

THE MORNING DOOR

Craig J. Hansen





*Jason Audley has had a colorful past (see author Craig J. Hansen's other Jason Audley titles, *The Skeleton Train* and *Winter Lake*). Once a whimsical drifter, we find Jason now with a job, a girlfriend, and a faithful dog. But, things unravel with a bicycle ride, his sister's Africa trip, and a would-be spirit guide. As in the other Jason Audley novels, the reader encounters quirky characters, misadventure, loss and redemption, all set in the rolling countryside of Northwest Wisconsin...*

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ISBN 978-1-63490-029-4

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Sky Blue Waters Press

<http://www.skybluwaterspress.com>

2014

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Acknowledgements

I want to acknowledge the help of the people who shared their time and talent in reading various drafts. I am especially indebted to Laura McLennan and Cynthia Leva, who read and re-read the manuscript, offering invaluable advice. I also wish to thank Kevin Giles, who reviewed the manuscript and whose press is kind enough to publish my work. Thanks also to Barb Goodlet for reviewing the final draft. And, as usual, a special thanks to my wife Karen, for her review, wise advice and unending support.

Foreword

The Morning Door continues the story of Jason Audley, a narrative that began in *The Skeleton Train*, with Jason as a train-hopping teenager, and *Winter Lake*, which joins Jason seven years after the first book as he tours northern Wisconsin in the willful Chess Chalmers Band. Jason has his ups and downs, and although you can enjoy this book on its own, you might find it interesting to learn more about Jason's world by reading the other books.

Chapter 1

A drowned spider floats in my bottle of water. It's not a big spider, but it's still off-putting. I hold up my bottle in front of the window, wonder how he got in there. It's still sealed. I open it, smell it. Smells fine.

"Professor Audley?" One of the department staff stands in my doorway. She looks anxious. "Dr. Murphy would like to speak with you, if you have a minute."

"Hi, Jeanne," I say. "I'm pretty busy right now. Maybe in a little bit?"

Jeanne nods. "I'll let her know."

I have mixed feelings about Brynda Murphy, the department chair. She's done nothing to earn my disapproval, but she's an authority figure and that makes me doubt.

I put down my bottle of water. I may keep it, see what happens to the spider over time. I stand and stare out the window. I look across a roof of pipes and hooded air ducts, across to the nondescript buildings, to a few rolling hills in the distance. Could be the vista of an office park or a medium security prison or a remote university in winter. Wisconsin

Technical University. My microcosm. The sun is shining though it's cold outside. It's the beginning of spring semester, and before it's over, the snow will melt, tulips will rise and fall, and we may get a tornado.

I pour the water on my two plants, pace around my small office, pick up a stack of paper and dump it in the recycling box next to my garbage can. It's a new semester. Time to start fresh. My office is neat, even spartan. Not like other faculty offices with worn couches, lamps, rugs, posters, paintings, photos, diplomas, certificates, plaques, and a miscellany of figurines, rocks, carvings, glassware, and coffee makers, depending on personality and area of academic discipline. We are a polyglot mix. As the Department of Humanities, we are the necessary evil in a technical institution. The classes most students don't want to take, to fulfill despised general education requirements.

I think I've made Brynda Murphy wait long enough. Outside her office, I'm asked to sit and wait for ten minutes. I've lost this battle of power posturing, but I vow, as God is my witness, one day I will win.

"Jason," Brynda Murphy says. "Come in. Please sit."

I look at her expectantly. She has a round face, an easy smile. She has a pleasant voice and she looks you in the eye when she talks.

"I have your teaching evaluations from last semester," she says. She puts on reading glasses, thumbs through them as though it's random, reads from one evaluation. "The class was really fun. The teacher was really fun. I think I learned a lot and it was fun." From another, "Mr. Audley was funny and he acted like he really cared." And "I didn't know people back in the day drank so much beer. That was awesome." And "my best class at WTU, which isn't saying a lot, but this was a good one. I hope you don't fire the instructor. It wasn't his fault." And "I'm going to be a humanities major and get out of electrical engineering. My

parents will kill me and my life will suck, but Audley thinks it's a good idea."

Brynda Murphy looks at me. "Not your fault?" I shrug.

"Well," she says. "That's not the real problem. The real problem is scores, not the comments. They are high, way too high."

"Way too high?"

"Yes. This will qualify you for a teaching award."

"That's bad?" I ask.

Murphy takes off her glasses. "Yes, of course it's bad. You're new. Teaching is a craft that takes time. These are the highest scores in the department from last semester."

She pauses and I shrug.

"Don't you see?" she says.

"No," I say.

Murphy sighs. "You are supposed to be researching and writing if you want tenure. Obviously you are spending way too much time on your teaching. That's what people will think. Or that you are pandering to students to get high evaluations, which many in the department do, but only after they are grizzled veterans. This will endanger tenure for you. These scores need to drop."

"It's Humanities 101," I say. "Won't a good experience encourage students to take more humanities classes? Isn't that good for the department?"

"Believe me, the students won't take any additional liberal arts classes just because they like one. They have too many requirements in the engineering and science majors."

"Well, I'll try to teach worse this term."

"Seriously, Jason," Brynda Murphy says. She puts her glasses back on, looks at a sheet of paper, and hands it to me. "I'm putting you on two committees, the university-wide Committee on Parking and our department Committee on Committees."

"Committee on Committees?"

“They figure out what committees we need, though I have to say, the structure hasn’t changed in twenty years. But this should help keep you out of trouble.”

Macey Beckman, MD, is waiting for me when I get home. We live in a farmhouse that was swallowed by the college town of Brinsley, Wisconsin. It’s white, predictable, and plain as dirt.

“There you are,” she says. “We have a problem.”

I put my book bag on the kitchen table and quickly sort the mail into the three boxes on the counter: junk, file, bills.

“What’s up?” I say.

Macey is in her work uniform, a dark polo shirt and khaki slacks. She looks incredibly fit, because she is. It’s the fitness lifestyle, she likes to say, and she wants to walk the talk as a sports medicine physician. She has a model’s angular face, always wears her hair tied back, and looks serious, unless I can get three drinks in her. She is six years older than me, just turned 40, but she looks 26.

“Your sister is coming to visit. She just called.”

“Kids?”

“Yes.”

“Dogs?”

“Yes.”

“Martin?”

“Of course. They’re stopping on their way to some camp thing in Canada to see the northern lights.”

“Okay,” I say. “We’ll burn the house. Can you find a couple of bodies we can plant?”

“No good,” Macey says. “They’d do a DNA match.” She shows a tiny glimmer of a smile.

“I guess it will have to be us, then,” I say. “Never thought I’d exit this way.”

“Keys,” Macey says. “You didn’t hang your keys.”

I hang my keys on the J hook, right next to the M hook.

“When?” I say.

“Two weeks. They want to stay the weekend.”

I’ve only been in the house six months and this is Lydia’s second visit. Before that, I hadn’t seen her or her family for four years. There were many changes in her circumstances, like babies becoming kids. When she visited for one full day in August, her kids were quiet, her husband Martin quieter than the kids. Her two smelly little corgis tore around our house, looking for rats or who knows what. But Lydia and Macey didn’t hit it off. Lydia is a doctor, too, a pediatric oncologist. Within five minutes they got into a disagreement over the benefits of exercise in cancer prevention. If they got into a real fight, Macey would win, of course. She can bench 125% of her own weight. But Lydia is quick-witted and ruthlessly sarcastic, and Macey’s might be a pyrrhic victory. But it didn’t come to that. They hardly spoke the rest of the day. Lydia is not into the fitness lifestyle. Like our mother, Astrid, Lydia is tall and thin. Unlike Astrid, who was a runner but died young anyway, Lydia looks pale and gangly. Her husband, Martin, is soft and chubby. Her kids are pale, like their mother, and frightened looking, like Martin.

I met Macey when I was punched in the face in the parking lot of a bar, trying to get Macey’s car started. Turned out, she had totally killed it. Never put in any oil. Drunks appeared. Macey and her friends, who were slumming that night, antagonized the drunks and I was in the middle. Macey treated me for free, x-rays and everything. That was great, because I couldn’t have paid. That was my walkabout time, when I played drums for the Chess Chalmers Band and tried to find myself. I failed. It was a low point, in a life filled with many astonishing lows. Anyway, I emailed Macey once in a while, went to college seriously at 25, was too scared to leave, and after a while, ended up with a doctorate from a state university in Illinois. No one was more surprised than me. Then I got hired at WTU and Macey’s clinic opened a sports med practice in town, and she was there, and I

was there, and we both were looking for a place to live, so we rented this house as roommates, and made love three times the day we moved in. I got fitter, she drank more booze. We found a middle ground.

So the house we rented was built for a farm family with 16 little farmhand children, hard-bitten offspring with calloused hands and pitched faces. It's a no nonsense, no frills house. Sober, quiet, and somewhat judgmental. But it was cheap and it holds a hell of a lot of exercise equipment.

On a typical evening, I sit on the couch, beer in hand, student papers spread around me. I grade with the TV on, a desultory sort of grading. Macey is on the weight machine, next to the couch, grunting and sweating. Occasionally we exchange a few words. Macey likes Civil War shows, movies, documentaries, anything that has to do with the Civil War. We've watched the Ken Burns series twice in the last two months. When she gets really interested, she stops working out, dries her hands and face with a towel, and stands and watches the TV without moving a muscle. Macey has a booming practice with the WTU athletic department. There are a lot of injuries, as most of the WTU athletes are terrible, except in cross country, where WTU is a regional powerhouse. There is something about engineering and the silent suffering of distance running.

"Did you say yes?" I ask.

"To what?"

"To Lydia."

"Of course," Macey says. She starts cutting up vegetables, deftly and precisely. Surgical. We eat a lot of raw vegetables and patties of organic beef. In fact, that's all we eat. I made pasta once and Macey screwed up her face in a strange expression and said "White carbs. No thanks." I supplement my refueling with frozen mac and cheese for lunch, every day.

Next door, a dog barks. It's a big black mutt and it barks nonstop, from its little pen in the back yard. In the barks, I can

hear the stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, acceptance. It's not a happy dog and that causes me some anxiety, like I should do something.

"I should just let the dog loose," I say.

Macey glances at me. "It would get hit by a car or attack someone. Better to just shoot the thing," she says.

I fry up the hamburgers and we carry our plates to the table and we eat in silence.

"Paperwork," Macey says and goes upstairs to her home office. I wash the dishes while listening to public radio. The European Union has fiscal problems and someone has found a 6-legged skink in Ohio.

Outside it's dark. Streetlights glint off of our meager snow. We've only had a few inches so far this winter, a winter drought. Then I'm stuck. I could turn on TV, but it's too early to retreat to the couch. I could go bang on my drums in the dingy cellar, but it's freezing cold down there. I don't have anything to grade. I'm teaching the same classes as fall term, and have little to prepare. I sit in the living room. My leg starts to twitch. Too early for a beer, by my rules. I can hear Macey keyboarding upstairs. She will have her reading glasses on, peering at her notes and updating patient files. She's supposed to enter it all in the computer during each appointment, but prefers to do it later.

I am asleep on the couch when Macey comes downstairs and starts lifting to work out. I wake up when she turns on the TV. I try to clear my head and say something, to show that I wasn't asleep. I almost say "submarine," but catch myself and realize that was in a dream.

"I'm taking a walk," I say.

"Good idea," Macey says without looking at me.

Instead, I go for a run. It's 5 degrees below zero and dead calm. Thanks to Macey I'm running in high tech winter fitness wear. She bought a bunch of gear after watching me run in blue jeans and basketball shoes. "It's embarrassing," she said. She

must make a lot of money. I don't know. She's very private about those things. She has a newer hybrid SUV. She says she has a great bicycle. I know it's incredibly light. She has tons of exercise equipment and outdoor sports gear. She says she is fanatic about cross-country skiing, skate skiing in particular, but we have not had enough snow for her to take to her skis. I know her parents live in Arizona and that she has a sister who lives in Dallas. I know she has small feet and hands and blue eyes, and if you bump into her, it's like bumping into a fence post. I know that she was married once.

Running is great. Sidewalks are clear of ice, traffic is light, and many people still have their Christmas lights up, even though it is mid-January. No moon, lots of stars, the sepulchral silence of winter. I run for an hour. I take off my outer layer to thaw in the front hall and go into the living room. Macey is standing in front of the TV. "Good boy," she says to me.

Chapter 2

“I am Jason Audley,” I tell the Humanities 101 class. “Your instructor.” There was a time when I liked to go by different names, depending on my situation. I’m sorely tempted. “I’m George Custer,” I’d like to say, “Jo DeSoto,” or “G. Morton Babington-Parks.”

“Welcome to Humanities 101,” I say.

The class is so incredibly diverse. I see 19-year-old white men with baseball caps on frontwards and 19-year-old white men with baseball caps on backwards. There are a few outliers. I see four Chinese students in a cluster. I see three women sitting in the back. One is a true engineering student. She has the same blank stare as the young men. One is broad-shouldered and smiley, no doubt recruited for some sports team. The third is an older student. Very rare. She’s chatting quietly with the smiley one. She catches me looking.

“Do you have a PhD?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“In what?”

“Humanities.”

“What exactly does that mean?” she asks.

“Good question,” I say.

“Should we call you Doctor Audley?”

“I prefer Mister Doctor Professor,” I say. The Chinese students write it down. “Okay, let’s take a look at the syllabus. Lots of reading. Lots of papers. This class is going to be hell,” I tell them.

It’s a long hour. Almost immediately, two of the young men fall asleep. One loses his baseball cap. The two women continue to chat. The Chinese students write down everything I say and look troubled. When I finally finish up, the students are out of the room so fast it creates a breeze. Teaching worse, I tell myself, is a painful business.

By the third class that week, I crack. I’m reading to them out of a textbook. I start to drift away, have trouble forming words. My head jerks. It’s fine, because no one is looking at me except the Chinese students.

“Okay,” I say, putting down the book and standing. “Here’s the deal. I’ll make this class more fun if you solemnly promise on your mother’s grave that you will give me a bad teaching evaluation. Not outrageously bad. Let’s say mediocre.”

“Can we watch movies?” someone asks.

“I’m not big on showing movies in class,” I say.

“No movies, no mediocre evals,” a student says.

“And we want popcorn,” another says.

“It’s not the middle of the night,” I say. It’s a 9 AM class. “Popcorn is an evening food. Late afternoon at best.”

“Chocolate,” the engineering woman says.

“I agree to occasional chocolate, but nothing fancy,” I say. “Do we have a deal?”

A few of the students look around the room. Finally the older woman says, “Deal.”

“We are all going to die,” says Helena Hermann. She’s one of our resident literature professors. In any other college, she would be in the English department, but here, literary critics, historians, social scientists, and various other areas of study cohabit, uncomfortably. Helena is a large person, nearly as tall as me and probably outweighing me by 50 pounds. “That is the theme of my lit class this term.”

“I like it,” I say.

“An intro class. You have to do something to make it interesting.”

“Good point.”

“So, death, mortality, the extinguishing of all we know and all we are, oblivion, they are such attractive concepts.”

I nod. “I have always thought so.”

“No soul. No afterlife. No ultimate accountability for your actions, except those culturally constructed and pathetically artificial restraints you place on yourself.”

I nod again. “That’s a great message for young people,” I say.

“I think so,” Helena says. “I wondered if you’d agree to guest speak on the futility of civilization, from an historical perspective. Say, in about three weeks.”

“If we still exist,” I say. “Sure. I can always say something about futility. It’s a special focus of mine.”

“Excellent,” Helena says. “I’ll be in touch. Have a nice day.”

I write my share of the rent check and push it across the kitchen table to Macey. She pushes it back.

“I bought it,” she says.

“Bought what?”

“The house. I don’t like paying rent,” she says.

I look at her for moment. She raises an eyebrow. “What?” she says.

“Was it expensive?” I ask.

“Not really. I had something from selling the last house. I needed to roll it over into another property or lose my deduction,” she says.

“Well, let me pay part of mortgage then,” I say. “I’ll pay half.”

“No mortgage,” she says. “We can split the utilities and I was thinking we could take turns buying food.”

“That’s fine, but I want to pay something for the house.”

“Pay off your debts instead,” Macey says.

It’s true. I have debt. Student debt, though not that much because Anna Bella, my dead mother’s lover, helped me with college. As did the Miller’s, parents of a boyhood friend who went missing until I found him, but that’s a long story. But I do have medical debt. Got sick when I was in my early twenties. Lymphoma, just months after my mother died of cancer. In remission, and staying there, for all time, I hope.

“Can I get a dog?” I ask.

“Maybe,” Macey says. “Depends.”

“Just a mutt,” I say.

“You have something in mind?”

“Yeah, the dog next door. In the pen.”

“The one that barks all the time?” She frowns. “It has an owner.”

“It needs a better life, a chance to self-actualize,” I say.

“So do lots of things, but we can’t help everyone,” Macey says.

“I still want to pay something for the house,” I say.

“Male pride,” Macey says, with the faintest smile. She’s only had one beer.

“We can talk about this later,” I say.

She shrugs, then says “Later, huh? What’s on your mind, you bad boy.”

Actually, nothing is on my mind, but I see that something is on hers.

“You, Dr. Beckman,” I say.

It’s Saturday morning. January thaw is in the air. This, they tell me, is a temporary phenomenon that raises hopes for spring, and then dashes them with six more weeks of real winter. I’m outside, looking at the house next door. It’s warm enough that I can actually smell something. When it’s really cold, not only does everything look dead, but the air is sanitary and odorless. Now I smell melting slush and a hint of diesel, from those old houses around us that still heat with fuel oil.

I walk to the neighbor’s front door. He’s never shoveled once this winter, but with so little snow, he’s been lucky. Macey is out there shoveling and sweeping with the slightest dusting and I always join her. We shovel our sidewalk about five feet past our property line into his, just to make a point. The doorbell is broken and hanging by a wire. I knock. After a while the door opens.

“Yeah?”

It’s a big guy, bigger than me. He’s balding, with a full beard.

“Dog out back...”

“Shoot him, the son of a bitch. Bark, bark, bark. Not my dog. Belongs to a buddy who won’t take the goddam thing back.”

“Well, I was going to ask if you’d sell him,” I say.

“Seriously? He’s yours. If my buddy shows up, I’ll say the dog died. Tired of feeding the fucker. He hates me. You sure you want him? My buddy says he’s part wolf, part pit bull, part Rottweiler, and part bear. Don’t know about the bear part, but I believe the rest.”

The dog stops barking when I approach the pen. He stares at me. His ears go up, his tail goes down. I don’t know what this means. I’ve never had a dog, but whenever my life gets too good, I inevitably find some way to complicate it. I know that, but I still want this dog. I want to rescue him. Sure there might be better ways to do this, but that’s never stopped me before.

“What’s your name?” I ask the dog. He remains motionless. “I’m Jason Audley, an assistant professor at WTU. Sounds important, but I’m a phony. I don’t know how I became a professor. It’s all a blur. I don’t know what I’m doing and soon people will discover that and I will be excommunicated.”

I take a step closer. He takes a step back.

“Here’s the plan. I’m going to take you to my house. Actually, Macey’s house. I’m just the pool boy or something. And I’m going to train you to be really cool. Do tricks. Look cute. Eat mice and criminals. In exchange, I will give you decent food, and an indoor environment instead of this pen, and I have this idea that you could go running with me. But I’m willing to negotiate. What are your terms?”

He growls softly. “Running only if you want to,” I offer.

The back door of the house opens and the dog immediately starts to bark. The neighbor comes over, hands me a leash and collar. The dog barks furiously.

“You are out of your fucking mind,” he tells me.

The dog settles when the back door closes.

“How old are you?” I ask. “I hadn’t thought about that. If you are a geriatric dog, you won’t be able to run and you’ll have all sorts of medical problems and then go senile. But I don’t see any grey hair on you. Do dogs go grey? I don’t even know.”

The dog walks in a circle and then faces me again.

“I should have brought a steak,” I say. “But then you might get a taste for cow and run off and eat dairy herds. That would go hard on you here in the nation’s dairy land. I’ll feed you chicken or something. Sausage. Then you won’t know what the heck you’re eating.” I take a step closer to the kennel. “Okay, stay. I figure if I go in there with you, you’ll kill me, so I’m going to let you out so you can put on this collar and we can take a walk. Dogs like that, going for walks and smelling posts and bushes and hydrants...” I go up to the door as I talk, lift the latch. As soon

as it clicks, the dog explodes past me. The first thing he does is run to a tree and pee for a really long time.

"Jesus," I say. "How long have you been holding it?" I show him the leash. "Okay, come on over here. Let's take a walk." He ignores me completely and starts racing around the yard and soon disappears around the side of the house.

"Shit," I say. I run after him. About three blocks later and a couple of near squishings by auto, he stops to eat snow.

"Here, puppy puppy," I say cooingly. He actually looks at me, like he's surprised I'm still around, and then starts rolling in the snow. I crouch very near him. "Hey buddy," I say quietly. He stops rolling, gets up and shakes vigorously. I scoot a little closer. Then he flops on his back and looks at me.

"Seriously?" I say. "You're surrendering?" He lets me put on the collar and leash. We start to walk back toward the house. He's terrible on the leash. He darts back and forth, pulls like a farm horse, and constantly tangles his own legs and mine.

Then we get home. Macey is at work, so this is the moment of truth. We go around to the back door.

"I'm going to keep you in the kitchen until we know each other better," I say. I bring him in, take off the leash but leave the collar on. I get a pot, fill it with water, and offer it to him. Since this was a kind of spur of the moment decision, I feed him a can of chicken noodle soup, undiluted. He likes it. He snuffles a couple times, like an old Englishman clearing his throat, and then curls up under the kitchen table and goes to sleep.

It turns out, he's the laziest dog in the world. When Macey comes home, he doesn't budge. I bring her into the kitchen.

"I got a dog," I say.

"That's the beast from next door," she says. "What's it doing in here?"

"I bought him," I say.

"You didn't," she says. "He's going to the animal shelter."

“No,” I say. “He’s a good dog and needs a good home. You might say he’s an underdog, and I know you like to root for underdogs.” I don’t know this, but it sounds good.

“What is he?” she asks.

“A mutt,” I say. “He had no idea what kind. I’m thinking he’s part service dog and part family dog.”

“He looks like a bear with a wolf head,” she says.

“He is large,” I admit, “but that makes him docile. Look.” I nudge the dog with my foot. He sighs but doesn’t move.

“Is he okay?” she asks. Then warming up, “How do you know that he’s not sick? Has he been neutered or spayed? Do you have any records? Do you even know if he’s a male or female?”

“Oh, he’s a boy, alright,” I say. “I can tell.” But I bend down. “Yup, a boy. Not neutered, unfortunately.”

“Jason, we didn’t talk about this. This is a huge responsibility. He’s gigantic. I don’t know why you did this.”

I don’t know either.

“Just bring him back,” she says.

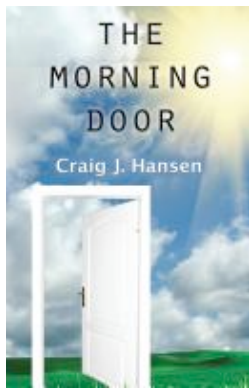
“Let’s give him a chance,” I say.

“What’s his name?” she asks.

I have no idea. “Bearwolf,” I say. “Kind of a clever play on werewolf. Pretty clever guy next door.”

“I am not going in public yelling Bearwolf,” Macey says. She leaves the kitchen and walks with a firm tread upstairs.

Bearwolf doesn’t move, but his paws start twitching in a dog dream of being a loyal and passive pet, or maybe catching and ripping apart a cow, or me.



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