



**PENI**

**PAL**

**J.T. GEISSINGER**

PEN PAL

J.T. GEISSINGER

# CONTENTS

## Note From The Author

### i. Inferno

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

### ii. Purgatorio

37. Fiona

38. Aidan

39. Kayla

40. Kayla

### iii. Paradiso

41. Kayla

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

About the Author

Also by J.T. Geissinger

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Text copyright © 2022 by J.T. Geissinger, Inc. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

ISBN: 979-8-9853168-3-4

Cover design by Letitia Hasser, RBA Designs

Cover photograph of Soj Mani © Wander Aguiar Photography

Editing by Linda Ingmanson

Published by J.T. Geissinger, Inc.

[www.jtgeissinger.com](http://www.jtgeissinger.com)

Printed in the United States of America

## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

This novel contains content intended for a mature audience only. Due to explicit language, graphic sex, detailed depictions of death and grief, intense power play dynamics, and other possible triggers, *it is not suitable for sensitive readers.*

Be well,

J.T.

*To Jay, who knows how to find me in the dark.*

I

# INFERNO

The path to paradise begins in hell.

~ *The Divine Comedy*



It's raining as my husband's casket is lowered into the hole in the ground. Raining hard, as if the sky itself is about to rip in half like my heart has.

I stand motionless under an umbrella with the other mourners, listening to the priest drone on about resurrection and glory, blessings and suffering, redemption and the holy love of God. So many words, and all so meaningless.

Everything is meaningless. There's a Michael-shaped hole in my chest, and nothing matters anymore.

That must be why I feel so numb. I'm empty. Grief has blown me apart, scattering my bones into a desert wasteland where they'll bake in silence under a merciless sun for a thousand years.

A woman behind me quietly weeps into her handkerchief. Sharon? Karen? A colleague of Michael's who I met at a long-ago faculty party. One of those awful holiday work parties in a school auditorium where they serve cheap wine in plastic cups and people stand around making awkward small talk until they're drunk enough to say what they really think about each other.

Sharon or Karen behind me told Michael he was a prick at that party. I can't remember why, but that's probably why she's crying now.

When someone dies, you start counting all the ways you failed them.

The priest makes the sign of the cross over his chest. He closes his Bible and steps back. I walk slowly forward, bend down to grasp a handful of soil from the pile to one side, then toss it onto the closed casket.

The wet clump of dirt makes an ugly hollow sound when it lands on the gray lid of the coffin, an uncaring splat of finality. Then it slides off, leaving a smear of brown behind like a shit stain.

Abruptly, I'm shaking with anger. I taste ashes and bitterness in my mouth.

*What a stupid ritual this is. Why do we even bother? It's not like the dead can see us mourning them. They're gone.*

A sudden gust of cold wind rattles the leaves in the trees. I turn and walk away through the rain, not looking back when someone softly sobs my name.

I need to be alone with my grief. I'm not one of those people who likes to commiserate over a tragedy. Especially when the tragedy is my own.

When I open the front door of the house, it takes a moment for me to register that I'm home. I have no recollection of the drive from the gravesite to here, though the blank spot in time doesn't surprise me. Since the accident, I've been in a fog. It's as if my brain is blanketed in thick clouds.

I read somewhere that grief is more than an emotion. It's a physical experience, too. All kinds of nasty stress chemicals get released into the bloodstream when a person is grieving. Fatigue, nausea, headaches, dizziness, food aversion, insomnia... The list of side-effects is long.

I've got them all.

I kick off my shoes and leave them under the console table in the foyer. Tossing my wool coat onto the back of a kitchen chair, I head to the fridge. I open the door and stand looking inside as rain drums against the windowpanes and I try to convince myself I'm hungry.

I'm not. I know I should eat to keep my strength up, but I have no appetite for anything. I let the door swing shut and press my fingers against my throbbing temples.

*Another headache. That's the fifth one this week.*

When I turn around, I notice the envelope on the table next to the fruit bowl. It sits by itself, a white rectangle with neat handwriting and a stamp that reads "LOVE" in red letters.

I know for a fact it wasn't there when I left.

My first thought is that Fiona must've brought in the mail. Then I remember she cleans the house on Mondays. Today's Sunday.

So how did it get there?

As I cross to the table and pick up the letter, a rumble of thunder rattles the windows. A sudden gust of wind whistles through the trees outside. The eerie feeling intensifies when I read the return address.

Washington State Penitentiary.

Frowning, I tear open the edge of the envelope and pull out the single sheet of white unlined paper inside. I unfold it and read aloud.

"I'll wait forever if I have to."

That's it. There's nothing else, except a signature scratched below the words.

*Dante.*

I flip the page over, but it's blank on the other side.

For a fleeting moment, I think the letter must be intended for Michael. That idea gets tossed aside when I realize it's addressed to me. That's my name right there on the front of the envelope, printed in neat block letters with blue pen. This Dante person, whoever he is, meant for me to receive

this.

But why?

And what is he waiting for?

Unsettled, I fold the letter into thirds, stuff it back into the envelope, and drop it on the table. Then I make sure all the doors and windows are locked. I draw the drapes and blinds against the wet gray afternoon, pour myself a glass of wine, then sit at the kitchen table, staring at the envelope with a strange feeling of foreboding.

A feeling that something's coming.

And that whatever it is, it isn't good.

When I drag myself from bed in the morning, the headache is still with me, but the oppressive sense of dread is gone. It's gray and blustery outside, but the rain has stopped. For now, at least. It's wet and cloudy year-round in Washington, and January is especially dreary.

I try to work, but give up after only an hour. I can't concentrate. Everything I draw looks depressed. The children's book I'm illustrating is about a shy boy who befriends a rabbit that can speak, but today my rabbit looks like he'd rather take an overdose of Percocet than eat the carrots the boy tries to feed him.

Abandoning my desk, I head to the kitchen. The first thing my gaze lands on is the letter on the table. The next thing I notice is the water all over the floor.

Overnight, the ceiling has sprung a leak. Two of them, to be specific.

I knew we should've bought something newer.

But Michael didn't want a new home. He preferred older homes with "character." When we moved into this Queen Anne Victorian six years ago, we were newlyweds with more energy than money. We spent weekends painting and hammering, pulling up old carpet and patching holes in drywall.

It was fun for about three months. Then it became exhausting. Then it became a battle of wills. Us against a house that seemed determined to remain in a state of decay no matter how much we tried to update it.

We'd replace a broken water pipe, then the heater would go out. We'd upgrade the ancient kitchen appliances, then we'd find toxic mold in the basement. It was a never-ending merry-go-round of repairs and replacements that drained our finances and our patience.

Michael had planned to replace the leaky roof this year.

I sometimes wonder what will be left on my To-Do list when I die.

But then I force myself to think about something else, because I'm sad enough already.

I bring two plastic buckets from the garage into the kitchen and place them on the floor under the places the ceiling is dripping, then get out the mop. It takes almost an hour to get all the water up and the floor dry. Just as I'm finishing, I hear the front door open and shut. I glance up at the clock on the microwave.

*Ten o'clock. Right on time.*

My housekeeper, Fiona, walks into the kitchen. She takes one look at me, drops the plastic bags of cleaning supplies she's holding, and lets out a bloodcurdling scream.

It's a testament to how exhausted I am that I don't even jump at the sound.

"Do I really look that bad? Remind me to put on some makeup before you come next week."

Breathing hard, her face white, she braces an arm against the doorframe and makes the sign of the cross over her chest. "Christ on a cracker! You gave me a proper fright!"

I frown at her. "Who were you expecting? Santa Claus?"

Unlike the rest of Fiona, her laugh is small and weak.

Of Scottish descent, she's plump and attractive, with bright blue eyes, rosy cheeks, and stout legs. Her hands are red and rough from years of work cleaning houses. Though somewhere north of sixty, she's got the energy of a woman half her age.

Having her help me keep the place up is an expensive luxury, but with two stories, over five thousand square feet, and what seems like a million nooks and crannies that gather dust, the house needs constant cleaning.

She shakes her head, fanning herself. "Hoo! You got the old ticker pumping, my dear!" She chuckles. "It's been a while."

Then she turns serious and looks at me closely, peering at me as if she hasn't seen me in a hundred years.

"How are you, Kayla?"

I glance away. I can't lie while gazing right into those piercing blue eyes. "I'm okay. Just trying to stay occupied."

She hesitates, as if unsure of what to say. Then she exhales in a gust and makes a helpless gesture toward the window and the cloudy view of the Puget Sound beyond. "I'm so sorry about what happened. I read about it in the paper. Such a shock. Is there anything I can do?"

"No. But thank you." I clear my throat. *Don't cry. Don't cry. Pull yourself together.* "So don't bother with the kitchen today, obviously. I'll find someone to come out and take a look at the leak, but in the meantime,

there's no sense cleaning up in here if it's only going to get wet all over again. My office doesn't need to get cleaned this week, and also..."

I swallow around the lump in my throat. "Also maybe skip Michael's office. I think I'd like to leave it as is for a while."

"I understand," she says softly. "So you'll be staying?"

"Yes. I'll be here all day."

"No, I meant you'll be staying in the house?"

There's something odd in her tone, a subtext I'm not getting, but then I understand. She's worried about her job security.

"Oh, I couldn't sell now. It's too soon to make such a major decision. Maybe in a year or two, when things feel more settled. I don't know. Honestly, I'm just taking it one day at a time."

She nods. We stand in awkward silence for a moment until she points over her shoulder.

"I'll get to work now."

"Okay. Thank you."

She picks up the bags from where she dropped them on the floor, then turns to go. But she turns back suddenly and blurts, "I'll pray for you, dear."

I don't bother telling her not to waste her breath.

I know I'm a lost cause, that no amount of prayer in the universe can help me, but that doesn't mean I have to be rude about it. I simply bite my lip, nod, and swallow my tears.

When she walks out, my gaze lands on the letter on the table.

I can't say what compels me to do it, but before I know it, I'm sitting down to write a reply. I scribble it on the back of the letter Dante sent me.

*What are you waiting for?*

I mail it before I lose my nerve. It takes a week before I get a response, and it's even shorter than mine. In fact, it's only one word.

*You.*

On the bottom right-hand corner of the paper, there's a smudge of something dried and rust-colored that looks like blood.

I put the letter in the back of my underwear drawer and leave it there, determined to forget about it. If another one comes, I might call the nice detective who interviewed me after the accident and see what he thinks about it. Maybe I'll get him to look into this Dante character and see what he can find out.

Dante Alighieri, according to the name on the return envelope, which sounds as if it could be entirely made up.

In the meantime, I've got other things to worry about.

Aside from the new roof leak, the house has also decided it has electrical problems.

The dining room chandelier flickers. I hear popping and crackling noises when I hit the light switch in the master bedroom. Every once in a while, the doorbell rings when no one is there.

I tried calling three different local roofers, but nobody called me back. So now I'm waiting for a handyman, some guy named Ed. I came across his business card in the bottom of my kitchen junk drawer when I was looking for a pen.

I don't know why, but I'm expecting an older man with a balding head and a beer belly wearing a tool belt slung around his hips. Instead, what I get when I open the front door to his knock is a smiling, slender young man with long brown hair held off his face with a braided leather headband. He's wearing a John Lennon T-shirt, faded bell-bottom jeans, and sandals, and holds a rusty metal toolbox in one hand.

He reeks of pot.

"Hey. You Kayla?"

"That's me."

Grinning, he extends his hand. "I'm Eddie."

I return his smile, and we shake hands. He seems sweet and harmless, two things I appreciate in any man I allow into my home while I'm here alone.

"Come in. I'll show you around."

He follows me into the kitchen, commenting on how cool he thinks the house is.

"Cool but falling apart a little more every day." I gesture to the two brown water stain rings on the kitchen ceiling.

"Yeah, these old houses need lots of TLC." He cranes his neck to stare up at the stains. "Especially with the humidity here. You got mold

problems?”

“Not anymore. Took care of that a few years back. Right now it’s the roof leak and the electrical.” I give him an overview of what’s been happening with the lights and the doorbell. “Plus, I smell something burning when I run the dryer. And the TV sometimes turns itself off. Oh, and a couple of light bulbs have exploded recently.”

A sudden cold draft lifts the hairs on my arms and the back of my neck and sends a tingle down my spine. Shivering, I rub my hands over the goose bumps on my arms.

I should ask him to have a look at the weather stripping around the windows while he’s here. But first things first. “Let me show you where the electrical panel is.”

Eddie follows me to the utility room at the back of the house next to the garage. The washer and dryer are there, along with cabinets containing a hodgepodge of household supplies.

Setting his toolbox on the floor, Eddie flips open the metal door on the electrical panel and does a quick visual scan of the switches.

“I’ll check the voltage first, see if the breaker’s running at the right capacity. Then I’ll look at the integrity of the wiring. You might have water damage or fraying that could cause problems. Then I’ll check all your outlets, make sure they’re not compromised. Where’s the meter?”

“Right outside the garage door.”

He nods. “Dig it. I’ll take a look at that, too. Should take me an hour or so to get through everything, then I’ll give you an estimate for the repairs. Sound good?”

“Sounds great, thanks. To get into the attic, the access is on the second floor through the master bedroom closet. The ladder’s in the garage.”

“Cool.”

“Holler if you need me. I’ll be around.”

“Will do.”

I leave him to it and head into my office. I’m able to work for a while before the headache starts. It’s a dull throbbing around my temples and pressure behind my eyes so strong, it makes them water. I lie on the small sofa with the shades drawn and the lights off until Eddie appears in the doorway with his toolbox.

“Oh, sorry, man. Didn’t know you were sleeping. I was just gonna check the outlets in here.”

Disoriented, I sit up. “I wasn’t asleep. Just resting my eyes. I have a terrible headache.”

He nods in sympathy. "I used to get crazy migraines."

Used to, past tense. I feel a weird pang of hope. "Did you find something that helped them? Nothing I take makes a dent."

"You'll laugh. Mind if I turn the lights on?"

"Go ahead. And I won't laugh, I promise. I'm too desperate."

When Eddie hits the switch and light floods the room, I wince. I try to stand, but discover I'm too dizzy. So I sink back onto the sofa, close my eyes, and gingerly pinch the bridge of my nose.

*When did I last eat? I can't remember.*

Eddie ambles around, hunting for outlets. He's so slim, his footsteps are silent on the floor. I've known cats who made more noise.

"After I started seeing a therapist, the headaches went away. Poof, man. Just gone. Turns out, I had lots of emotions bottled up."

I open my eyes to find him crouched under my desk with a small power meter in his hand. He sticks it into the electrical outlet, waits a moment as he reads whatever it's telling him, then stands and moves to the next outlet where he repeats the process.

"Psychosomatic illness, they call it. Your brain literally makes you sick. Stress is *that* toxic. Far out, isn't it?"

"Far out," I agree, wondering if he lives in a commune or co-op. They're all over Washington and the Seattle area, communal-living groups started in the free-love sixties where people share housing and resources and eschew modern things like cell phones and GMO foods.

I'm much too private to live in such close quarters with people I'm not having sex with, but I don't judge anybody's life choices.

Standing, he turns to look at me. "I can give you my doc's name if you want. Unless you don't think stress could be a problem for you."

"Does losing my husband count as stress?"

I don't know why I said that. Or why I said it in the biting way I did. I don't normally wear my heart on my sleeve, and I'm not sarcastic like Michael was. He dealt with depressing or morbid things with black humor that sometimes came off as insensitivity, but I knew was just a coping mechanism. The man was a marshmallow.

Confused, Eddie stares at me. "You lost him?"

*No one can possibly be this dumb.* "He died."

Now he looks stricken. "Oh, dude. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you."

"Was it recent?"

"New Year's Eve."

"Holy shit! That's only a couple weeks ago!"



I should stop talking now. Every word out of my mouth makes poor Eddie more and more upset.

I've always had a problem over-empathizing with other people, which is one of the reasons I tend to keep to myself. Everyone else's emotions piled on top of my own can get suffocating sometimes.

"Yes. Anyway." I manage to stand this time, then avoid Eddie's eyes as I say, "So what's the verdict?"

In his pause, I feel him looking me over. Reading the stiffness in my body and the artificially bright tone of my voice. Maybe he's empathetic too, because he takes pity on me and changes the subject.

"Well, that leak in the roof is a bummer. It's coming from the roof deck by the turret, which means you're gonna have to remove the shingles and cut away the wood to repair the leak. Between the gables, the turret, and the steep pitch of the roof itself, it's gonna be a major job, I'm sorry to say. You're definitely gonna have to bring in a specialist."

My heart sinks. Anytime a specialist gets involved, the price goes up. "I tried calling three different roofers before I found you, but couldn't get hold of anybody."

He chuckles, shaking his head. "Yeah, don't know why, but roofer guys are notoriously flaky. I'd give you a recommendation, but I don't know anybody I trust with a job like this."

"Okay. Thanks anyway. I'll just keep trying. I was hoping to avoid calling a firm from Seattle because they're so pricey, but I guess I have to."

After a beat, he says gently, "If you want, I can look at the quote you get. You know, so you don't get ripped off."

Because I'm alone, he means. Because I won't have a man around to negotiate for me.

Because someone in my position—grieving, disoriented, desperate—is a target for scams.

When he smiles, I know he's not trying to flirt with me. He's just a genuinely nice guy trying to help someone out who he can tell is in distress.

If only the whole world were made up of such kind people.

"That's very sweet of you, Eddie. But I can handle it. I come from a long line of ball-busting Jersey girls."

His smile turns into a laugh. He has a crooked front tooth, which is oddly endearing. "I knew one of those once. She was only four-foot-ten, but she scared the living shit outta me."

I smile at him. "Even small dragons can still breathe fire."

“True that.”

“So how about the electrical? It’s bad, isn’t it?”

He shrugs. “No. Everything checked out.”

I stare at him in disbelief. “What do you mean it checked out?”

“I mean there aren’t any problems. The current’s strong, breakers aren’t tripping, can’t find any frays in the wiring, there’s no arc faults, hot spots, dead outlets, or loose connections...” He shrugs again. “Everything looks groovy.”

“That can’t be right. What about the flickering lights?”

“Could be a problem with the local power grid. You might want to ask a neighbor if they’ve got the same thing happening. Parts of the network around here are over a century old. Whatever the cause, it’s not coming from inside the house.”

“And the exploding light bulbs? That’s definitely not normal.”

“It’s more common than you think. Either the manufacturer didn’t put enough insulation in the base so the filament overheated, or there was a loose connection between the bulb and the socket that made the current jump. Just make sure you don’t buy cheap bulbs from now on, and also make sure they’re screwed in real tight.”

I’m getting a little exasperated. Did he even check the wiring or was he up in the attic smoking pot this whole time?

“Okay, but the doorbell rings when nobody’s there. And what about the burning smell when I run the dryer? How do you explain that?”

He hesitates. I sense him carefully choosing his words.

“I mean...you have been under a lot of stress lately, man.” He adds sheepishly, “What with your husband and all.”

For a moment, I don’t understand. Then I get it, and I have to take a breath before I speak so I don’t bite off his head. “My mind isn’t playing tricks on me, Eddie. I’m not hallucinating electrical problems.”

Uncomfortable under my stare, he shifts his weight from foot to foot. “I’m not trying to be disrespectful. All I can tell you is that when I was in a bad place, I thought I heard whispering voices and saw shadows move.”

“Did any of that happen while you were under the influence of mind-altering substances?”

His expression is pained, which I take as a yes.

Either way, I think our business relationship has reached its conclusion. Maybe whoever I get to do the roof can recommend an electrician who’s sober. “Never mind. Thanks for coming out to check. What do I owe you?”

He stuffs the small power meter into the back pocket of his jeans,

bends to pick up his toolbox from where he left it on the floor, then straightens and shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“No, that’s not right. You should be compensated for your time.”

His smile is lopsided. He flips his long hair over his shoulder. “I appreciate it, but it’s my policy that if I don’t find a problem, the visit is free.”

I have a sneaking suspicion he just made up that policy on the spot because he feels sorry for me. “Are you sure? I don’t want to take advantage.”

“Nah, we’re cool. But maybe if one of your friends needs a handyman...?”

“I’ll recommend you. You bet. Thanks, Eddie, I really appreciate it.”

He grins at me, flashing that crooked tooth. “I’m outta here, then. You take care now, okay? And call me if you want my doc’s name. He’s really the best.”

I force a smile and lie. “I will. Thanks again.”

“I’ll let myself out. See you around.”

He leaves. When I hear the front door open and close, I go after him to make sure it’s locked. Then I go into the kitchen for a glass of water, but stop short when I see the envelope sitting on the table.

Even from halfway across the room, I can see the LOVE stamp in the corner and the neat block printing in blue pen spelling out my name.

My breath catches in my throat. My heart starts pounding. My steady hands begin to tremble.

Then all the overhead lights in the kitchen ceiling grow brighter.

With a sharp buzz of noise, they flicker and go out.

*Dear Kayla,*

*You didn't respond to my last letter, which I understand, because you think we've never met. You're wrong. I could bore you with the details, but for now just trust that I know you.*

*In every way one person can know another, I know you.*

*I know the sight, sound, taste, and smell of you.*

*I know your darkest darks and your lightest lights.*

*I know your dreams, your nightmares, and every secret you've ever kept hidden, all those nameless desires you never admitted even to yourself.*

*I know the shape of your soul.*

*I know your hands tremble as you read these words, and your heart beats as fast as a hummingbird's wings. I know you want to tear this letter up, and I also know you won't.*

*How I need to touch you. How I need to hear your voice. I can't, of course, because I'm here and you're there, but the distance doesn't make the longing go away.*

*I can still taste your skin.*

*Dante*