old building on South Wacker Drive. I try to keep hold of that day. Despite everything that happened, I try to live there.”

Her words trailed off and tears settled under her eyes.

“Do you need a break?” Edmond asked, raising his hand towards his cameraman. Gwen straightened herself and brushed the hem of her

Gretchen Blickensderfer

skirt.

“You see, the birth mother was slipped a Mickey Finn during some Northwestern University frat party. I guess she still wanted to finish college. So, after we greased the palms of an attorney, covered ourselves in black ink and revealed every last shred of information about our backgrounds from who did the dishes to the kind of moisturizer we liked to use, we were given this beautiful one month old girl.”

She relaxed back in her seat and laughed, her eyes dancing with the image playing out in front of them. “I swear, it was like all there was to her was a little tuft of brown hair and these tiny fists that wouldn’t be opened for anything. Sally took her in her arms first. There was a storm that morning and the thunder made the windows around the office rattle. Mary wasn’t bothered. I mean, I’m jumping out of my skin at every thunderclap, but she didn’t cry. She just stared up at my wife, like she belonged there and nothing was gonna hurt her.”

Edmond’s head was inches away from hers. “Gwen? Gwen, what happened to your wife and daughter?”

She took a small breath and gripped the arms of her chair.

“We were in our apartment in West Chicago. I don’t remember what day it was, but Mary was about a year old, I think...I think just after the Boystown massacre. My wife and I were arguing about

### The Last Circle

joining the refugees leaving the country and coming here. But Sally didn't want to leave her mum and brothers back in Mississippi and we couldn't take them with us. Sally was crying. They both were crying. Then there was this hammering on the door. It was like when we met Mary. The windows shook. Sally and I just froze. I should've grabbed them. Got them out of the back kitchen window. It must've been only a few seconds but maybe it was enough time. But then the door flew open and I remember we threw ourselves over Mary. Tried to protect her. They charged into our living room. It was just this...this sea of black. They pulled me away, like my arm was being torn from my shoulder. My legs were kicking at them and they, they...they started punching me all over. Sally wouldn't let go of Mary. She just wouldn't let her go. They piled on her. Beat her to the floor. They kicked her in the stomach and her...her head. She was gasping for breath. But, she wouldn't let her go. They smashed at her arms with nightsticks. Her hands went all crooked and Mary fell to the carpet. Sally begged me for help and I tried to get to her. I tried so hard!"

"It's all right."

"Then, my body went rigid. I couldn't control it. My legs just dropped. The skin on my chest was burning and I remember seeing everything happening around me but I couldn't move. I couldn't speak.

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

Mary was pulled out of the front door. She was howling and she just disappeared like a tube train down a tunnel. But I couldn't help her! Either of them..."

She bent forward, racked with insuppressible convulsions. Edmond took her hands and squeezed them. "I'm so sorry."

At the sound of his voice, Gwen calmed and, her eyes still wide with confusion, slowly focused upon him.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"How did you escape?"

Gwen firmly clenched his hands until she found a measure of composure. "I was put on a BRP transport to a Salvation Center. Had anyone known who I actually was, I would've been sent to the one in Dallas and that would've been my lot, but for some reason, I was shipped to the processing facility in St. Louis."

"So you were part of the mass breakout there?"

"Occurred within hours of my arrival. Lucky me."

"What about your family?"

"I thought Sally was dead. After I arrived in Anglesey, her mum managed to get a brief message to me. Sally was put on a separate transport that was ambushed by the Invisible Node in Kentucky. She was barely alive when they found her. They somehow managed to

### The Last Circle

patch her up and took her home to her family. They've been taking care of her ever since."

"And Mary?"

Gwen seemed to brighten a little. "Maybe she's happy. Maybe given to new parents. She'll fit in, have a life, won't remember us. I don't know. Like I said, I'm supposed to keep the faith."

"Gwen, you've got more than I could ever have," Edmond thoughtfully measured her demeanor. "And Laura Salway and her friends?"

Gwen jerked her hands away. "They've got 24 hours to remain news, right?"

"Well, you get longer if you've got your own reality show, but I'd say that's about it."

"Is that enough time?" Gwen asked like a child seeking the promise of a toy.

"That's up to you."

She rubbed her cheeks and, after examining the traces of mascara that were left on her fingers, pushed her hair back and cleared her throat, leveling a stoic gaze at Edmond.

"My coming to London and talking to you was Laura's idea and refusing her is something no one around her is very good at. Although let's be clear, Mr. Edmond, I would've been happy to spend the rest of

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

my days in anonymity. I know Laura wanted to until it all came crashing down one September morning.”

She sighed and resumed picking at her nails. “I used to think Autumn was brilliant when I was a kid. You know, kicking through piles of leaves, the smell of bonfires and jacket potatoes. But, that day, I couldn’t care less about any of the damned colors, the sunshine or life in general.”

“Why was that?”

Gwen raised her eyes and gave a rueful shake of her head. “Someone I was very close to had just been Saved.”



# One

*“But there’s no reason why we should abdicate our foundational principles because certain groups don’t believe in them. You know, no majority should surrender its deeply held beliefs to those who don’t believe in anything.”*

The centerpiece of the cavernous, stark white Praise Hall was an elevated baptismal over which towered a varnished, cherry wood cross. Lit from behind by an exacting line of focused golden beams, the cross cast an encompassing shadow over the uniformly diagonal pews crammed with an early Sunday morning gathering. At least seven hundred pairs of eyes squinted up in silent and reverent expectation at the two figures standing waist deep in the pool. An impatient stillness was pierced only by the bored prattling of a toddler that abruptly ceased under a stern, whispered rebuke by its mother.

Shelby Romana Langman sat front and center in the pews; her knees clamped together, the heels of her shoes carving jagged holes into the plush, blue carpet below. She clenched her fists and strained her head upwards towards the baptismal. There, dwarfed by an oversized, heavy white robe that was soaked in the freezing water, the sum of her perpetual labor was shivering uncontrollably. He cast terrified

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

glances back and forth from Shelby to the formidably sized Pastor in front of him who boasted a polished smile as if he were about to close the sale on a used Buick.

“Do you?” The Pastor repeated, raising an eyebrow. His resonant voice was amplified through two dozen high definition speakers scattered throughout the Praise Hall. God himself could not have sounded so omnipresent. His outstretched right hand completely covered the scalp of the scrawny lad who inched his head in his fiancée’s direction gawping at her helplessly.

Shelby mouthed back a prompt. “You say, yes!” Her flawless, black suit creased under the tension of her lean body to which it faithfully adhered to every curve.

Some of the assembled allowed themselves a cough and began to pass each other curious glances. Why hadn’t he responded? It had never taken anyone this long before. What was he trying to work out? Was he a simpleton? A mute? The women sitting on either side of Shelby turned their heads in unison towards her. Shelby’s cheeks flushed with uncharacteristic color.

The boy drew back. Two years painstakingly taught him each of the sentences spoken by Shelby’s magnificent, green eyes. They could be read in the highest seat of a football stadium along with every curl-

### The Last Circle

ing strand of her cascading hair, dyed in obsessive monthly rituals designed to obliterate unexpected grey in varying hues of flaming crimson.

He finally returned the Pastor's awaiting stare. "Sorry, what was the question?"

There was a groan of frustration from a few members of the congregation. Shelby snapped a furious glance at them and felt her spine crumpling down the pew towards her ankles.

The Pastor cocked his head slightly. His curiosity deepened into concern. "Roshan Hezbani, do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" He repeated, his voice rising emphatically.

It echoed into silence. Inescapable silence.

After another quick glance towards the pews, Roshan sighed and answered in a low, barely audible voice.

"Yeah, all right."

The Pastor pressed emphatically down on Roshan's head. He was submerged in the numbing baptismal, and immediately surfaced, gasping and shaking uncontrollably, to wild applause. As he ruefully accepted the Pastor's arm and trudged out of the water to a waiting towel, Shelby threw a pair of exhilarated hands into the air, gave a cry of relief, and joined the rest of the congregation of Living Waters

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

Christian Church in a raucous, disharmonic song of triumph.



Less than three miles away, in the bedroom of a small rented house with one of the most beautifully kept gardens on the south side of Indianapolis, Laura Rhiannon Salway indignantly pushed her heavily snoring companion's arm away from its possessive clutch across her breasts and, rising, found her favorite pair of fuzzy slippers. Once in the bathroom, she stared gravely into the mirror at a reflection that heartlessly displayed an age well beyond her 27 years. She leaned forward, her deep brown eyes dissecting every pore on her face. They discovered a few tiny strands of grey within her usually pristine, long dark hair. Wincing, she plucked the offending filaments from her head and laid them carefully in her hand examining them as if she were holding evidence of a major crime. She was under no obligation to pull herself together in time to go anywhere in particular, yet she eventually dusted the hairs off her hand and crept down the stairs. In the living room, she curled up in a small ball on her couch and picked up her phone.

“Hey it's me,” she announced softly.

She was answered with a pained moan, then silence.

### The Last Circle

“Jack?” Laura demanded, cupping her hand so as not to have to raise her voice.

“Not time to wake up now, Jill,” he yawned, drifting away from his phone. “Call me back in a few...months.”

“No. I really need to see you,” Laura begged.

“Can’t it wait?”

Laura glanced nervously towards the stairs. “I want to talk with you before Barry wakes up,” she whispered. “Meet me at the Monon in an hour.”

“An hour?” Jack whined pitifully.

“Please?”

“You got no respect for the dead.”

He agreed to the meeting with a muffled grumble and hung up.

Laura tiptoed quietly back up the stairs, past her boyfriend’s inert body and into an alcove that served entirely as her closet. She carelessly kicked aside Barry’s clothes, limited to a pile on the floor near Laura’s quite impressive array of shoes, and dug out a pair of capris and a T-shirt. Thirty minutes later, she was frantically pleading for her rattling green Chrysler to start.



**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

The Living Water's Fellowship Center was an expensive proposition but, it turned out, not an impossible one. Thanks to donations from the church's collection plates, along with a few members in high places, construction of the monolithic edifice sitting adjacent to the sharp, angular main building, was completed within a mere two years. Everything about it was state of the art. Now Living Waters members and their children could hold Sunday School classrooms with the latest in computer led Bible-Studies and audio-visual capabilities rivaling those of any Ivy League university.

The crowning glory of the Fellowship Center was a fully equipped gymnasium, complete with bleachers, electronic scoreboards, and a floor that could become a basketball court, an indoor soccer field, or a gymnastics arena with the touch of a button and minimal effort. It was the perfect place for the congregation to enjoy recreation after a hard morning's worship and for teams from other Indianapolis Evangelical churches to engage in healthy competition with those from Living Waters. Everyone agreed it was money well spent.

Almost everyone.

Shelby had been dragging Roshan there for each of the 36 Sundays since they got engaged. The church was surely Indianapolis's best answer to Westminster Abbey, a structure whose resplendence he

### The Last Circle

often gushed about with patriotic enthusiasm. His descriptions, in the gentle British accent that made her wilt on their first date, delighted Shelby intensely. After all, although he stubbornly defied his parents by proclaiming himself an atheist in the same sentence, his infatuation with the Abbey's intricately detailed facade had to be compelled by a deep, if well-camouflaged, love of the Lord.

Roshan instead found the Fellowship Center to be about as glorious as 'a crappy-looking aircraft hanger' and wondered aloud why four million dollars of Living Water's substantial coffers had gone to the same architect who designed trailer parks. Why not spend it on feeding the people of a blighted African nation or even to shelter the many homeless people of Indianapolis? Surely this was the sort of thing Jesus would have preferred, rather than attempting three pointers or engaging in feats of marvelous acrobatic skill on a trampoline. It was a point he conspicuously made on many a Sunday morning's post worship cookie-fest, much to Shelby's heartbroken embarrassment. Yet she relentlessly persevered, cajoling him out of bed and, if that didn't work, forcing him to leap from the covers and into his clothes with threats to go on without him. The latter, as it had with his long line-up of predecessors, worked like a charm and culminated in today's elated but exhausting victory.

Gretchen Blickensderfer

With the excessive, arduously painted banner ‘*Congratulations Roshan!*’ politely keeping his mouth shut about “pork-barrel religious spending”, he desperately clutched Shelby’s arm as he entered the sterile Fellowship Center to cheers, handshakes, and many a laudatory word:

“You’re walking a path you’ll never forget!”

“You’ll never have another relationship like the one you now have with Jesus.”

“Now your place with the Lord is guaranteed.”

He acknowledged the enthused commendations with a quiet “thank you” barely making eye contact with anyone.

Shelby forced away Roshan’s grasp, leaving him to fend for himself, while she gracefully accepted praise for the baptism on his behalf.

“So, when’s the wedding?” Sam Jennings eased nervously behind her, tapped her on the shoulder and offered her a glass of fruit-punch. Shelby turned with a radiant smile and accepted the drink.

“We don’t...we were gonna figure that out after today.”

Her Texan lilt had been kept under tight restraint since the day she was reluctantly transferred to Indianapolis. It absently broadened at the sight of a stocky, handsomely suited figure with neatly cropped,



### The Last Circle

dark hair and unapologetic blue eyes. “How are ya’ Sam?”

His despondent response was carefully out of the range of an army of gossipers. “I’ve had better days.”

“Deb?” Shelby nodded in a partially sincere acknowledgement and looked over Sam’s shoulder. “Where is she?”

“Packing,” Sam replied. He rubbed his chin with his hand and forced a smile. “I guess the plus is I can do the writ myself. She’s agreed to that as long as her own attorney can give it a once over.”

Shelby’s eyes glistened. “I prayed so hard y’all could work it out.”

“Long time coming,” Sam admitted trying to stay composed. He nodded towards Roshan who was half-heartedly engaged with the Pastor as if he was twitching his way out of a pure wool sweater. “About the same for you two. I’m happy for you, sweetie. I mean, that’s why I’m here and not home making sure Deb doesn’t forget to leave the checkbook on the counter. Tell you the truth, I didn’t think you’d ever get him to accept Jesus. Was it Pastor Warren? Last time you guys came to dinner, you said they were meeting pretty regularly.”

“Mmm Hmm.” Shelby nodded, pulling at a strand of her hair. “But he was helping Roshan work out some other issues as well.”

“What other issues?”

She blushed slightly and drank down her juice as if she was polish-

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

ing off a double Brandy. “Why didn’t you and Deb go to him?”

“Oh we did,” Sam acknowledged. “And he is persuasive, but he’s no exorcist.”

Shelby placed a sympathetic hand on his arm. “Ah’m so sorry.”

She hesitated and pulled it away, straightening the hem of her skirt.

Sam took her empty glass and placed it on a bleacher alongside his own. “So go on. What made Roshan come around?”

Shelby regarded him with a perplexed smile. “Love.”

Sam nodded his understanding before he perceived the approach of the Gossiper General and cleared his throat.

“Well, you’re in the right place for it.”

“Aren’t we just?” Shelby agreed. She forced an acknowledgment to the infuriating woman who energetically carried a plate of her universally-obnoxious homemade cookies. Across the room, Pastor Warren grinned broadly. “I heard you’re going to play Balthazar for us in December.”

“I am?” Roshan took an involuntary step back. This was news, but the source was obvious and he glared at Shelby. In turn, she shot Roshan a look that carved into him like a razor-sharp cutlass.

“I am,” Roshan coerced his lips into a smile. “Yeah. Happy to. Really.”

### The Last Circle

Shelby dared a quick, unspoken farewell to Sam and joined her fiancé.

“Balthazar!” Roshan whispered to her in disgust. “What a stretch.”

Shelby put a macadamia nut cookie in his hand and kissed him delicately on the cheek. While relishing her rare display of public affection, Roshan ignored the cookie. He was beginning to feel quite ill.



“You don’t look well,” the barista observed as Laura shuffled up to his curved, marble topped counter and leaned heavily against its glossy surface.

“Long night, Bill,” Laura conceded, rummaging through her purse.

“No scone then?”

“No, just the usual,” Laura found her wallet and dropped a couple of dollars on the counter. “Where’s your hubby?”

“He’s upstairs, doing the books.” The barista gave an antiquated espresso machine a thump until it complied with a reluctant whine. “So I’m keeping a low profile. Yours is out back, by the way. Took our last Danish, as usual.”

“Thanks.” Laura frowned. “Everything’s OK isn’t it? I mean, with the place?”

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

“We’re not going anywhere, hon,” the barista patiently assured her again. He slapped a plastic lid on the insulated coffee cup and handed it to her. “Promise.”

Laura gave a contented grin. “Good. You guys play nice.”

She took the drink and walked to the back of the shop. Its amber wallpaper was steeped in the aroma of delectable, freshly baked pastries and lined with oak shelves containing a jumbled array of well-read books, herb jars and stacks of frayed board game containers. At the end of a short corridor covered with posters advertising local arts events and pictures of customers through the years, gleefully wrapped in each other’s arms or toasting the camera, Laura pushed open a heavy metal door and squinted as she emerged onto the patio.

Jack’s large, hairy frame was slumped in a cushioned chair ogling the well toned bodies of the Sunday morning bicycle riders along the adjoining trail. His legs stretched under a glass table shaded by an oversized umbrella. The granite patio and stone white walls of the café looked woefully out of place, like a torn piece of a postcard depicting a quaint village draped in antiquity and nestled inside a lush Welsh valley. The image was carelessly pasted onto a drab, crudely daubed backdrop of barren shopping malls and a few uncharacteristic skyscrapers that oversaw lifeless convention and a church on almost

### The Last Circle

every corner.

Laura and Jack were regular bacchants throughout the year but particularly when the appearance of the café's outdoor furniture signaled the annual arrival of spring. Like Laura's home that served as a regular meeting place for the small Wiccan Coven she presided over, the café seemed to be created just for them. It was an all-purpose center for effervescent debate that ornamented dusks and stretched long past closing time, lunches spent carping about bosses or discussing an upcoming ritual, and an array of peaceful mornings to compare and commiserate their love-lives. Today, the lackadaisical water of the nearby canal and the babble of carefree conversations between those enjoying a more hedonistic style of coffee under the early September sunlight combined in a placid lullaby that was working wonders for Jack's headache.

"There's my feral fag-hag," Jack yawned, shading his eyes.

"When are you gonna stop it with that name?" Laura growled, collapsing into her seat.

"Sorry."

Laura took her napkin and polished a corner of the table. "I thought gay men were supposed to be better listeners. Five years and how many times have I told you I hate it?"

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

“Jill, do you know how much sleep I got last night?”

“I can take a wild guess,” Laura smiled, absently clearing away thin layers of grime in a widening circle.

“About an hour before you called.” Jack grinned impishly. “But he was worth every minute.”

“Who was it this time?”

“Oh you don’t know him,” Jack casually took a sip of his drink.

“I rarely do,” Laura grimaced.

“But I’ll tell you what, he’s not only got talent but one hell of a personality. I mean, he and I spent half the night just talking.”

“No!” Laura dropped the napkin and gazed up at Jack in genuine surprise. “Well, did you get his name this time?”

Jack scowled as if he was being chastised by his mother. “Yes. His name is Mark.” He snatched Laura’s napkin away.

“Last name?” She obstinately wrenched it back.

“Good Gods Jill, we’re not getting married!”

Laura laughed for what felt like the first time in months. She leaned over and nestled her head into Jack’s chest, her delicate fingers clutching at his shoulder. His wide hands stroked back her hair. “You missed a spot.”

Laura moaned in contentment. “Uh huh.”

### The Last Circle

Jack considered his friend's demeanor, sighed and began to hum softly. "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a whore for a dollar. Jack went down on a guy named Brown and Jill came tumbling after..... Barry the Bane?"

He felt Laura give a subdued nod.

"What was the brawl over this time?" He groaned wearily.

The response was weak and muffled. "Egg Drop soup."

"Well at least it was something substantial," Jack chuckled.

"Not funny."

"Look, everyone in the Coven knew this guy wasn't right for you the first time we all met him," he reminded her. "We've all tried to..."

"My relationships are none their business," Laura argued petulantly as she picked the arm of Jack's shirt clean of lint. "I'm High-Priestess not *People Magazine*."

"And we're not just there for the mead," Jack reminded her.

"Sorry. I wanted to keep this between you and me."

"With Irvin around?" Jack scoffed. "Fat chance! He predicted this before your first date. And for once I agree with him. I don't know why you stuck with Barry for what? Two years now is it?"

"One year, ten months and two weeks."

Jack gently raised Laura's face towards his. "He takes no interest

Gretchen Blickensderfer

in ritual,” he persisted.

“He’s not Pagan. Why should he?” Laura shrugged.

“He still doesn’t have a job and…”

“He’s been on a few sales interviews,” she interjected defensively.

“..and this band idea of his is never going to get off the ground. I mean really, who the hell’s gonna pay to see the ‘Flatulent Zebras’?”

There was silence. Jack’s eyes enthusiastically bobbed along with the rhythm of a passing jogger. “Besides, he never has anything nice to say about the Coven and he prefers playing with his X-Box rather than you.”

Laura’s face tightened. “That thing’s evil.”

“But you stood in line for hours with me last November and all but knocked out a body builder so you could get him the latest version,” Jack recalled with a laugh. “You should’ve bought a vibrator at the same sale.”

“He says he’s gonna cut down,” Laura muttered.

“Empty promises!” Jack sang. “We’ve been over this before. You can practice any Magick in the book on the Bane, but it’s like trying to talk Congress into doing something productive.”

“It’s against the Rede to use spells to manipulate or control someone,” Laura sniffed, punching softly at his shoulder.



### The Last Circle

“I know. But even if Wiccan law allowed it, there isn’t a hex in the world that’d work, especially with him.”

Laura fell back into her chair and pressed her hands against her temples. “Why do you always have to insult...It’s not totally his...”

With an aggrieved sigh, she dropped her arms, tore the lid off her coffee cup and swirled the contents around in frenetic clockwise and then anticlockwise directions, hoping the tempestuous eddy she created would suck down a stretching, unwelcome fear.

“Time to go get another cat,” Laura shivered as she watched it gradually subside. “How many do I need before I qualify?”

“Five years and how many times have I told you that you aren’t going to die an old lady surrounded by cats?” Jack hunted around and pulled a lone, broken cigarette from a crumpled pack in his pants pocket. Cursing, he attempted to force it back into the filter before handing it to her. “You’re being a cheerless defeatist again, Jill. You’ve only got one.”

“You’re a nurse, not a pep rally,” Laura reminded him as she accepted the wretched, drooping consolation.

“Besides, aren’t you a little young for your biological clock to be sounding the alarm?” Jack grinned as he lit it for her. “I’m 29 and I haven’t even pressed the snooze button.”

Gretchen Blickensderfer

“Oh don’t I know it,” Laura snorted. “But you’ve never had to worry about having the Cosmo endorsed stick-figure, monstrous breasts and miniature IQ needed to get a decent guy in this town.” Her rising voice severed the morning’s temperate peace. One after the other, people at surrounding tables put a halt to their own conversations in order to become an attentive audience.

“Don’t say ‘breasts’ in the middle of Indianapolis.” Jack laughed, pulling her forward on the table. “You’ll get us excommunicated. Besides, I happen to find that magazine extremely enlightening.”

“Oh I’ll bet you do!” Laura grunted, pushing away his arms. “It’s pathetic, Jack! ‘1000 ways to give him a toe-curling orgasm embellished from the 200 ways we told you about last month.’” She sat up in her chair and returned a disdainful look to a couple of conservatively dressed women across from her. “Orrrrrgasm!”

Jack mouthed an apology to them and drove his arm around Laura’s shoulders. “You’ve been doing another post-mortem in the mirror,” he sighed. “Why can’t you ever see what I do? You’re a Goddess!”

“That’s blasphemy!” Laura warned and then admitted nonchalantly: “If they could care less.”

“No, I think they *should* envy you!” Jack asserted. “You got all the faces of the Divine; the enchanting maiden, the tender mother, to all of

### The Last Circle

us I might add, the wisdom of a cro...”

“Don’t even!” Laura pushed her hand against his mouth before he could finish the word. “Anyway, so what? Men are afraid of me! I don’t know, because I’m intelligent or I like my independence. They either run like rabbits or become totally reliant.” She pounded her fist down on the table hard enough to make the coffee cups tremble. “I’m running out of time, Jack, and there’s no way you can understand why!”

Jack snapped his arm away from its comforting hold around her shoulder. “Don’t do the gender war thing again with me, Laura. Or I’ll just go home and finish what you interrupted.”

As he rose, Laura grabbed his shirt in desperation. “I’m sorry.”

“If you want my help, then stop being persnickety, heed the advice of every member of your Coven this time, and dump both Barry and his controller.”

Laura winced and her head drooped forwards.

“There you go!” Jack grinned. “That’s the ‘Jack’s right’ face.” He lowered his own to the table and searched for her eyes. “Time to say adios to the Bane and find someone more...” he paused tactfully. “Well, more of the Egg Drop soup type.”

“Dare to mention the sea and I’ll empty my coffee over you.”

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

“Actually, I was going to suggest invoking the elements and seeing if he bursts forth from the earth,” Jack smiled and, finally, Laura with him. She turned away and stared at a couple ambling down the trail, their arms wrapped around a small girl between them who joyously demanded to be hoisted up in the air again.

“I’ll need to do a Barry cleansing with everyone,” she noted flatly.

“Fine!” Jack beamed in proud accomplishment. “Tell you what hon; you go home, wake his lazy ass up, and tell him it’s over. While you’re doing that, I’ll grab, say, three or four more hours sleep and arrange for everyone to meet at your house tomorrow night. We can do the cleansing and then, I swear this time, I’ll be your wingman every Saturday without fail.”

After another twenty minutes of gentle persuasion, Laura nodded in tacit agreement.

“It’s late. I’d better get home.” She smiled weakly. “And you need to get some sleep.”

Jack wrapped his arms around her. “OK, but if you don’t think you can do this or the Bane gives you a hard time,” he advised, breaking the hug and rising, “then wake me up again. I’ll be there to strong-arm him before you know it.”

He kissed her on the forehead and sauntered away, focusing on

### The Last Circle

his phone and the texts he was already sending to the Coven. Laura watched him leave and lingered at the café, basking for as long as she could in the serenity it offered. Between daydreams, she sat, rose and sat again, occasionally catching some of the conversations around her; friendships, husbands, children, houses, school all merged together, their details drowning in chaotic uncertainty. Her coffee was replaced by the soggy remnants of cigarettes each smoked down to the charred end of the filter, when Laura heard the familiar cascading ‘spell’ chimes of her phone. She dug in her purse and found a half dozen anxious texts from the Coven culminating with an “*are we there yet?*” from Jack.

“He hired a publicist,” Laura moaned. She forced herself up from her seat, hoping that the Chrysler would fail before she could make the short journey home.



It was Shelby who finally broke the silence in the car.

“I’m so proud of you, honey!” She cried.

“You told me that before we went to bed, when we woke up, while we were having breakfast, when you were picking out my suit and at least four times on the way here,” Roshan muttered under his breath.

There was another prolonged lull that choked the confined two-door. Shelby turned the volume up on a country station and dug in her purse

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

for a cough drop. She popped it in her mouth, sat back and glanced at her fiancé. He had that ugly scowl painted over his face again. His usually graceful, long hair frizzed around his cheeks and across his shoulders, his eyes were bloodshot and his olive hands gripped the steering wheel like a pair of stick insects clinging to a branch. She was trying to coerce a deep blue memory from her mind by focusing on the taste of cherry menthol and the lyrics of the song, when Roshan spitefully jabbed at the radio, unceremoniously replacing Travis Tritt with a news-anchor who was blithely announcing the latest vain attempt by the Secretary of State to cool rising tensions between Israel and Iran.

Shelby stared out of her window. “Just what is your problem?” She asked, shaking her head in frustration. “You promised me and Pastor Warren you were ready.”

“Because you told me that if I didn’t get baptized, the engagement was off,” Roshan seethed. He suddenly thought better of it.

“I mean, I...I felt ready,” he added, his throat tightening, “but, then when I was up there I realized that I...” He searched desperately for an explanation that she could sympathize with, but none came to him. Besides, the damage was already done. He lifted his hand to his nose. “That bloody water had too much chlorine,” he scowled.

Shelby gaped at him and thrust herself forward, fiercely tugging at

### The Last Circle

her seat belt to loosen its grip against her. She reinstated Travis Tritt, dialed up the volume as far as possible and sat back, her mind twirling in and out of the music thumping from the speaker.

*“So, she called him up at home when she knew he’d  
be alone  
Said, “Preacher I could use advice  
I got troubles with a man that I know you’ll  
understand  
If you could help me it would sure be nice.”*

“You we’re lying,” Shelby whispered in a thunderstruck realization.

“What?” Roshan tried to lower the volume, only to find Shelby’s hand blocking him. “Shelby, I can’t hear you!”

*“Well, I’ll tell ya somethin’ brother when you’re  
dealin’ with the Devil  
It’s tough to keep a level head.”*

“You we’re weren’t you?” Shelby cried, her volume slowly rising to match that of the song. “You fucking lied to me, to Pastor Warren, to the whole church!”

“You can bloody talk,” Roshan bristled defensively. “Oh how quickly the ‘Shelby Langman Double Standard’ rose and flapped in the breeze.”

“Double standard?” Shelby gasped.

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

“Will you please turn that bleedin’ noise down?”

The music quieted a little and Roshan leveled himself carefully. “Look, ever since we met, you’ve gone on and on about ‘individual freedoms’ and how Liberals shouldn’t be ‘legislating morality’. Didn’t take you long to legislate mine, did it?”

Shelby’s cheeks flowed crimson. “Because you’ve got none! I thought you understood what a relationship with the Lord meant and what He suffered so that you could be forgiven of your sins.” She tried wildly to force back a rising tide. “Especially your sins!” Her eyes began to sting with water and she rubbed at them obstinately. “I wanted you to know Him so you could be a part of my family. Daddy was thrilled when I said you’d agreed.”

“Oh I’m sure he was,” Roshan scoffed staring at the traffic ahead. “The first time you dragged me to Henderson to meet him, what did I accidentally hear? ‘Limey Towelhead’?”

“He was joking!”

“Well I don’t get redneck humor!”

“Don’t even...” Shelby’s tiny hands tightened into fists.

“Hey, if the Budweiser fits!” Roshan smiled sarcastically. “Oh yeah, I’m sure it’s a big relief to Mr. Langman that I’m too busy getting Saved to take a 767 on a joy ride through Manhattan.”



### The Last Circle

Shelby's head jerked in Roshan's direction. Her eyes burned through him and his heart started to pound as if he were a feeble Gladiator about to face an army of starving lions armed only with a dessert spoon.

"Are you calling my Daddy racist?" Shelby hissed.

Roshan tried to clear the fear from his throat. "You're never denied anything you want, Shelby, you know that?"

Shelby unlatched her seatbelt and turned her body towards the trembling figure. "I asked you a question."

"Despite the fact that, from the minute you first came into my office demanding a date," Roshan continued shakily, "you couldn't commit to me or even your job for that matter."

The contents in the pit of Shelby's stomach began to poach. "Bullshit!"

"Yeah?" He countered. "Just because Bob Ainsley meekly suggested that you might want to work on your customer service skills, you'll "never darken the doors of his company again" and instead you've gone back to obsessing about religion."

"Answer the fucking question!"

Roshan wiped flecks of spit from his cheeks. "I don't care if it's Jews for Jesus or Pentecostals for the Pope, it's not some great cure-all

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

Shelby. ‘Saving’ me was never gonna fix our problems. But you’re... you’re...like a child overly excited about the Veggie Tales Crucifixion Special. Not everyone needs to give Jesus Christ a try.”

Shelby didn’t care to hear a single word of the soliloquy. Her mind coiled in fury, rattling at an image that degenerated before her eyes from a man of noble bearing, like some eccentric descendent of the British Raj, to a muddy tadpole, squirming for escape from the net it had floundered into.

“I don’t know why. I really don’t,” Roshan’s voice cracked under the strain, “but I’ve loved you for so bloody long. I did even when everything I believed was slammed, when you sent me to that pontificating con man because of the way I choose to live my life and after you broke your promise not to try and ‘cure’ me.” He slapped the steering wheel indignantly. “So your will be done. You got what you wanted and I’m Saved at the expense of every last bit of my integrity and all I can do now is have faith that in a few months, my born-again ID card, that ratty-looking Bible of yours, Jesus, and God end up gathering dust in the same storage shed as your Cello, ballet slippers, writing pad, and that poor tired Avon Sales Manager who should’ve been committed one day after she met you!”

Shelby took a deep breath and deliberately punctuated every word.

### The Last Circle

“Are you calling my family racists?”

“Yes!” Roshan yelled furiously. “Not that it’s entirely their fault. They’re Texans, so they were probably born that way.”

There was a dire stillness.

“You fucking little bastard!” Shelby screamed. She hurled her right hand against the passenger window. The glass cracked as if hit by a bowling ball. “How dare you degrade my Daddy, my family, my faith in your redemption!” With each further adjective she hammered against the window, aware neither of the damage she was causing or her own pain. “You freakish, perverted, cowardly faggot!”

*“They better get their heads together or they’re gonna slap leather With the Lord and the Bible Belt. Amen Brother.”*

Roshan flinched in his seat and pressed his foot on the accelerator. The car peeled into the parking lot of their apartment complex. He brought it to a screeching halt, grabbed the keys and made for the front door of their squat duplex, pretending not to notice the blood streaming down Shelby’s right wrist and arm. Clutching it with her uninjured hand, her face pallid and her eyes blazing with maniacal vehemence, she charged in after him, kicking the front door closed with such force that her treasured antique painting of Oliver Cromwell fell from its mount. The frame cracked as it hit the hardwood floor.

Gretchen Blickensderfer



Laura latched the door behind her and leaned against it, hopelessly surveying her living room. Its deep, jade walls were embellished with portraits of Emily Bronte, gleaming frames containing Barry's first musical attempts in scratched out manuscripts, radiant faeries playing flutes in a moonlit forest and meadows alit with sparkling fireflies. Judiciously dusted shelves contained leather bound volumes of *Wuthering Heights* and *Lord of the Rings* interspersed with colorful biographies about Judas Priest and the rise and fall of the Sex Pistols. Wedged alongside CD collections of Celtic Woman and The Dead Kennedys were carefully ordered pictures of the Coven and of Laura and Barry together on a Florida beach, in line for a concert, and picking the first fall apples in Wisconsin.

"This is going to be too much of a mess to untangle," Laura thought sadly as she pulled off her flip flops and set them carefully on a mat next to a pair of large motorcycle boots. She paused to run her fingers along the worn, cracking leather. "Not worth it."

She caught sight of the television, surrounded by half drunk, brown beer bottles and an open Chinese container fallen on its side next to a pair of greasy chopsticks and an equally soiled game controller. A

### The Last Circle

glob of sweet and sour sauce pooled on the carpet next to it. On the screen was the frozen, animated image of an attacking zombie army bearing down on a single hand holding a machete. Scotch taped above the hand was a hastily scrawled note. “DON’T SWITCH OFF! NOT AT A SAVE POINT.”

Laura stormed over to the X-Box, yanking the cord unceremoniously from the wall. She gathered both it and herself together and, with a deep inhale of fortitude, strode up the stairs.

“Wake up,” she shook determinedly at the still snoring body of her boyfriend. “Barry, wake up!”

“What is it, babe?” Barry yawned without doing her the courtesy of opening his eyes.

Laura stood at the corner of the bed and casually tossed the X-Box onto Barry’s groin. “We have to talk.”



## Two

*“These people work 365 days a year to destroy America and corrupt our youth for the devil and Halloween will be their ‘all out’ day in Washington DC. We have enough problems. We don’t need witch curses too.”*

Laura’s Altar was a continual work in progress. The mahogany Imperial Drum Table, with a small chip at the north end of its circumference, was a \$20 find during an intoxicating Saturday afternoon spent treasure hunting through East Indianapolis yard sales with her parents, shortly after she graduated from high school. Both Laura and her mother had purred over its 1930’s vintage and the May leaves carved with delicate precision into its single, sturdy leg while her father appreciated the practicality, especially since it was light enough to be carried up to Laura’s freshman dormitory. There it would no doubt be put to good use as a dinner table, study desk and night stand.

Yet the moment her parents bade an upsettingly prolonged farewell and left her to begin college alone, Laura set to work adorning it with a dark green cloth cross-stitched in a crimson and black Tudor rose that was bequeathed to her and faithfully coveted after her grandmama’s passing. On the cloth, she placed four squat, emerald candles,

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

the remnants of the daisies, summer snowflakes and coltsfoots she methodically pressed as a child and a small, stone pentacle given to her by her first love after Junior Prom. When her parents would come to visit, the candles, flowers and pentacle were neatly wrapped in the cloth and removed from the table to be replaced by text books, salt and pepper shakers, the silver cross Laura received on her first Communion and the small lava-lamp from her uncle that refused to do originality a favor and die. The contents of the Altar were carefully stashed in a box at the bottom of her dorm-room closet.

Over the years, the Altar grew to include items collected from her growing Coven, a small, surrogate family of the religiously dispossessed who still desired the innate beauty of rituals by candlelight, the choirs of peaceful lullabies and a sense of belonging to something without the mountainous guilt they were forced to carry like personal crosses because they were forbidden by God to simply be themselves. Each of their gifts was revered by Laura's heart regardless of their superfluous style, inexpensive cost or mismatched color. There was a silver chalice around which a Welsh Dragon elaborately curled. It was once the highlight of Irvin's own Altar and had often been the subject of Laura's venerated envy during the rituals he held when he was leading the Coven. He and his partner, Rich, gave it to her when Laura



### The Last Circle

assumed the mantle of High Priestess and she squealed with delight as Irvin looked on, beaming like a proud father.

Surrounding it was a small collection of sea-shells jubilantly discovered during summer adventures to Maine with Megan and her daughter Helen, then boiled, rubbed with mineral oil and meticulously painted with clear varnish on evenings when the three would gather in front of the television and watch re-runs of *Charmed* with a combination of hysterical laughter and resentful commentary.

An ornamental, wooden wand, embedded with seven brightly colored stones representing the heart, throat, crown and each of the other chakras had taken pride of place above the stone pentacle ever since Jack gave it to Laura. At the time, he was still a relative newcomer to *Threefold Return*, the Coven's online meeting place for the rare occasions when they weren't all gathered at Laura's home. With only a passing knowledge of Wicca, he figured she needed a wand to wave about. It looked mystical enough and so he worked double shifts at the hospital, until it was rapturously received on Laura's 22nd birthday.

On either side of it, a pair of incense holders shaped from porcelain cherry blossoms contained within the hands of a delicate woman held sticks of Frankincense and Rose. They were found by Cally in San Francisco's Chinatown, haggled over for at least two stubborn hours,

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

and triumphantly returned, wrapped in a combination of newspaper and souvenir hand towels, much to Laura's exuberant gratitude.

The Altar remained in a solemn corner of Laura's living room until needed. Such as on an evening when her lawn was beginning to transition from decaying brown to enlivened green and the flowers in the surrounding beds peered into the warm dusk for the first time. In the center of the grass, the Altar stood adorned with paper chains shaped by the curves of the Goddess, the figures holding hands in wreaths that covered it from its base to its rim. Seven equally inseparable friends, flower seeds cupped in their palms, and glasses of mead flushing over their senses, encircled the Altar ecstatically abandoning their earnest Ostara ritual with raucous laughter as they danced an unashamed welcome to the Earth Mother, resurrected from her dark and frozen nights.

Their music was suddenly drowned out by the wail of a siren that slowly increased in pitch until it became an urgent, prolonged shriek of terror. Laura and the others froze in place and instinctively searched the skies. Clouds of rolling ebony seemed to be descending upon them from all sides. The Coven dropped the seeds and clasped hands with each other as an immense wind took hold of every tree in the garden and murderously shook the tender new life from their branches. Laura

### The Last Circle

tried to lead her friends to the French Doors but they flew shut in front of her with such force that the glass shattered in its frames. Behind them, a colossal funnel seeped from the clouds and, with an ear-splitting fury, began to collapse wood and brick as easily as an agitated child leveling toy blocks. Yet the Altar remained untouched. Even as the vortex passed over it, the table and each of its contents remained perfectly still. Laura turned her head towards her Coven. The tornado churned bright crimson and black as it wrenched each of them apart from their grips, lifting them away from her and ripping their bodies into pieces. Their cries mingled with the sound of the wind, matching its howling annihilation.

“We are one with the Sun, forever and infinite! She’ll drown us in our own blood! Didn’t you ever think there’d be a cost to it? You should’ve seen this coming. Oh Gods, why didn’t you?” They merged with the voices of Laura’s parents in an agonized wail. “You’re a what? You’re turning your back on the Sacraments. On Christ! Get out Laura. Leave your father alone. Go on! Get out now!”

Laura’s eyes snapped open and, from her dark green, well worn couch, she gradually focused on the desolated fragments of her living room. The images of sleep paled into a forgotten mist as Tribble, an overweight bad tempered tabby, lumbered up and nestled into her lap,

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

purring loudly.

“Alright, Tribb,” Laura moaned. “I’ll feed you.”

Laura rubbed her face with her hands and pulled herself up on her elbows in order to see the clock squatting on a mantle now covered with the glass of broken picture frames.

6:35 in the evening. They would be at her door in less than half an hour.

Laura had not moved from the couch since she arrived there from work and collapsed, summoning memories of last year’s Spring Equinox celebration until the smile they conjured sent her into an exhausted sleep. Other than Ostara, Laura could think of little that would motivate her to clean up the surrounding anarchy in her living room, grab some mead out of the fridge and set up the Altar in the garden.

She delicately fingered the beautiful gold Pentacle charm that hadn’t left her neck in the six years since she last spoke to mom and dad and stared blankly at the array of boxes she magnanimously packed for Barry after he stormed out late Sunday night.

Months of pointless labor sealed away with peeling strips of tape. Instead of endorsing Jack’s knee jerk reaction and kicking Barry out, all she really needed was a little more time. She’d slowly been getting

### The Last Circle

results, after all. When, one morning, she threatened to attack the X-Box with a garden spade, Barry actually cut his game playing by at least twelve minutes a day. But Jack never gave him a chance.

“Why the hell did I listen to him? Of all people, the ‘Jack of all trades!’ Why didn’t he fix his own wretched life before he started serving up advice about mine?”

There was a simple solution. Laura mentally compiled her most contrite olive branch to Barry, dug through her purse for her phone, and unlocked it only to find a message from Jack: “*No texting the Bane!*” She snarled and threw her phone down on the couch. “Jack’ll just start another of his histrionic lectures. Cloying, obstinate Drama-Queen. Puts me on a pedestal then pulls the carpet from underneath it.”

She was still trying to heal her annoyance with a dose of self-reproach when the doorbell rang. Laura mustered up just enough energy to haul herself to her feet. “That’ll be him,” she gritted her teeth as she went to answer it.



Unlike the compressed jam of Sunday services, this evening there were only a few cars in the Living Water’s parking lot as the red Toyota, with a passenger side window made from plastic insulation and flayed strips of duct tape, pulled up to the wide glass entrance of

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

the Fellowship Center. In the car, two figures kept their eyes adamantly focused on the windshield ahead.

Shelby's right hand and arm had been delicately picked clean of tiny fragments of glass and expertly bandaged to the top of the wrist by an ER nurse. Roshan looked as though he had just returned from a murderous battlefield. After an imperishable silence, which neither one wanted to disturb, Shelby looked at her watch and spat a command in his direction.

“9:30.”

He gave a curt nod as she exited, slamming the door and causing the plastic insulation to pathetically droop away. Oblivious, Roshan hit the accelerator. Shelby watched him merge into traffic and disappear. Her breath stuck in her throat and she started to involuntarily bend forward. She caught herself, straightened up and looked around. The owners of the parked cars were thankfully all inside, waiting for her. Instead of going in to meet them, Shelby ran and did not stop until she reached the back of the Fellowship Center. There, between two large metallic garbage skips, she collapsed on the unyielding ground and, her hands clasped around her knees, rocked back and forth against the concrete wall. Her chorus of elation from Sunday morning's Baptism broke into wails of unrestrained, agonized torment at the shredded promise

### The Last Circle

of family. Her cries echoed across the adjoining field and the residents of the cemetery beyond stirred at the sound of Shelby's despair. How could she have possibly convinced this unbelieving perversion to ever come around to her way of thinking? This blighted, effeminate freak who continued to consort with those unholy faggots in the theatre and who, despite a two year, concerted effort to exorcise the devil with both church and secular counselors, still insisted upon wearing...

"'Religion was never going to cure our problems.' That's what he told me," Shelby thought. "That self-righteous bastard!"

Her heartbroken disillusionment yielded to an unchained fury that burst through her in a sudden and jarring paroxysm. The flood from her eyes abated and they blazed with seething enmity. She rose and paced between the two garbage skips like a caged panther preparing to tear open the throat of its trainer. Her anguished song grew in pitch until it became a murderous scream with the power to shatter her fiancé and anyone else who stood between Shelby Romana Langman and happiness into a thousand blood soaked shards.



Laura opened her front door to find Megan and Helen Gallagher each carrying casserole dishes covered with tin foil.

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

“Hello, you two!” Laura smiled with genuinely pleasant surprise.

“Thought you could use some help setting up.” Megan kissed Laura on the cheek as she entered.

Helen followed close behind and, as Laura let the door fall shut, her two friends stood in the living room gaping at the unexpected sight of haphazardly stacked boxes, strewn clothing, and shelves emptied into piles of books, DVDs and CDs and picked through with random carelessness. The once flawlessly swept carpet was scattered with the decaying contents of Chinese food containers, spread and pressed into the fibers alongside unwashed plates and daggers of broken glass.

“That’s putting it mildly!” Helen whispered to her mother for which she received a silent admonishment.

“I’m sorry you guys,” Laura groaned. “I wanted to pick up but…”

“We understand,” Megan affirmed gently. With a single, experienced hand, she cleared away a small space on Laura’s coffee table amongst ashtrays over filled with still smoking butts and a small pile of pictures torn into indecipherable pieces. Placing her dish down between half-drunk, coffee mugs and an uneaten bowl of crusted, brown noodles, Megan took Laura by the arms and, her hazel eyes radiating sympathy, gazed at a deteriorated face. Laura fell gratefully into Megan’s hug and over her shoulder, Megan silently commanded



### The Last Circle

her daughter to go and make herself useful. Helen scowled, picked up the dish and edged her way gingerly through to the kitchen where she began rinsing off and setting a tremendous pile of grimy china into the washer.

“She really doesn’t have to do that,” Laura sniffed at the sound of gentle clatter.

“Don’t worry,” Megan grinned. “I have an unusually well-trained and obedient teenager.”

“Yeah,” Laura wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “You’re lucky. Compared to most 17 year olds, she’s incredibly manageable.”

“Even docile on occasion.”

“I heard that!” Helen called from the kitchen. “I’m not a Golden Retriever, you know!”

“Shut up and get on with it, darling daughter,” Megan chirped back. “Or you’ll get no Cheez Whiz in your Purina.”

“Gross! It’s turned green!” Helen moaned.

Megan and Laura giggled and found a place on the couch together. Megan pulled her long auburn hair into a tight pony tail and unzipped her boots. “I stopped by Editorial today to see if you wanted to get some lunch.”

“I didn’t see you,” Laura frowned.

Gretchen Blickensderfer

“No, you were too busy savaging your keyboard. You didn’t look like you were begging for company. I guess I didn’t right after Grant and I split.”

Laura picked through one of the ashtrays, until she found a butt with some life left in it. “Barry didn’t know how to use the word ‘marriage’ in a sentence, Meg,” she recalled, grimly lighting the cigarette. “At least he won’t try to get custody of the cat.”

“Careful what you wish for,” Megan warned, delicately examining the picture fragments. “Grant might advise him to do what he did and tell the judge you’re teaching the innocent to cast spells!” She waved a mystical pair of hands in the air.

“You’re a waste of good ole’ Indiana parenting,” Laura agreed. “Spare the bullwhip and free the child!”

Megan smiled and, with ridiculous ease, began to organize the living room into some semblance of civilization. Laura gazed at her with admiration that had never once wavered in the four years since Megan walked into the office in the hope that her frugal resume would be a ticket to freedom from the violent, Hooters bar-fly that pregnancy and two devout sets of parents had forced her to marry during her senior year of high school. After a dozen black eyes and enough self-loathing to become a fashion model, Megan finally walked away, taking Helen

### The Last Circle

with her. The outlandish custody case her ex cooked up hinged on her being a “closeted, lesbian Satan-worshipper.” Sanity alone would have had thrown it out, but this was Indiana and so it dragged on for over a year sometimes coming within a single gavel strike of robbing Megan of her daughter. With shining ebony hair that poured down the spine of a slender body highlighted by enormous brown eyes, she held both Megan and Laura in the palm of her hand and Megan fought to keep her even as the last of her savings was dwindled to pennies and she was forced to pawn every gem in her jewelry box.

Although they sometimes did more harm than good, the rest of the Coven all had particular ways of overcoming the tremendous obstacles the contemptuous normal that surrounded them never admitted to. There were so many nights when Laura tenderly cradled her friends providing them with reams of Kleenex while aiming a well-placed kick at their behinds when necessary. Yet Megan never once lost sight of her optimism believing her thoughts created the world around her and the pictures she imagined of the years ahead would become real, for good or for ill.

“Sorry about lunch today,” Laura smiled wanly. “I wouldn’t have been able to get away anyhow. Jeff’s got me fact-checking his ‘War Mongers of Jerusalem’ cover.”

Gretchen Blickensderfer

“War Mongers of Jerusalem?” Megan raised her eyebrows as she picked up a fallen box from the floor. “Isn’t he Jewish?”

“He says the saber rattling over Iran’s nukes is gonna send us all face first onto a red-hot griddle.” Laura rolled her eyes, unenthusiastically rising and lending a hand. “I told him I think he’s over-reacting but I’m only the State House monkey, so what do I know, right?”

“I’d better start tweeting some damage control,” Megan sighed, collecting the overfilled ashtrays and dumping the contents into a trash bag.

“Why would any of our 205 followers plus some horny old man in Columbus care what we write?” Laura grimaced as she discovered an unwashed pair of Barry’s briefs. “Someone around here’s got to have a dissenting opinion.”

“In Indianapolis?” Megan laughed. “We barely sell enough papers when we’re singing the Mayor’s praises, which is never.”

“We were kind to him last week!” Laura protested. “When he signed off on domestic partner benefits.”

“*Mayor tosses breadcrumbs to Gays.*” Megan set to work clearing glass from the floor. “What an endorsement!”

“Jack was happy at the news.” Laura shrugged, handing her a dustpan. “Says it’s at least a step forward.”

### The Last Circle

“Mmm Hmm, I bet every gay in Ohio’s burning with envy. Where is Jack anyway?” Megan asked looking around.

“Damned if I know. He probably blew me off for this Mark character.”

“Oh is that his latest?” Megan smiled sweetly. “How long are we giving this one?”

“I don’t know, since he actually managed to get a name this time.”

Megan dropped the dustpan. “No kidding! When’s he getting married?”

“Never!” Jack’s deliberately fustian voice resounded into the room as he stood framed in Laura’s doorway, his arms folded defiantly. “Marriage would take all the fun out of it.”

He entered with his now trademarked dramatic flourish and was enthusiastically hugged on both sides.



Shelby stepped inside the windowless classroom. Between its monochromatic paintjob and equally blanched residents, color was only to be found in two framed posters, hung with central precision on either side of the room. One depicted a golden sunset reflected by unnamed, calm waters. A quote from Isaiah was printed in the cloudless azure sky in pearly lettering: “*the world will be filled with knowledge*”

Gretchen Blickensderfer

*of the LORD like water covering the sea.*” The other was more for the Sunday School children. In front of an additional sunset, this one in hues of yellow, a crucified Jesus with a square, hair lined jaw and an equally impressive, rippling build illustrated the bold white statement: *“HIS unblemished life made him the only one who could pay for the sins of the world!”* Neither picture was noted by the immaculately presented women who were awkwardly squashed behind school desks meant for people half their age. They were involved entirely with their cell-phones and iPads, sending text messages to their husbands and children, looking up recipes or daring to read another chapter about masochistic love.

Shelby made very little effort to clean herself up before going inside the Fellowship Center, and her bloodshot eyes smeared with mascara, ashen face and bandaged hand were effective enough demonstrations. At her appearance, heralded by her deliberately dropping her book-bag on the floor, Samantha, Rebekah, Barbara, Angela, Dawn, and Jamie, immediately heaved themselves up and surrounded Shelby en masse offering a shoulder, a drink, and a fresh bandage from the first aid room.

“I’m OK. I’ll be alright,” Shelby answered them all valiantly.

“What happened?” Dawn asked, overwhelmed with concern.

### The Last Circle

“I’m fine, really. Just some trouble with Rosh, but nothing we can’t work out with the Lord’s help.”

“I’m so sorry.” Rebekah placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Especially seeing as how he’s just been Saved. I really believed you guys would be getting married soon, getting a place together, and starting a family.”

Shelby winced as Dawn took her hand cautiously in her own, examining it as if she knew precisely how the injury occurred. “Is your hand OK?”

“I had an accident while I was visiting him at his apartment last night,” Shelby replied flatly. “The doctor took care of it and sent me home.”

“Yes, you’ve told us how messy he keeps it.” Angela nodded with matronly concern. “So I’m hardly surprised.”

“You should’ve called,” smiled Rebekah. “I’d’ve gladly driven you to the hospital and back to..” She paused and gave a conspiratorial glance to the others. “Well, wherever it is you actually live.”

Silence fell over the group. Shelby glared at Rebekah. “Rosh drove me to the ER and then back to my house,” she asserted quietly.

“Least he could do,” Dawn affirmed.

Shelby cleared her throat and assumed an immediate air of author-

Gretchen Blickensderfer

ity. “Anyway, I apologize for being late. Since we’re running a little behind, perhaps we should take our seats and begin?”

“You’re sure you don’t need...” Samantha offered.

“I need for us to get started,” Shelby insisted, clasping her bloodied hands behind the stake. “Thank you, though.”

The group returned to their seats. Shelby pulled out a small notebook from her purse. She consulted it for a moment, carefully removed a hastily printed “*Jesus Loves the Obedient Child*” from the whiteboard and, delicately taking a red Dry Erase Marker in her bandaged hand, wrote in large, barely legible letters:

*“Is witchcraft really harmless?”*

She turned and faced the assembled ladies. In a unified response to the official beginning of Bible Study, each of them bowed their heads.

“Let us pray,” Shelby commanded. As she focused on the familiar words of the blessing, the devastating storm in her mind calmed into the still black and menacing clouds.



Jack’s arrival heralded the appearance of the rest of the Coven. Irvin Lawsen and his boyfriend Rich Stover easily managed to break every gay stereotype, floated around from both outside and inside the community, by remaining in a completely monogamous relationship



### The Last Circle

for close to six years. He and Irvin met at a small Pagan fair in Boston where Irvin hosted a booth selling the amulets and talismans he crafted in order to counter the tedium of a shiftless career putting out IT fires at a Satellite TV company. Rich arrived there shortly after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, fleeing his home in a tiny North Carolina community after he worked up the courage to come out. For the next few months, he drifted across the Eastern states in search of a new family. Despite having to spend a few winter nights huddled next to his backpack under city bridges or sharing a bed of straw with the mice who scrounged around countryside barns, the pudgy smile his mother once assured him could sell a tin of sardines to Jonah never left his face. He may have been hungry, he remembered, but at least he was himself.

Entrance to the fair was free and, while gratefully drinking down a couple of cups of hot cider that were being given away, he wandered over to Irvin's booth. Even though Irvin was 15 years his senior, Rich dallied there, shyly returning again and again to examine the same amulet carved from dark green basalt and to engage Irvin in short conversations, fascinated by an uncommon insight into his predicament and the piercing grey eyes that expressed it. After the fair closed down, Irvin invited Rich for a drink, quite taken with his pale, brawny young body spotlighted by dazzling blonde curls. A year later, Rich

Gretchen Blickensderfer

followed Irvin and his company to Indianapolis where the two found a modest south side home and created *The Threefold Return*. Despite the obvious difficulties of living as a couple in a town that outwardly spurned them, their days together were ones Laura labeled as “idyllic to the point of nausea.”

As he entered, Irvin thoughtfully surveyed the stacks of boxes in Laura’s living room. He ran a hand over his closely cropped thinning hair and gazed with preternatural intuition, straight through the ever vigilant sentinels of Laura’s mind.

“Are you sure we should stay?” He asked her bluntly. “Or do you want more time to decide whether or not to unpack them?” Laura flushed, kissed him on the cheek and took the bottle of mead he offered.

“Ease up, Irv,” Rich scolded.

“Yeah, haven’t you figured it out? His Marioship is gone for good,” Jack grinned, stretching out on the couch and clasping his hands under his long, fawn hair. “So put a cock in it, Irvin.”

Rich fell back against the door and covered his face. His boyfriend scowled at him, delicately picked a tiny piece of ash from Laura’s arm and offered it to Jack. “I think you dropped your IQ.”

“Oh goodie!” Jack sang. “It’s banter-time again with the all knowing High-Geek, himself.”

### The Last Circle

Irvin took Rich forcefully by the hand, and lead him to the couch, kicking Jack's feet aside before nudging his short, stocky frame beside him.

"How's the man and life hunt coming, Jack?" Irvin beamed.

"About the same as your-alls trip to Des Moines?" Jack offered.

Laura sighed and took the mead into the kitchen.

"Jack!" Rich warned. "It's none of your beeswax."

Irvin patted Rich on the knee. "No, let him have another go. You know, you work too hard for your own good, Jack. Every few days, you're humping the next Mr. Right only to watch him repost his ad on *Manplay* the next evening." He gleefully took in Jack's reddening cheeks. "Still, it has to beat a Vicodin coma."

Jack moaned in irritation. "Oh, here we go."

"I wasn't gonna add anything." Irvin waved, innocently. "Other than we all admire you for spending six months discovering that a booty call is much more fun than forging your own prescriptions. I'm actually proud."

"Think this bothers me?" Jack snorted. "Those days are over and I've made my peace with everyone."

"But not your own need for constant gratification," Irvin nonchalantly reminded him.

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

“So before I get the ‘settle down’ lecture,” Jack grunted, “why don’t you just point me out someone worth your breath?”

Irvin placed his arm around Rich’s shoulder. “Two Rum and Cokes was all it took for me to find my kindred spirit.”

The sapphires in Rich’s eyes sparkled. “Now where have I heard that before?”

“Then why’s it taking you four years to make it down the aisle?” Jack sneered.

“Because we don’t need any validation,” Irvin contended quietly, “especially from a piece of paper that’s nothing more than a tax dodge.”

“Speak for yourself,” Rich sighed.

“Can we not get into this here, babe?” Irvin pleaded, taking his hand and squeezing it with abashed restraint.

Jack stretched and picked up a plastic bowl of pistachios from Laura’s coffee table.

“You know if, Gods forbid, you were to get sick,” Rich pressed, “do you think there’s a hospital in this miserable little town that’d let me sit at your bedside and help you make decisions without that piece of paper?”

“Do you think there’s a hospital in this miserable little town that’d care even if you had that piece of paper?” Irvin countered.

### The Last Circle

“Now there’s an original and legally sound argument.” Rich glowered at him. “So much more compelling than the soapbox you used to get on about the *Defense of Marriage Act*. Thanks for that, hon.”

He placed Irvin’s hand in his lap, gave it a patronizing pat, and stalked off to find Helen for her enthusiastically favored ‘Rich-bear’ hug. Irvin shook his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Jack polished off a pistachio and leaned towards him.

“Oracle, perceive thy own,” he advised.

The front door unlatched and Cally Pardeck elbowed her way in. She carried three bags of chips in her mouth and her heavy arms were filled with an array of multi-colored dishes and two cases of soda. Despite a pair of gorgeous eyes and a head crowned with ambrosial hair, for 22 years and 280 impossible to remove pounds, Cally was taught that she had little to offer except as the focal point for callous hilarity from a parade of savage schoolmates who were hopelessly indoctrinated in the idea that beauty was relative only to the media’s beloved walking pretzels. Her bitter experiences since Junior High made her reticent to discuss her private life with anyone. Only her small menagerie of adopted pets was acquainted with her pain. She did not wish for advice or judgment on how to assuage it. They offered neither.

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

“Lil’ help!” She cried through clenched teeth nearly dropping one of the dishes and trying to steady it with her arm.

Laura’s head poked out of the kitchen. “You two, off your expansive behinds!” She commanded. Jack and Irvin snapped to attention and each relieved Cally of her carefully prepared contributions. She blushed in gratitude, licked her dry lips, and stared around the room.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding this time!” She whispered to Jack. “She’s really done it?”

“Uh huh,” Jack nodded with a boastful grin.

Cally took Irvin’s arm as he led her through the cluttered maze and towards the kitchen. “How’s she doing?” She asked with deep concern.

Irvin made a ‘so-so’ gesture with his hand.

“You’d better be prepared to give up another one of your cats,” Jack warned her.

Cally and Wicca found each other one Sunday afternoon during her senior year of college. Her tears that day had been drained down to their riverbed. When her father called to see how she was, Cally told him nothing he didn’t already know. His response, although tender, offered little except for her to “Soldier on, Duchess.” It was a phrase she first heard from him at the age of five when her schoolmates pushed her off

### The Last Circle

her bike and her gashed knees revealed what a stony place the world was. So, in order to shroud herself in some measure of peace, Cally again wandered aimlessly around the Indianapolis Central Library. It was there, in one of the loneliest sections, that she happened across *The Complete Book of Witchcraft*.

Sheer curiosity, as to what such a book was doing in a library in Indianapolis, took Cally into its pages. With rapt fascination, she discovered that a Wiccan woman was not only held in the highest esteem but revered, no matter how heavy she was, simply for her virtue of being a conceiver of life. Cally sat alone in a quiet corner completely engrossed in the freedom she discovered, oblivious to the setting sun and the obtrusive announcements that the library was closing. Her hands never left the book and the liberty it contained, even as it was stamped and she was ushered out by librarians impatient to lock the doors for the evening. After a month spent scouring the internet looking for others who had made the same discovery, she connected with Laura through *Threefold Return* and thirstily absorbed each of the enduring friendships that the Coven had to offer. She became Laura's personal Jiminy Cricket even on those days when the High Priestess felt that the fools she had to bear in Indianapolis demanded a more hateful response. Liberated from the constricting, humiliating code,

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

years of Sunday school and her Lutheran mother insisted she follow chapter and verse, Cally instead often focused on the eight words from the Rede that guided Wiccans from the earliest beginning of the religion.

*“An it harm none, do what ye will.”*



Shelby consulted the talking points hastily scratched in red pen on her notepad and took a moment to stare into the faces of each occupant of the classroom.

“I think you’ll all agree that the popularity of fantasy books like *Harry Potter* was both astonishing and alarming.” There were murmurs of acknowledgement from her audience. “The secular and Liberal media will tell you that they...,” Shelby referred to her notes and quoted disdainfully, ‘*encouraged more children to read.*’ I ask you, is that really such a good thing when they’re drawn from the false religions of the druids, witchcraft, and Satanism?”

Satan never failed to elicit a terrified response and Shelby enjoyed a quiet moment to allow the ramifications to sink in, dubiously eyeing the group in order to determine which of the collected mothers had, in fact, allowed their children to be entertained by J.K. Rowling. As a few of them shifted nervously in their seats, she drummed her fingers



### The Last Circle

on her notepad and continued.

“Now, some so-called ‘Christian leaders’ have pointed out that these books are ‘just harmless fiction’ and so nothing we should worry about. So now we’re choosing the sorts of witchcraft that are evil in the Lord’s sight and the ones that are ‘harmless’? Is this the sort of degradation we’ve fallen into, even in our own city? God does not choose between one and the other! I mean, look no further than Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 10 through 14.

*‘There shall not be found among you anyone who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the Lord, and because of these abominations, the Lord your God drives them out from before you.’”*

Shelby moved to the center of the room, pressing her palms on the corners of the front desk and leaning towards the group. After a dramatic breath, she began to speak quietly, at an almost conspiratorial whisper, causing the gathered women to inch forward in order to hear her.

“We must not tolerate a witch, either in our community or from the demented mind of this Rowling woman: a suicidal, single mother who

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

discarded her husband and who used our children to spread the devil's agenda of lies and manipulations. If you think you can just laugh it off, dismiss this evil propaganda as 'harmless fantasy', then you're allowing Pagans and their devil-worshipping, homosexual ilk the chance to take free reign over this country."

The women nodded to each other. "The Democrats," they bleated in somber agreement. Shelby strode between them turning continually to stare through each of the eyes that surrounded her.

"Yes, the Democrats! And people like them. They call us 'hatemongers', taunt our attempts to promote morality with words like 'fundamentalist' while at the same time they spurn and slander God. Their judges won't even allow us to acknowledge Him in public but instead permit children to be taught they are descended from chimpanzees and to accept the constant degradation of marriage. By looking the other way you're betraying our Lord all over again and every single person who has died in His blessed name. You're not true Christians!"

There was a unified gasp of contempt. Angela tried to text the offensive remark to her husband. Shelby seized the phone out of her hand and glowered at her.

"Do you believe that you can stand before God on Judgment Day and justify your actions? Where are our Judeo-Christian standards and

### The Last Circle

where is the strength that Jesus had while carrying the cross? He died on that cross for you!”

Her eyes welled up in a passionate lament. “They hung Him naked before a savage world. His flesh was ripped into shreds by the whip, His bones were shattered by spikes and pain shot through His body as if his nerves were being crushed by a vice, and you repay Him by supporting the occult?”

Angela’s head dropped in remorse and Shelby handed back her phone, patting her on the shoulder.

“*Harry Potter* isn’t some fairy tale and the ‘entertainment factor’ won’t buy you an excuse. Pray for clarity from the Holy Spirit before you become completely lost. There’s an agenda by the secular to steer you away from our Savior. This isn’t my opinion; it’s the word of God.”

Her voice gradually increased in volume until she reached a high pitched and furious climax.

“I warn you, those who turn their backs on Him will not inherit His kingdom. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, murderers, the sexually immoral, witches, sorcerers, idolaters, liars, and J.K. Rowling, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur: a second death and no more than anyone who abandons

Gretchen Blickensderfer

God deserves!”

The last sentence echoed between the dreary walls. The women sat upright in their desks staring at each other and then Shelby in stunned silence. She caught her breath and smiled.

“Any questions?” She asked demurely.



Laura’s modest, exquisitely tended lawn was adorned on three sides of its rectangle with jewelry displayed in beds of dazzling golden daffodils, dandy sapphire irises, proud drifts of ruby tulips and imperial topaz forged in yellow and pink blends of allium. Their hypnotic aroma weaved into the thyme, pineapple sage, ginger and mint of an herb garden, its perfumes enhanced and carried by the calm, evening air. In the very back of the lawn, under the forlorn branches of a willow, was a tiny graveyard. Its daintily crafted markers exalted the names of the various hamsters, guinea-pigs and gold fish Laura doted upon over the years. The garden was the perfect setting for many a nightly ritual and the Coven was meticulous in its transformation from a spectacular arboretum into a place of worship.

It took the combined efforts of each of them but, within an hour of their arrival, Laura’s desolated home was cleaned, scrubbed and dusted. While she changed into a yellow, cotton summer dress and

### The Last Circle

tried to brush her tangled hair into some semblance of order, the boxes containing Barry's belongings were laid out in an orderly pile on Laura's front porch for him to pick up at his leisure without the two of them having to cast eyes on each other again.

Four tall candles were equidistantly placed at the four cardinal directions of the lawn. Laura's Altar was moved from the living room and placed north of the center. Upon her grandmother's cloth, three elegant candles; one white, one black, and one green stood in tall, intricately spiraled holders behind the silver chalice. Rosemary, Pine, Juniper, and Jasmine scented incense sticks were placed in the cherry blossom holders and waited only for fire. Amethyst, and Amber stones were set in an orderly pattern between them, while Rose Quartz, the bejeweled wand and the stone Pentacle took pride of place at the middlemost point. Although deeply personal, Laura's Altar was always adapting and characteristically changed to suit a particular need. Tonight's was designed specifically to heal and improve Laura's state of mind while vanquishing fear and loneliness and energizing her about the future.

The early September sun was completing its work. In the roles of High Priestess and High Priest, Laura and Irvin knelt in front of the Altar facing north. The rest of the Coven watched, their hands folded around each others. Laura gently clasped her Athame; a majes-

Gretchen Blickensderfer

tic, double-edged silver dagger that gleamed in the waning sunlight. The silver runes on the jet-black hilt were chosen by Laura with great care. They were delicately inscribed in the Elder Futhark alphabet, dating back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD, and spelt out the one word that brought Laura the most empowerment, even during her times of greatest desperation.

The Athame's tip was not dulled. For unspoken reasons, Laura kept it razor sharp.

She deftly placed it on her outstretched palms and walked slowly to the Eastern-most candle on the lawn. There, she took the Athame in her left hand, grasped it tightly and closing her eyes, summoned the powers of her own personal Goddess. The elements released their energy into the dusk; it lingered above Laura momentarily before flooding into her. She gasped and shuddered as she felt it flow through her body down her arm and into the very tip of the knife. Taking a deep breath, Laura let it guide her as she drew a perfect clockwise circle in the grass between each of the candles, leaving only a gap in the Northeast section.

As the Circle was created she recited passionately:

*"I conjure thee,  
O Circle of Power,*

### The Last Circle

*that thou beest a meeting place of love and joy and truth;  
So I bless thee and consecrate thee.”*

Once completed, Laura stood at one side of the gap in the Circle, laid the Athame at her feet and, with a nod, beckoned Irvin to join her. She took his waist with both hands, and rising on her toes, gently kissed him on the cheek.

“Blessed be,” she whispered into his ear before turning him clockwise three times. Irvin ended up facing the Coven, and Laura took a step back. Like performers waiting for their cue, Megan, Jack, Cally, Rich and Helen formed a line at the entrance. Irvin admitted each of them in precisely the same way. Once everyone was inside, Laura picked up her knife and completed the Circle before turning to the East. The rest of the Coven followed suit. Laura formed a Pentagram in the air with her blade as she spoke.

*“Ye Lords of the East, of Air;  
I do summon and call you up to witness our rites and to  
guard the Circle. Hail and Welcome.”*

Laura turned to face the South.

*“Ye Lords of the South, of Fire;  
I do summon and call you up to witness our rites and to  
guard the Circle. Hail and Welcome.”*

Gretchen Blickensderfer

She faced West, and completed her Pentagram:

*“Ye Lords of the West, of Water;  
I do summon, stir, and call you up, to witness our rites  
and to guard the Circle. Hail and Welcome.”*

The rest of the Coven joined her in turning North and, their voices in perfect harmony, spoke the final invocation.

*“Ye Lords of the North, of Earth;  
We do summon, stir and call you up,  
to witness our rites and to guard the Circle. Hail and  
Welcome.”*

The Circle was sealed and no power on earth could possibly break it.



Shelby inhaled the disinfectant still clinging to the molded plastic desks and paced the classroom, her fists thumping on the sides of her thighs.

“There is everything wrong with *The Wizard of Oz!*” She exclaimed.

“But my daughter’s playing a Munchkin at the Civic Theatre this Christmas,” Rebekah protested. “She’ll be heartbroken if I tell her she can’t because she’s supporting witchcraft.”

“Do you want her to grow up to be a hypocrite and a fraud?”



### The Last Circle

Shelby rounded on her fiercely. “Because that’s what you’re teaching her to be.”

“Don’t you judge my parenting ability!” Rebekah objected.

“I will if it’s at fault,” Shelby retorted.

Rebekah gasped incredulously. “Like you’d know!”

Shelby slammed her Bible down on an empty desk.

“But we can’t avoid it, Shelby,” Angela interjected calmly. “I mean witches show up in *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*...”

“*Mary Poppins*,” added Barbara.

“*The Little Mermaid*,” Dawn nodded.

“*Pinocchio!*” Jamie offered brightly.

“That was a fairy,” argued Rebekah.

Jamie shook her head. “I thought it was the Blue Witch?”

“No, it was a blue fairy,” Rebekah asserted.

Shelby felt herself begin to tremble and she stared at one of the posters.

“I think you’re wrong,” insisted Jamie. “She had a magic wand,”

“But no broomstick,” Dawn contended

“It doesn’t make any difference!” Shelby lamented, pressing her head against the poster.

“Weren’t there witches in *Beauty and the Beast*?” Samantha asked.

Gretchen Blickensderfer

“No, I don’t remember seeing any,” Dawn muttered thoughtfully.

“Well, who made the candlestick sing and dance then?”

“That was an Enchantress.”

“Well, how’s that different from a witch?”

“She didn’t have a broomstick.”

Shelby turned and threw her hands up in the air.

“Wait a minute,” Rebekah smiled. “A couple of months ago didn’t Pastor Warren say that *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* would not only encourage our children to read, but would stimulate questions about God?”

“Now that’s a far cry from *Harry Potter*,” Shelby retorted defensively.

“How so? There’s a witch in that book.”

There were murmurs of agreement from the women.

“Because,” Shelby sighed, “as Pastor Warren explained, C.S. Lewis was a God-fearing man and wrote the books as Christian analogies.”

“So, it was a Christian witch?”

“No!” Shelby answered firmly. “She represented the power, greed, corruptibility and merciless evil of man and the good Aslan, who was supposed to be Christ, is resurrected and slays her.”

“But she was still called the *White Witch*.” Rebekah argued. “She

### The Last Circle

still practiced black magic and made magical truffles. We're still exposing our children to witchcraft."

"Turkish Delight," Jamie corrected with conviction.

"Are you sure?" Rebekah frowned. "I could have sworn they were truffles in my version."

"They aren't truffles in any version," Jamie insisted. "They were definitely Turkish Delights,"

"Never mind witchcraft, it all sounds a little Islamic to me," Dawn mused.

"How do you make those anyway?" Samantha asked curiously.

"Look can we focus on the problem at hand please?" Shelby was gradually losing the tentative grip on her patience. "Clearly, witchcraft is everywhere and we should not expose our children to it at all, in whatever form it comes in. We must remove these books and movies from our lives and burn them from our hearts." She paused. "Other than anything written by C.S. Lewis,"

"So no *Sleeping Beauty*?" Dawn asked.

"No," Shelby confirmed.

"No *Little Mermaid*?"

"No."

"No *Beauty and the Beast*?"

Gretchen Blickensderfer

“NO!”

“And no *Pinocchio*?”

“Definitely not!”

There was a knock at the door.

“Yes!” Shelby snapped.

Pastor Warren stuck his cheery face into the room.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he smiled. “Shelby, the K through three children’s choir wants to sing a special song during the Nativity play. Since you told him you used to study dance, Vincent wondered if you might help choreograph it.”

“I’d be more than happy to, Pastor!” Shelby beamed vaingloriously. “What’s the song?”

“Oh, it’s *When You Wish Upon a Star*.”

Rebekah gave Shelby a victorious grin. She dropped into a chair, her head throbbing maniacally.



The green, white, and black candles were removed from the Altar and placed before Laura.

With the rest of her friends gathered around her, holding hands, she kneeled before them, cleared her mind and lit the white candle. As she did, Laura spoke with solemn sincerity:

### The Last Circle

“Mother Earth, Fire, Wind, Water, and Spirit. I ask thee to free and heal my body from all negative forces. Blessed be!”

Slowly, inexorably, Laura felt her sadness begin to melt away.

She lit the black candle and repeated the chant. Her friends moved closer. Laura’s fear began to vanish.

As she put a flame to the green candle, each member of the Coven placed a hand upon Laura’s body.

She spoke the incantation again, a contented smile gradually appearing on her thin lips.

The Coven encircled her in their arms, their heads bowed. She absorbed their energy like a new born calf gorging on milk.

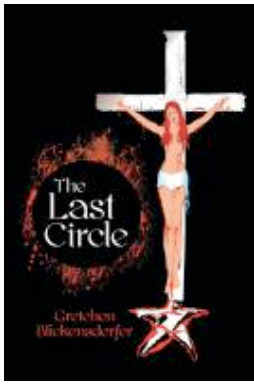
On the opposite side of the house, having received no answer at the front door, Barry angrily kicked a white, porcelain kitten statue standing innocently in a corner of the porch. Continuing to wish upon Laura all manner of misfortunes, he heaved the boxes to his car.

The Magick cast that night worked perfectly. In Laura’s mind, Barry’s image sped away. Surrounded by the friends whom she truly loved and who returned that love unconditionally, her desperate loneliness drove after him. She gazed up at the perfect night sky, illuminated with ornaments containing infinite possibilities. They recalled even the smallest moments long past and were steadfast in their promise to

**Gretchen Blickensderfer**

witness those yet to come.

Laura's smile haltingly ebbed from her face as every nerve in her body uniformly began to stretch in a siren of alarm. Adrenalin drenched her blood, easily overpowering the hope that took a fragile hold in her mind. The moisture on her skin numbed into icy droplets and the mahogany dust of Laura's eyes churned impenetrable clouds that mushroomed over the night sky. With no regard to elapsing time, they obliterated each of its clinquant stars. The immovable Altar, the clasped hands of her friends who possessed alien voices screaming to be heard under the howling wind of her mind; it was all so familiar, and for a fleeting second, as real as the arms that enveloped her, unable to provide a moment's relief, nor defend her from absolute dread.



*"If you will not be saved, there will be consequences." Based upon platforms and quotes from Conservative political and church leaders, *The Last Circle* chronicles the rise to power of a United States Evangelical theocracy and the small group of Pagan and LGBT friends who must escape the country to survive. A terrifying chase through the southern states tests the limits of their friendship and someone from among them is secretly tipping off their pursuers.*

## **The Last Circle**

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7202.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**