

Jenna's

Flaw

Lee Tasey



Satanism comes to a college town in the Middle West. Carl Sorensen arrives at graduate school armed with Nietzsche, ready to take on the backward beliefs of Nebraska's Black Forest University. Then he meets Jenna—beautiful, fascinating, and seductively unpredictable. She has a dark secret and a dangerous influence on everyone around her. In order to save Jenna and himself, Carl must learn to wield a new weapon. Faith.

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1

On the day Coach Dixon found his star running back dead on the sandbars of the Platte River, an Amtrak delivered me to the Lincoln depot before vanishing into the jungles of corn leaves. I walked into the depot and swatted a fat fly from my face. In the corner, two elderly farmers with fresh blue overalls and red faces stood by a television.

"It's a tragedy."

"Kenny was a miracle."

"What happened?"

"Only God knows."

I lowered my body onto a bench and leaned forward with my elbows on my blue-jeaned knees, my satchel and blue suitcase at my sides. I'd heard about the discovery of the body on the long trip down. In fact, I'd heard about little else. Now I watched the breaking news story on the TV screen: Les Dixon, the football coach for Nebraska State University, stood at a podium in a conference room, shielding his eyes from the flashes of cameras. On the other side of a split screen, four paramedics muscled a stretcher up the bank of the Platte River, while an Adidas shoe dangled by a shoelace from a low branch of a cottonwood tree.

I brushed another fly from my face and ran my forearm across my forehead. Behind me, a fly buzzed against the window. My blue T-shirt darkened in the middle, sticking to my chest and the middle of my back. I pulled Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* out of my satchel and began to fan my face.

Sad piano music began to play on the TV. On the screen, a Nebraska State Bison player ran down the football field,

breaking tackle after tackle. He entered the end zone with a tattooed arm raised sky high, the football falling from his loose, taped-up fingers. At the bottom of the screen, his obituary scrolled lazily along. He was twenty-one years old. His name was Kenny Winslow.

The farmers walked toward the screen door.

“Don’t know how it could’ve happened.”

“With the corn crop dried up and now with Kenny gone, I wonder what’ll happen next?”

“The football season is darn well over and it hasn’t even begun.”

“Kenny was a shooting star. Bright one minute and gone the next.”

Ticket stubs and wisps of corn husks blew inside when they filed through the door, the depot now more full of flies. I sat for a minute, ignoring the news. It was a thirty-eight hour train ride out from Sacramento with the two transfers. I had known when I signed up for graduate work in philosophy at Black Forest University that football was God around here. I glanced at Nietzsche. And now it seemed that God was dead.

I needed to get myself settled. I walked to the ticket booth. A teenager was inside with a cell phone to his ear.

“Are there any cabs around here?” I said.

The boy looked up, his face red and flushed. “Say what?”

“Cabs.” I tapped the ticket window with a knuckle. “Do you guys have cabs in this state?”

He lowered the phone. “Yes, sir. Should be waiting at the curb. If not, I can call one for you.”

I snatched up my luggage. On the TV, the highlights of Kenny Winslow’s career flashed on the screen—Kenny running down the field, his hair, long and gold like prairie

Jenna's Flaw

grass streaming down his back, a razor blade tattoo on his left forearm, and Kenny charging into the end zone as the Husker players dropped like flies.

There wasn't a cab at the curb or for miles around, I guessed. I stood alone in the parking lot, Ray-Bans on, and studied my new home. Dust devils danced across the lot in a breeze that never seemed to stop. To the east, a cemetery of freight trains glowed in the afternoon sun, and high above the rows of quiet trains the Nebraska statehouse soared into the sky, big and tall and phallus-like.

I got out my Salems. I tried to light one but the flame blew out. I tried again. Then, hunkering down, again. Once lit, I took a hard pull and surveyed my new home.

So this was Nebraska.

To my left was a gas station with its windows boarded up and *We Remember #8* spray-painted in maroon on the garage—a sign that grief-based vandalism moved quickly. To my right, a junkyard with three pyramids of scrap metal. Three red cranes like gigantic beasts lowered their huge jaws and gobbled up car doors, small refrigerators, and silver pipes. I watched the beasts as they tossed the junk, on fire in the sun, from one pyramid to the other. A candy-apple-red locomotive, its hopper cars loaded up with coal, slunk past the pyramids and chugged off into the hillsides of sweet corn.

I sighed. I was beginning to understand why I'd been admitted to Black Forest University. Who wanted to live in Nebraska? I could probably still find cowboys and Indians here if I looked hard enough.

I pulled at my T-shirt, wet and sticky on my chest, and stared off into the great northern sky, over the grids of

soybean and alfalfa fields and four silo farms. The Dakotas were up there somewhere. Canada, too.

I tapped my cigarette. "The Middle West. The Great American Desert as the pioneers had called it. A whole lot of nothing. Just football, beer, and religion. And me."

I puffed away on my Salem. The trains in the Burlington company locomotive yard were quiet and still, while the huge summer clouds like slumbering gods cast their shadows darkly against the rows of boxcars.

At least I'd gotten into a doctoral program. My plan was to finish in four years and then land a full-time teaching job in the Pacific Northwest or England. I saw my future with a godlike clarity: Dr. Carl Sorensen, professor of atheistic thought. I'd have tenure, summer vacations, and a heavy pension ready to kick in. For all that, I could deal with Nebraska for four years.

Of course, that was just a fantasy. Given the job market for PhDs in philosophy, I'd more likely wind up with an adjunct professor's job, making ends meet by painting houses over the summer. Oh well, at least I'd be doing what I loved.

Then I saw it. A small bus, sulfur white and blinding to the eyes, appeared out of nowhere. A young girl in a white tank top and short shorts was driving. She rolled down the passenger window. "You need a lift?"

"Are you a shuttle service?"

"We are."

"Could you take me downtown?"

"We can do lots of things."

The girl stretched out her arm to unlock the door, and I spotted a pink, rubbery scar on the inside of her wrist. The girl's gigantic black eyes were locked on mine. They were

smiling, her eyes. Almost made me feel good about Nebraska. I tossed my suitcase in the back, then climbed in the front next to her.

As we left the depot, a local freight chugged on ahead of us, belching out smoke. A railroader stood at the guardrail, arms crossed, eyes barely visible under the bill of an orange hard hat. He waved. The girl waved back.

We drove through a suburban neighborhood that could have come from Hollywood in the 50s. Pink and baby-blue houses were set back on the dry lawns, strewn with old footballs and chrome dirt bikes. American, Husker, and Bison flags unraveled in the breeze, while the cottonwoods stood on either side of the street, trunks like the columns of cathedrals.

“Wow,” I said. “This is small town life.”

“You haven’t seen this before?”

“Not in California.”

“Then allow us to welcome you to Nebraska. It’s the good life. Or so I am informed.”

I looked at the girl. She looked twelve years old but she talked like she could have been forty. She had long, frizzy honey-blonde hair, like a girl out of an 80s music video. A pink bra and matching underwear peeked through the white, skimpy outfit.

Not bad. Maybe Nebraska was a blessing in disguise. It still didn’t seem likely, but you never know.

We coasted down the street. Shirtless kids in cutoff blue jeans chased us on bikes.

“This is something out of a John Cougar Mellencamp video,” I said.

The girl tapped her maroon thumbnails on the steering wheel and began quietly singing "Small Town," Cougar's famous song. She had a pretty voice, almost angelic.

She pointed at the satchel on my lap. "School?" But before I could answer, she held up her hand. "Wait, don't tell me." She closed her eyes and opened them. "Black Forest University."

I stared at her. "I'm going there in the fall."

"Hmm," she said dreamily. "The fall." She closed her eyes again and when she opened them her eyes were smiling more. "A doctoral program?"

"What are you, a psychic? If so, your skills might come in handy."

I told her about my doctoral degree—about the trainload of term papers and exams on the way, plus the lousy job market for philosophy. I explained that colleges and universities were relying on adjunct professors, part-timers, to teach most of the courses and that full-time positions were becoming few and far between, especially in the humanities. And this was happening everywhere, too. I didn't mention the dream of tenure. I was looking for sympathy.

Stabbing another Salem between my lips, I said, "All right, I'm off my soapbox now. But maybe you can give me the lowdown on Nebraska, on Black Forest University, on the local libraries . . . whatever I might need to know."

She seemed to consider my offer. Then she looked at me with big black eyes, and an invisible fire seemed to burn in them. "We could do that."

I was beginning to wonder about the first person plural. "Hey, can you turn the air off?"

"It's not on."

"It's freezing in here."

"Then roll the window down."

I torched my Salem, then hit the window's lever. My hair began to blow wildly.

"I was just joking when I called you a psychic," I said. "I don't believe in that junk. I studied it in divinity school for, like, a week. 'Paranormal Activity and the Spirit World' was the course's title. I dropped the class because the professor and the rest of the class were just way too credulous. Can you guess what I took, instead?"

The girl's eyes flashed over to mine. She seemed to know the answer.

"Medieval theology," I said. "It seemed more likely that I could figure out how many angels could dance on the head of a pin."

At a stoplight, the girl and I looked at each other. She smiled. I did, too. On the floor, I glimpsed a copy of *The Amityville Horror* and an issue of *Good Housekeeping*. Interesting combination. Unexpected.

"Do you like to read?" I said.

"I do."

"A lot?"

"Oh, yes. Whatever we can get our hands on."

That might explain the range of reading on the floor. I studied the girl's nice-looking legs, giving her the space to elaborate, but she seemed to be thinking of something else.

"Anyway," I said, tapping my cigarette. "All those right answers you came up with about me, that was just good observation and smarts. I mean, why else would a twenty-six-year-old guy move to Nebraska, if not for graduate school? So there you go, Ms. Psychic. Your two guesses accounted for."

The girl wheeled the bus onto Cornhusker Highway. We passed by Uncle Ron's, apparently a country music bar, and then a Phillips 66 where a boy attendant in blue overalls was pumping gas into a burnt-orange Chevy truck.

"Are you a student?" I said.

"Not anymore."

"Oh, that's too bad. I guess. What'd you study?"

The girl took a sip from a paper cup I hadn't noticed in the center console.

"Art." She put it back in the console and wiped her fingers on the white shorts, leaving dark wet marks.

"Ah, the humanities. Good for you. You may be driving a bus for the rest of your life, but hey, at least you'll have something meaningful to do when your shift is over, right?"

"Is that how it works?"

"You can't do much with a humanities degree."

"But your philosophy degree is going to make you the big bucks?"

"Good point."

She smiled. Her eyes wandered over to mine and then she averted them and blushed.

"So, can you tell me what I studied as an undergraduate?" I said. "There's no way you know this one."

The girl laughed and her overlarge eyes lit up like black flames. The bus was still freezing. I glanced at the dashboard. The air conditioning knob was really off. I crossed my arms.

"Okay, I'll tell you. Theology. You know, the study of God and salvation? I thought I might actually learn something

useful, something that might help make sense of the world. Well, someday I'm going to write a poem about the whole experience. It'll be called 'DONE.'"

The girl grabbed a lock of frizzy hair. She ran her fingers down it as she looked into the rearview mirror.

"Do you know what I mean?" I said. "I mean, have you ever had high hopes for something, then reach the point where you get burned out and just say to hell with it."

The girl pulled at the lock of hair, now like flattened wheat. She was still looking in the rearview mirror with a peculiar smirk on her face. Slowly, I looked over my shoulder. The bus was empty.

I said, "What are you staring at?"

"Oh, nothing."

I studied her. What a weirdo. Smoking-hot body, though. I settled deeper into the seat, still unable to get warm. "But do you know what I mean about saying to hell with something?"

"Oh, we know exactly what you mean."

"It happened to me and a lot of my friends in divinity school. Some guys didn't even finish the program. One guy now runs a nightclub in Chicago, while another guy's an investment banker in Manhattan with a hot, younger wife." I looked out the window at a shimmering blue lake where a German shepherd trotted on the shoreline. "I don't know, maybe it was just a crappy lot of teachers. Did you ever take a theology class in college?"

The girl reached for the radio's dial, snapping it on.

"It's not a big deal if you didn't," I said over the news—more on Kenny Winslow's death. "Theology certainly isn't for everybody. It certainly wasn't for me."

The girl adjusted the mirror, and a silver chain-link bracelet slid down her wrist, past the pink scar. We drove on in silence as Lincoln, the Star City, came into view.

"So where are you from?" she said.

"Most recently from Massachusetts—undergrad at University of Boston. Originally, California. Sacramento."

"California." She said the word with a hint of longing.

"Have you been there?"

"In some sense."

I ashed my cigarette. "What's that supposed to mean? Either you've been there or you haven't. It's what philosophers call the law of excluded middle." I stuck my hand outside and sent the Salem into orbit, then crossed my arms, awaiting her reply.

"I've heard of it," she said. "The middle thing."

"Good." I was getting a little tired of the enigmatic stuff. It was like she was playing a game with me, and I'd had enough of that as an undergrad. "Because even though it's a law of logic, everybody uses it, every day. That cigarette butt that's rolling down the highway? It can't be both a Salem and an American Spirit. Not at the same time. Do you see where I'm going with this? So according to that logic, Ms. Psychic, you've either been to the West Coast or you haven't. So which is it? Yes or no?"

Her eyes were blazing now, though I wasn't sure with what. She bit down on her lips and her cheeks reddened.

"Okay, so you're not going to answer the question," I said. "You're just going to sit there—"

Without signaling, she crossed into the left lane and sped up, blowing past a taxi—they did have them here—and then a local news van.

"Let's just say it's complicated," she said.

When my breathing settled down a little, I inspected the stalks of blonde hair partially hiding her face. Her white nose stuck out prominently with a pretty dent in the bridge.

"Anyway . . ." I brushed the flakes of ash off my satchel. "Crap, I forget what I was going to say. Never mind."

"School?"

"Oh, right. I've got four years in this program, then I'm done. Ideally, I'll land a tenure-track job and life will be awesome."

"Oh, it'll take you longer than that. They don't finish in four years there. They take eight, maybe ten."

I let my head fall back on the headrest as the highway vanished under the bus. *Jesus, what's this girl's deal?* "You know the local scene pretty well, dontcha?" I inspected the girl's face, pale and sickly but also beautiful, and then noticed a batch of business cards next to the hardcover edition of *The Amityville Horror*.

I picked one up. "Are you Jenna McMaster?"

"I am."

"Any relation to John McMaster, the famous theologian? He was a professor of mine in Boston."

Jenna twisted up in her seat as the bottoms of her thighs peeled audibly off the vinyl. She thumbed the radio's dial, blowing through the stations.

"John McMaster is the most famous theologian in America," I said above the snippets of country music and mourning for Kenny Winslow.

Jenna rolled her window down, the hot air roaring into the bus, and a modern rock station blared through the speakers.

"Oh, look," she said. "There's the football stadium."

Off in the east, I saw Memorial Stadium, the landmark I'd read about in a Nebraska travel guide my previous roommate had given me as a joke. The stadium was an enormous art deco lump that could have been a hospital from the outside. In the parking lot, an ESPN van had stopped by the front doors, along with the local news crews.

"I hear the locals call the stadium 'God,'" I said. "Is that true?"

"They call it lots of things."

"Do you know what I heard about their old coach? The travel guide said that if he returns to coach the Huskers, it'll be as big as the second coming of Christ." I looked at Jenna, expecting her to laugh, but her eyes were fixed firmly on the highway. Both hands were on the wheel again. She wasn't smirking anymore. "Haven't you heard these things? You're from Nebraska, right? In some sense?" I looked past Jenna into the bus' side mirror at Memorial Stadium. Maybe I should try for the topic of conversation on everyone's lips. "It's sad what happened to that football player. He played for the Bison, right?"

"He did."

"What was his name again?"

Jenna inhaled through her nose, and I noticed her overlarge eyes now seeming to possess a black, smokeless fire.

"Kenny Winslow," she said.

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"In a sense."

We passed a minor league baseball stadium and then descended into the downtown area, stopping at a traffic light across from the Journal Star.

"So what happened?" I said.

"It wasn't a good situation."

"I might have guessed that from the fact he's dead. But how'd he die? Do the authorities know anything yet?"

Jenna shook her head.

"But you know, right?"

I waited for a follow up but of course there wasn't one.

The bus pulled up to the Pioneer Hotel amidst the large vans from the local and national news stations that were packed into the loading zone. Jenna double-parked, hopped out, dragged my suitcase from the back of the bus, and set it down gently at my feet.

"There." She patted the handle.

"Thanks." Now that she was out of the bus, I noticed the red high heels.

"It's our pleasure."

"Maybe we'll see each other down the road. I'm Carl, by the way. Carl Sorensen."

"Nice to meet you, Carl."

I shook Jenna's hand. It was cold. Then I handed her a ten-dollar bill, which she took with her small, child-like fingers.

"Thank you, Carl. Maybe now I can buy a book on mind reading."

"And after you do, we'll get together and talk about it. You can tell me about Lincoln. I'm certain this town has a lot going for it. Loads."

"We'd love to do that."

My eyes dropped to Jenna's upper chest—a constellation of dark red moles seemed to form a funny-looking face.

She leapt up into the bus and closed the door and stuck her head out of the window. "Oh, Carl?"

"Yeah?"

"There's something else you should know."

I picked up my suitcase. "Yeah?"

Jenna's lips parted slowly as a breeze lifted up her hair.

"You're always going to live here."



Satanism comes to a college town in the Middle West. Carl Sorensen arrives at graduate school armed with Nietzsche, ready to take on the backward beliefs of Nebraska's Black Forest University. Then he meets Jenna—beautiful, fascinating, and seductively unpredictable. She has a dark secret and a dangerous influence on everyone around her. In order to save Jenna and himself, Carl must learn to wield a new weapon. Faith.

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