

The Visitor

By Chris Minton

Audie ignored the knock on her front door. It might be Billy Sullivan from across the street selling popcorn for his Cub Scout troop. Or Kylie Stanford from two doors down with another fundraising scheme for her gymnastics club. Or any one of the dozen neighborhood kids who knew they could rely on her for a donation or purchase.

She was an easy mark and everyone knew it. Audie herself knew it and was more than comfortable with that. She believed it was the right thing to do, especially since the neighborhood had been so supportive of her own kids' fundraising activities when they were younger. But she couldn't do it today.

The knocking came again. It carried a weight that suggested it belonged to an adult. She cringed and hoped that the person at her door who was peddling magazines, windows, tree trimming, cable TV or a hundred other products and services that every home in a middle class neighborhood like hers needed would just take the hint and go away.

There was more knocking. It was insistent and demanding. For a moment, Audie thought she might cry. Just mustering the energy to get up and shoo away the person at her door – as politely as possible, of course – seemed overwhelming. For the last two days she'd felt as though she might break apart with the slightest emotional jostling, which at this point included uncomfortable conversations with strangers on her front porch.

When the rapping came a fourth time, Audie closed her eyes and asked God for the strength she needed to get through the next minute or two. She rose, crossed the living room and took a deep breath as she reached for the handle and pulled the door open.

Before her stood Helen Maybin, who had been her best friend since the two women roomed together thirty years earlier at Northwestern University.

"Helen?" Audie managed as she tried to process the fact that her best friend was at her door. "What are you doing here?"

"When I heard what was going on with Elisabeth, I had to come. I figured it might do you good to see a friendly face."

"You drove six hours to see me? But what about your job? What about Frank and the boys? How did you know?"

"Oh stop asking questions and give me a hug."

Audie complied and threw her arms around Helen, tears welling up in her eyes. "Do come in, but let's be quiet. Elisabeth is resting upstairs. Finally."

The two friends went inside and sat down on the living room couch.

"It's so good to see you," Audie began, "the last few days have been a nightmare. I just can't believe this is happening. I mean, Elisabeth has always been more tightly strung than her brother. You've seen it yourself." She sighed. "But I never expected this."

"How is Eric doing, by the way? He's still getting along fine at Ohio State?"

"Yes, he's doing great. You'd think he was clear across the country instead of across town. I hardly ever see him. He's more like a senior than a freshman the way he's so connected on campus. But he always was more emotionally mature than his age. Which is why I just can't understand how it's so different with Elisabeth."

"Well, we're all wired differently. I'll point out," Helen continued, "that her struggles are not your fault. You're a good mother and this is not a reflection on you."

Audie began to cry. "Oh, Helen, I wish I could believe that."

"Do you remember our freshman year? How we used to talk about what a relief it was to be out of high school?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Audie, high school sucks. Being fifteen is hard. Being a fifteen year-old girl in high school is really hard, especially with all the social media crap these days."

"Yes, but she tried to kill herself. Who does that?"

"I think you'd be surprised at how widespread it is."

"Maybe," admitted Audie. "I just can't believe she wanted to die. Helen, she cut her wrists. The blood was..."

Helen put a hand on her knee. "You don't know that Elisabeth wanted to die. Maybe this was a cry for help and was exactly what needed to happen in order for her to be ready to receive it."

"Well, it sure got my attention. I guess I'll have to give her all my attention now. You know, they had me hide all the knives in the house. I just don't know..." Audie's voice caught in her throat. "I just don't know how I'm supposed to keep her safe. How am I going to keep her safe?"

She leaned over and placed her head on her friend's chest, sobbing. Helen caressed her hair and let her cry. After a few minutes, Audie sat back up.

"I'm sorry. I guess I needed to get that out of my system."

"Well, I'm glad I could help with that." Helen stood. "Audie, it's time."

"Time for what? Are you leaving already?"

"No, it's time for you to get Elisabeth."

"What? I don't want to disturb her. She's finally sleeping and needs her rest."

"Perhaps. But I didn't come all this way just to see you. I need to see her."

Audie looked up at Helen, not understanding.

"Why don't we do this," Helen suggested. "You go upstairs. If Elisabeth is awake, then I'll come up and say hello. If she's asleep and you don't want to wake her, then just come back down and we'll continue catching up. Okay?"

"Uh, okay. I guess that'd be fine."

"Great."

Audie got up and made her way upstairs to Elisabeth's room. She knocked very lightly below the "Do Not Enter" sign that had appeared on the door several months before. When there was no response, she pushed the door open and stuck her head inside.

Her daughter lay on her back, asleep. Her blankets had slipped off to one side, so Audie went over to the bed to cover her back up. On the bed, sitting next to one of Elisabeth's heavily-bandaged wrists, was a note. Audie picked it up and read it. Her head jerked to the left as she realized she had been so focused on gathering up all the knives in the house that she'd forgotten to hide the other items on the list that she had been given. A bottle of pills sat empty on the desk.

She dropped the note and screamed. She bent down and began shaking Elisabeth by the shoulders, shrieking her daughter's name over and over. Helen appeared and Audie turned to face her.

"What do I do?" she shouted, her voice panicked. Her face was contorted and her body shook. "What do I do? Oh, God, what do I do?" She spun around wildly, dove onto the bed and resumed shaking her comatose daughter, whose head bounced violently. "No!" she wailed. "Elisabeth, no! Oh, God, what do I do?"

“Audie.”

Audie turned around, terror in her eyes.

“Audie, you can do this. But you need to calm down. Do you want to help Elisabeth?”

She nodded, tears and snot falling from her nose.

“Call 9-1-1.”

“What?”

“Audie, you need to get your phone and call 9-1-1. Can you do that?”

Audie nodded again. She climbed off the bed and left the room. She returned with her cell phone.

“Click on the phone icon,” Helen instructed calmly. “That’s it. Now touch the number nine. Good. Now touch the number one. Good. Touch the number one again. When they answer, explain what’s happened.”

Audie held the phone to her ear with a trembling hand. After a few seconds, her eyes widened. “It’s my daughter,” Audie practically screamed into the phone, “she’s taken pills. Oh, God, she’s killed herself. Please help me.” Audie fell to her knees.

“Tell her your name, Audie.”

“What?”

“Tell her your name.”

“Okay. My name is Audie Hendricks. My daughter Elisabeth...” Audie began sobbing. “She just got out of the hospital and...what? My address?” She looked up at Helen. “My address?”

“Your address is 1448 Southingham Drive in Westerville.”

Audie repeated the address into the phone.

“Oh. Yes, that’s my friend. What? Helen. Helen from Chicago. Helen is here. Helen. And Elisabeth. Oh, God, Elizabeth.”

A low moan escaped from Audie. As it began to crescendo, her arm became limp and fell away from her ear. She dropped the phone. It clattered loudly on the wooden floor, shaking Audie

back into the moment. She grabbed for the phone and lifted it to her ear. Silence. "It hung up," she cried helplessly. "Oh, no, no, no, no."

"Audie, look at me," Helen commanded. "Good. Now listen carefully. You gave them the information they needed. They're on their way. Elisabeth is still breathing. You're going to get through this. Do you understand?"

Audie nodded, child-like, at her friend.

"Now go sit by Elisabeth. The paramedics will be here in just a couple of minutes. I'll go downstairs to meet them."

Audie did as instructed. In less than a minute, she could hear sirens. A minute after that the paramedics arrived. Soon, she was in the back of the ambulance, watching them work on Elisabeth as they sped towards the hospital.

"Mrs. Hendricks?" A young doctor took a seat next to Audie. "Are you Mrs. Hendricks?"

"Yes."

"I'm Doctor Ward. I'm sorry you've had to wait so long for an update on Elisabeth."

Audie braced herself.

"I must tell you, it was touch and go. If she'd been brought in even five minutes later, we'd have lost her."

"She's alive?"

"She is," he confirmed. "We've got her stabilized. Would you like to see her?"

Audie began crying and nodded.

"Okay, give me just a minute to finish up some paperwork. I'll send out a nurse to bring you back to her room, alright?"

"Yes. Oh, thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

The doctor patted her arm and left.

Audie wiped the tears from her cheeks and thought about how narrowly Elisabeth had escaped death. She realized that if Helen hadn't shown up at her door, her daughter wouldn't be alive.

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “Helen.”

She fished her phone from her purse and dialed.

“Hi Audie,” came the cheerful voice of her friend.

“I’m so, so sorry. I completely forgot about you when the ambulance left. You saved her life – she’s going to be okay. Where are you? Are you still at my place?”

“Audie, this is Helen. I think you might have dialed the wrong number.”

“What? No, I meant to call you.”

“I don’t understand. What’s going on? What’s all this business about an ambulance?”

Audie held the phone away from her ear momentarily and looked at it. Helen’s name and number appeared on the screen. She shook her head and returned the phone to her ear. “You know, from this afternoon. The one that came to my house - for Elisabeth. Helen, where are you?”

There was silence on the other end of the line.

“Helen?”

“I’m here, Audie. I’m here in Chicago. Where did you expect me to be?”

Audie looked at her watch. Two hours had passed since she had arrived at the hospital. “But that’s impossible,” she whispered. She lowered the phone to her lap and stared at the carpeted floor of the waiting room.

“Audie?” Her friend’s voice wafted upwards. “Are you okay? What’s happening with Elisabeth? Audie, what’s going on? Audie?”