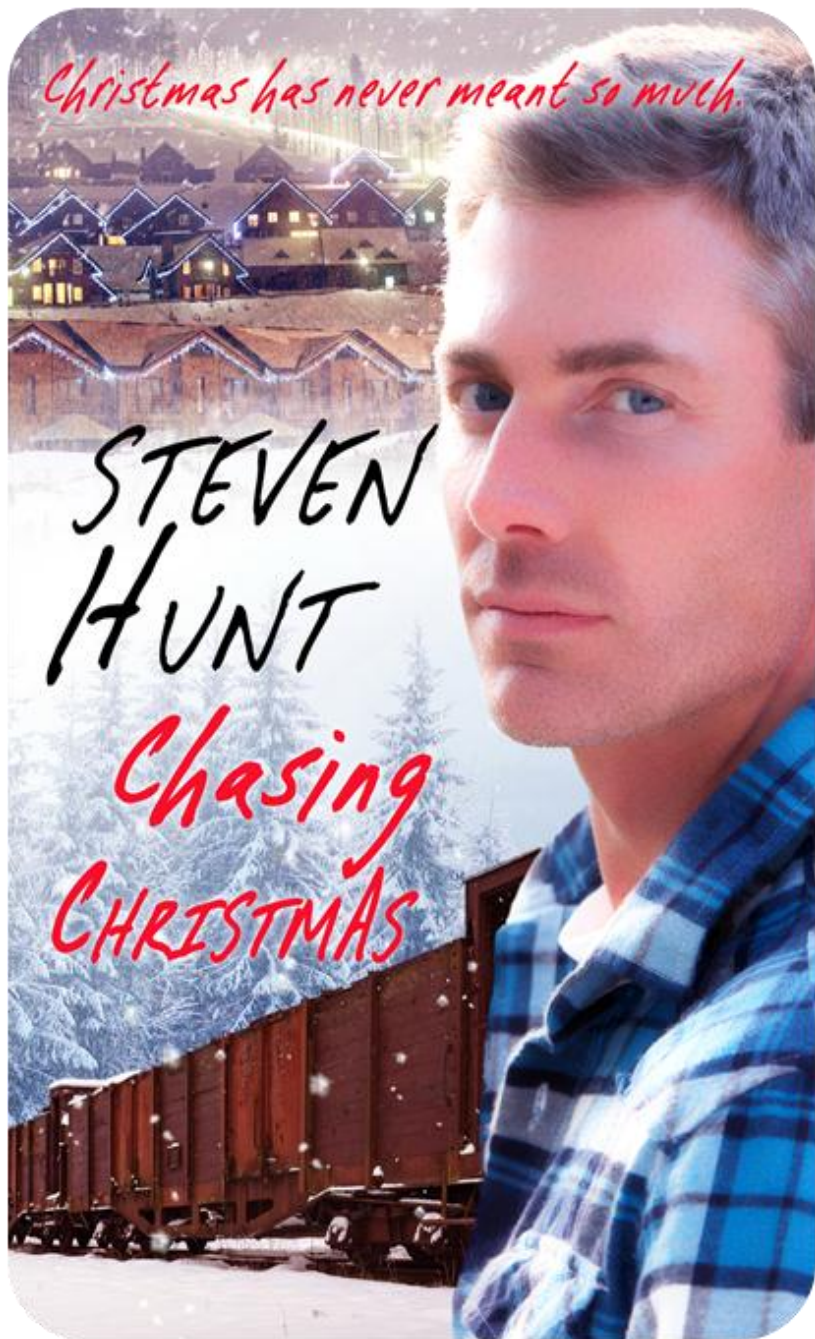


Christmas has never meant so much.

STEVEN
HUNT

*Chasing
CHRISTMAS*



Chasing Christmas

Steven Hunt

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Chasing Christmas

COPYRIGHT 2012 by Steven Hunt

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given away to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Cover Art by Nicola Martinez

Harbourlight Books, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

Harbourlight Books sail and mast logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2012

Print Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-176-2

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-175-5

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my uncle, the late Rev. A.L. "Cotton" McAffrey:
Your walk of love for our Savior continues to touch lives.

1

Teddy glanced into the rearview mirror, not recognizing the person that stared back. Gone was the snappy and confident man he'd seen every morning for forty-eight years. The eyes that looked at him now were red-lined and sunken with blackish, puffy bags underneath, lifeless and empty. If the eyes were the gateway to the soul, his had disappeared.

The headlights bore through the dim evening, illuminating the treacherous Missouri mountain road; a road that had claimed its share of lives over the years. As the speedometer's needle quivered just short of eighty, Teddy Whitaker gripped the leather-wrapped steering wheel with white knuckles. The extra-wide tires on the 1967 Chevy Camaro—his dream car—squealed in protest around each sharp curve, emitting a pungent smell of burnt rubber amidst a trail of gray smoke.

His right foot stomped on the accelerator, fueled by an overabundance of confusion and loneliness. Replaying the tragic events of the past months, he accelerated toward what the locals called Dead Man's Curve.

Depression, they called it. He smirked at the thought. He could be the spokesperson for a national depression association. He'd never been this depressed before. This evil proved a worthy adversary: controlling and powerful.

He was tired—physically, emotionally, and mentally. Exhausted from fighting the unending negative thoughts swirling in his head, weary of being the target of sympathy stares, and bored of being told he needed help. Drained and depleted, he was tired of *living*.

He inhaled a deep breath before releasing it slowly to

settle the anguish in his stomach as he jammed the accelerator harder to the floor—as if he could get more power out of the already flattened pedal—aiming the car straight for the apex of the curve. Every horse in the V8 power plant roared, unbridled; emitting a deep rumbling sound from under the hood.

He dropped his hands from the steering wheel. Whether the car careened off the mountain at his chosen location or somewhere else, the result would be the same. Death.

And finally peace.

He dropped his chin to his chest, clamping his eyes closed. A song from his youth—when life contained less turmoil—blared from the radio's speakers, drowning out the sound of the cold, north wind as he barreled along the road. He'd never envisioned during those long, tedious hours of restoring this car that it would serve to be his last resting place, his coffin for eternity.

As he prepared for the weightlessness that would follow once he careened over the cliff, a surge of unexpected wind whipped through the car's interior, ripping the ball cap from his head. The blast rippled his clothes and tossed his now uncontained hair.

What happened? What had caused the gust of wind? The windows were tightly rolled to the top. The doors were closed. Nothing could explain the gusts of wind *inside* the enclosed vehicle. Could a window have blown out? Maybe slipped its track? He'd never driven this fast and reckless, so he didn't know what to expect. Yet, he didn't dare open his eyes to investigate. That would entail watching the car soar over the cliff and, from what he'd read, his instincts to survive would kick in, ending his attempt to find that elusive peace.

As the Camaro veered sharply to the left, a second powerful force gripped the front of his coat, crushing his chest. The Herculean force yanked and pried at his seat-belted body similar to the force a child would use while tugging an oversized rag doll through a jungle gym.

Could it be he was having a heart attack? He'd read

people often felt a pain in their chest similar to a crushing weight at the onset of an attack. No, that was impossible. He was too young. Wasn't he?

Teddy gritted his teeth as he pressed even harder on the accelerator. Whether heart attack or car collision he would find peace.

A force grappled with his coat like an F5 tornado before a sudden sensation of weightlessness overcame him. Bitter air engulfed him, wrapping its freezing arms around him while biting into his flesh.

The sound of the engine droned on. The familiar hum of the Camaro's tires as they raced over the pavement quieted as the car plunged over the edge.



Standing on the rocky shoulder of the road, Teddy stared at his mutilated car at the bottom of the mountain. Stepping as far as he dared to the edge of the drop off, he watched as fire licked what remained of his pride and joy. The intensity of the heat warmed his face as blue metallic paint bubbled into an ugly charcoal hue. Thick, black smoke billowed up the steep embankment, clouding his vision and causing his eyes to burn. A strong stench—a combination of rubber, gasoline, and oil—gagged him, forcing him to cover his mouth and nose before stepping back onto the safety of the road.

How could this have happened? What had gone wrong? One minute he sat in the driver's seat, prepared to greet death. Next, he'd been plucked from the speeding car, tumbling and rolling along the gravel shoulder.

Teddy looked around, not knowing what to expect but seeing nothing out of the ordinary. Something had pulled him from his car, of that he was certain. Only trees, rocks, and underbrush lined the roadway. He didn't see anything that would explain his sudden exit. He touched his coat where the force had gripped him.

So what had happened?

He leaned forward again, peering over the edge at the burning heap of metal. The car was destroyed, eliminating any chance of inspecting it for equipment failures and possible clues to his early ejection.

Questions filled his mind, searching for a solution. But every idea sounded ridiculous. How could a door spring open on its own *and* the seat belt release at the same time? One may have failed, but *both*? Impossible.

The destruction of his Camaro robbed him of his chance to overcome his depression; the same depression that caused him to consider suicide in the first place. Teddy hung his head as his shoulders slumped in defeat.

Nothing remained in this world for him.

He crumpled to the road, cradling his head.

He should just give up. Just lie here on the road and freeze to death. Who would miss him? Who'd care?

After several moments, he shook his head as he forced himself to stand. Without glancing at the fireball, Teddy walked away—to where, he didn't know.

A half mile from the crash site, he ducked into the thick underbrush of the mountain, half-sliding, half-falling down the slick embankment mainly to avoid contact with motorists who happened along. He needed to be alone. A walk in the forest would provide that.

Keeping under the cover of the thick canopy of trees, Teddy worked his way around the small town of Jubilee—his hometown—to the railroad tracks that had serviced the businesses of the town and the local lumberyard for years. As a child, Teddy had stood in awe as miles and miles of freight cars containing cut lumber of every size and shape were unloaded and transported to the lumberyard. The lumber was then shipped on semi-trucks to neighboring states, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas, for disbursement and sale. On this wintery evening, with the Christmas holiday quickly approaching, the same railroad tracks that had occupied him and made him smile as a young boy would assist his escape. If he couldn't kill himself, he could at least run from the scene

that had fueled his grief.

Alone on the track's cross timbers, the emptiness that continued to plague him slapped him with a resounding blow. It punched him in the gut with such a demanding force that he clutched his stomach with both hands, fighting the queasiness that always accompanied the void. Stepping off the track and craning his head to look at the rising silvery moon in the clear sky, he inhaled a deep breath, trying to ease the pain.

A fog of doubt and confusion folded around him. It brought along as companions dread, and indifference. Collectively, they consumed him like a suffocating cloak, choking him.

 Numbing him.

 Destroying him.

He fell to his knees, sinking deep into the mud. Without any energy to continue, the only thing left to do was to lie on the cold ground and rest. To sleep and never wake up. To end his misery here and now. Continuing to live would only produce more pain and suffering, of that he was certain.

He missed caring for the things that once meant so much to him. The warmth they provided. The feeling of belonging.

“God, why are You doing this to me?” he yelled. “What have I done to deserve this? Just take me. End my misery. Kill me now!”

As much as he tried, the tears would not come. He needed to wash away the unbearable pain—this disease—but nothing happened. He fell prone on the ground before curling into a fetal position, bracing his back against the stiff wind, not caring anymore if he froze to death.

He welcomed death. Death and peace. Life had become too hard.

But the urge to survive—however small—bubbled deep within his darkened soul, straining to surface. Like a string of sugary taffy, he felt tugs by the night on one side and by the light on the other. The inner battle would wage until he was ripped into two halves. Until the war had been won, he served two masters.

Steven Hunt

He filled his lungs before facing into the wind whipping around him. "Someone—anyone—please help me!"

2

Jane tried to process the deputy's news. The wrecked heap of her husband's Camaro had been discovered at the bottom of a ravine, but there had been no human remains inside. Teddy was missing.

"Whatdaya mean you can't find him?" Mandy shouted at Deputy McCoy who stood shivering on their covered front porch.

Jane rubbed her teenaged daughter's back, trying to calm her. She was hysterical. But who could blame her after the news they'd just received? Panic filled Jane's mind as a hole opened in her heart. Everything within her pressed to join Mandy in her conniption, but she needed to hold her emotions intact—for Mandy and Teddy. Clutching her shaking hands to her chest, Jane placed her face close to Mandy's ear. "Honey, why don't you get the deputy something to drink? I'm sure he could use something warm." Mandy didn't move. "Please." Jane added.

Mandy stomped toward the kitchen but not before giving the deputy a menacing look. The three-inch streak of purple hair at the side of her head swished and swayed in rhythm with her thick strands of blonde. Mandy had fought a nonstop battle for weeks for her right to display her individuality vis-à-vis the vein of dyed hair. Teddy—distracted by his depression—had been noncommittal, deferring all the decision-making to Jane. Without her husband's supporting strength, Jane had given in, if for nothing else but to preserve the peace and ease the tension.

"I'm sorry about that. Her and her dad..." Jane turned back to the deputy, but her throat thickened and tears welled

in her eyes. She covered her nose with her hand.

"That's fine, ma'am. As I was saying, his car was found at the bottom of Lancaster Mountain. Looks like he lost control. We're still searching, but we haven't found any sign of Mr. Whitaker. The sheriff wanted me to run by to ask if you'd heard from him."

Jane pressed her cheek against the edge of the open door. The coolness failed to calm her emotions as she pictured Teddy's car crumpled and bent at the base of the mountain. When her mind wandered to Teddy in the same condition, her legs became weak and unsteady. She gripped the door tightly, not trusting them to support her. "Are you sure it's his car—the blue Camaro?"

The deputy nodded. "Yes, ma'am." His lips formed a hesitant smile. "Everybody on the force knew that car. I don't reckon there's a soul—at least not a male officer—who didn't envy that car. Your husband did a mighty fine job rebuilding it."

Jane dropped her hand as she glanced at the dancing Christmas lights on the overhang of the porch. Small red, green, and gold bulbs flickered to the tune of *Jingle Bells*, one of Teddy's favorites. "No, deputy, we haven't heard from him." Her voice sounded far away, even to her.

"When was the last time you saw him, ma'am?"

"This morning. When Mandy and I left he was sitting in the kitchen. He didn't say anything about having plans."

"Excuse me for asking, but have you and your husband been having troubles? Marital discord sometimes gives us motive for what's happening."

Jane inhaled as her heart raced. There it was. The question she had been asking herself for months. Spoken aloud. "Our relationship of late has been sort of...*strained*, I guess you could say. My husband has gone through some terrible stress recently and he's not been himself."

"How so, ma'am?"

"Depression. He's suffering from depression."

"Oh, I see." The deputy scratched his cheek. "I hate to ask,

but...do you believe his state of mind had deteriorated to the level that he's suicidal?"

Jane's hand rushed to her mouth. Her pounding heart thumped in her ears. While she couldn't feel them, she knew large blotches of red covered her neck. She hated that her body did this, but every time she came under stress they showed up like an unwanted relative. While the question had crossed her mind more times than she cared to admit, it now sounded so devastating. So final. "Wha...what're you saying? Do you think he's...*killed* himself? Oh, my..."

The deputy touched her arm. "We don't know, ma'am, and I'm not trying to frighten you. I'm just trying to determine his state of mind. If he were...um, you know... it's something we need to know. It would change where and how we search."

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she found it hard to speak. One wrong word and the flood gates would burst. "I-I don't know. I know he was feeling down, but we haven't really spoken. Each time I tried, he crawled into a shell, not letting me anywhere near." He'd had bouts of depression in the past but this had been the worst.

Deputy McCoy placed his white Stetson on his head. "I'm sorry for disturbing your holidays with this type of news, Mrs. Whitaker. I'll be sure to let you know as soon as we find anything." He tipped the bill of his felt hat. "Ma'am."

Jane's gaze followed the deputy to his green and white patrol car, but without really focusing on anything. Her mind replayed the last days, searching for any sign—any clue—to what Teddy had been planning. Maybe something he said or something he did would alert her to his state of mind. Her thoughts broken by the deputy's car speeding away, Jane closed the heavy, wooden door. Leaning her forehead against the cool timber, Jane watched the floor tilt as her legs finally gave way. She slumped to the parquet tile, giving freedom to her tears.

Mandy joined her, kneeling by her side. A cold, wet spot where her daughter's face rested soon formed on the shoulder

of her red sweater—Teddy’s favorite. Powered by a battery, the embroidered Christmas tree’s lights blinked on and off. She’d worn the sweater this morning, hoping the sight of it would cheer him and help him out of his funk. He adored the Christmas season and regardless of what was happening in their lives, the holiday always made him happy. So what had happened to him? Why had he shut her out? It had to be catastrophic to keep him from his normal Christmas joy.

Jane wrapped her right arm around Mandy, trying to comfort her daughter. But who would comfort *her*?

“W-what’re we g-gonna do, M-mom?” Mandy’s voice broke with hitching breaths.

“I’m not sure, honey.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks. “But I know we aren’t going to just sit here and wait. Your daddy needs us.”

3

The train's whistle shattered the quietness of the frigid night like an opera singer shattering a crystal champagne flute with a piercing note. Reverberating across adjacent plowed fields, the blast served to send a bolt of energy through Teddy. Thoughts of his family finding him curled into a ball on the side of a train track, frozen to death, sickened him. Did he want to be remembered this way by his daughter? Dying a coward? Mandy deserved better and he didn't want to be a source of embarrassment for her. His family didn't deserve to be the brunt of jokes because of him. Through the darkness he could see his wife and daughter as shining diamonds in the midst of huge piles of coal that had become his life.

Deep within, the desire to die faded. The dark fog maintained its grip on his mind, growing stronger by the minute, but he vowed to not be servant to it as long as he remained in his right mind. The fog of doubt had a way of distorting the facts.

There had to be something better out there. Things couldn't get much worse.

He stood to his feet, straining under the cloak of guilt and transgression that sought to keep him down.

The approaching train's powerful headlamp cut through the darkness like a scythe. What had once been lit only by moonlight now became bathed in a bright light. Deer leapt across the tracks in front of the engine as cattle in nearby pastures scattered away from the massive, iron horse. Shadows dancing as sinister stick men appeared on the trees, laughing and teasing him.

Hiding to keep the train's engineer from spotting him,

Teddy backed into the thick brush lining the tracks as frost dampened his only pair of clothes. His tan corduroy coat and blue jeans soon were soaked by a thin layer of frost.

Years ago he'd been known as an outstanding athlete, racing up and down the University of Missouri's football field every Saturday. But a punishing tackle, by a linebacker from Oklahoma State University in the last game of his senior year, had fractured his femur and damaged his knee; an injury that caused him to limp from time to time.

In addition to his leg and knee problems, age had taken a toll, softening his once-muscular body. He, however, refused to concede the logic and convinced himself that he remained as agile as he had ever been.

Hearing the systematic *klackity-klack* of the train's wheels as it approached his concealed position, Teddy psyched himself to sprint along the tracks before leaping into a vacant freight car. As he had done before each game, he formed a mental picture of himself boarding the train. The movie in his mind showed him running with the train before leaping like a deer into an open boxcar.

Simple.

The train's destination didn't matter as long as it was away from Jubilee.

As the engine roared past, Teddy threw himself from the bushes, running with all the might his damaged knee could endure. The stench of burning diesel immediately assaulted his nasal passages, hampering his ability to breathe and causing his lungs to spasm. A spontaneous coughing fit erupted, threatening his capacity to gulp fresh air while slowing his pace.

A combination of diesel suffocation and the biting, cold air stung his eyes much like the smoke from his burning car had done. He fought the urge to close them, to rub them, to soothe them until the demand became too unbearable to ignore.

His peace depended on not quitting. Nothing else mattered.

The train sped along the tracks faster than he'd imagined. He'd never been this close to a moving train before. He'd miscalculated its speed.

His mouth gaped open to breathe while fighting the impelling need to gag. With the clumsy pumping of his legs across the rough terrain of the track's shoulder, Teddy admitted for the first time that he was not as nimble as he'd once been. As his heart pounded and his lungs petitioned for a slower pace, a bright red warning flashed before his eyes.

His mind had lied to him.

Spotting a boxcar with an open door on a moving train at night proved more difficult than he'd imagined. The mile-long train sported cylinder-shaped tenders, hoppers, boxcars with solid sides, gondolas, and the ones with open slats which were mainly used to haul livestock. Taggers had taken upon themselves to decorate many of the tankers and solid-sided boxcars with graffiti of every color and size. As the train blurred passed, Teddy saw artistic messages proclaiming 'LIL-S LUVS C-GIRL' and 'DHS RULZ.'

As the train streaked along the track, the fog of confusion returned. Doubt consumed his mind. He'd only seen one open door, and he'd been too slow to get close to it. As another graffiti-decorated car zoomed by, he questioned if he'd have another chance. Hadn't his life been sucked down the drain enough?

"God, why are You so against me?" he muttered, fighting for breath.

Huffing, choking, and fighting to keep the contents of his stomach intact and breathable air in his laboring lungs, Teddy chanced a glance behind him, spotting an open door ten cars behind and quickly approaching. It would be a difficult jump. But what choice did he have?

There would only be one chance.

Lengthening his stride while gritting his teeth, he pressed with everything he had to run faster. His exhausted legs pumped out of sheer will now. His breathing became more strained and rapid. Reaching for the open doorway, Teddy

stretched as far as he could until the tendons in his arm and back screamed in rebellion.

Just two more inches.

Stre-e-e-etch.

One more inch.

Come on, Teddy. You can do it!

His fingertips grazed the edge of the boxcar's wooden door as the toe of his damaged leg clipped the top edge of a rail tie, sending his hurling frame sprawling face-first into the white, golf ball-sized gravel along the track. Throwing his hands in front of him, he saved his face from being shredded by millions of rocks, but succeeded in ripping his clothes and mutilating his palms into a bloody mess.

"Nooooo!" he screamed, pounding the gravel with battered fists. The familiar feeling of failure flooded over him like an old friend, wrapping him like an infant in a warm blanket.

The train—his transportation to peace—continued on its way.

The fog of confusion demanded he give up.

No sooner had the thought passed than an image of Mandy appeared in his mind. Tears stained her gentle, beautiful face as she stared at his lifeless body along the railroad tracks.

The knot in the pit of his stomach returned, filled with turmoil and distress. "Aagggh" he screamed as the stomach cramps intensified. His injured leg and knee throbbed. The internal battle between the clutches of the depression and good continued to rage, evolving to a full-blown war. The fog controlled him with steel cuffs, but good fought back, even in its weakened state. Since depression had held him captive for such a long time did good even have a chance? Was he strong enough to defeat the darkness? Alone?

Refusing to concede to the fog's coaxing to quit, Teddy shot up like a sprinter bursting from the blocks, running harder than he had in years—or at least as fast as his bum leg would move. Spying another boxcar with an open door,

Teddy ran with a limp at an angle toward it. His good leg bore the brunt of the dash, working extra hard to compensate for the bad one.

He stretched for the door of a car that'd been decorated with a cryptic SPANKY in red and yellow spray paint.

The train continuing along the rails mocked him. *You can't catch me. Klackity-klack. You can't catch me. Klackity-klack.*

The putrid smell of the diesel—filling his lungs—tried to stop him.

His fingertips grazed the wooden door.

Inches separated him from peace. His outstretched arm couldn't quite reach it and his bad leg wouldn't last much longer. If that happened, he'd be done. Finished. He'd be destined to live with the cloak of failure wrapped around him for the rest of his miserable life.

He watched as his best and final opportunity inched away from him.

At the last possible second and with an animalistic cry erupting from his throat, Teddy threw himself at the opening. A do-or-die attempt with reckless abandon. Either he would make the train or he'd be crushed underneath its massive steel wheels.

As his body vaulted toward the opening, he grabbed frantically at the edge of the door with his bloody fingers. All the remaining energy quickly drained from his body like water gushing from a hydrant. Fatigue overwhelmed him. From his toes to his head, his strength slipped away.

He watched in fear as one finger lost its grip.

Then a second finger slipped.