



Before She Dies

Steven F. Havill

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When Posadas Register reporter Linda Real barely survives her nighttime patrol with one of Undersherrif Bill Gastner's deputies who is killed by a more accurate shotgun blast than the one that ruins her face, Bill gets angry. Teamed with his intuitive, observant detective Estelle Reyes-Guzman and her usual sharp eye for physical evidence, Bill implicates Tammy Woodruff, the thrill-seeking daughter of the local Republican County Chairman, in the brutal assault. Before he can interrogate her, though, she scoots. Soon Tammy is found crushed to death after her truck goes off the road while she's loaded with booze-too much alcohol, in fact, for anyone to hold...

Originally published in 1996 by St. Martin's Press, Before She Dies is the fourth Undersherrif Bill Gastner mystery following Poisoned Pen Press' releases of "Heartshot," "Bitter Recoil," and "Twice Buried."

Before She Dies Details

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#4 in the Posadas County mystery series. I discovered this series in August 2010 and promptly shoehorned the first five into my overloaded reading schedule in as many weeks. As part of the world outside the mystery realism found in the series, reporter Linda Real loses an eye during a ride-along with a deputy. Real rehabs and joins the Sheriff's Department as a recurring character. Very enjoyable series.

Posadas County mystery - Reporter Linda Real barely survives her nighttime patrol with a deputy who is killed. Teamed with Reyes-Guzman and her sharp eye, Bill implicates Tammy Woodruff. Before he can interrogate her, she scoots. Soon she is found crushed to death after her truck goes off the road while she's loaded with booze.

This is an early Gastner novel set in New Mexico, strong police procedural structure with nice use of evidentiary procedure and fairly subtle clues (at least they were subtle to me). It's a wonder anyone has cars in New Mexico what with most of them being shipped South of the Border with impunity. And that's probably the big flaw: the police are focused more on the plot-related crimes than on their jobs, and that left me feeling a little dubious about the police work, not good in a procedural. Finally, the last couple of chapters were pretty manipulative, the police just acted like the author's puppets and weren't true to their developed capabilities, losing control when they really shouldn't have.

Well he is likeable. I mean what's not to like about a self effacing, ageing overweight Sheriff who wonders every day if he should be put out to pasture. Yep, you can see him looking like a corpulent Buddha sporting a

flat-top hair cut with dusty brown uniform, clip down sun glasses and a big star on his chest and some boots requiring a polish.

But don't under estimate him, those lines around his eyes aren't just crows feet there the lines of experience, patience and a stubbornness that just don't quit. And it's his town and his people and he knows every one of them and they know him and everybody feels better cause he's around.

It's a small town in a big county watched over by a big hearted man, and that's why I like this series so damned much. The story was pretty damn good as well, worth checking out if you like small town people who care for each other but once in while get to drinking, makes some mistakes, get unnaturally riled up, or run into a bad apple or something like that and need somebody to put things back the way they was.

But then, that why, it's a good thing he's around.

Janice says

Another good read in this series, this time has the Undersheriff investigating the murder of a member of his own squad. Good descriptions that continue to help with character development, and with a sense of the landscape, with the setting in southern New Mexico.

Christine says

I love this series and have seen the aftermath of some of the events in this book so I was pleased to be able to read about them first hand in this earlier book that I had overlooked before.

Monica Willyard says

This mystery is part of a series set in the bleak surroundings of rural New Mexico. The area is experiencing an economic depression because of changes in the culture and in businesses in the area. The stark and somewhat Grimm setting transforms what might be a cozy mystery into noir.

Cathy Cole says

These Posadas County mysteries are little gems. All about family and friends and support and compassion, when something bad happens to one of them, everyone is galvanized to do something to help. The elements in this series that keep me coming back for more are the picture perfect setting of a small town in the Southwest with its entwined heritage of the Hispanic, Native American and Anglo residents; truly intriguing plots that usually keep me stumped; and a cast of characters with whom you feel right at home. Insomniac Bill Gastner is a tough old bird, filled with compassion and self-deprecating wit, he's capable of lulling suspects into a false sense of security before swooping in with the handcuffs. Or perhaps he'll send in someone else with the cuffs because this older man is all too aware of his physical and emotional limitations.

Before She Dies has yet another of those "stump me" plots that I've grown to love (and expect), and

watching this cast of characters grow together warms my heart and makes me smile. Are you one of those people who loves the Western element in Craig Johnson's Sheriff Walt Longmire mysteries? Something tells me you'd enjoy a trip down New Mexico way. Walt and Bill are two lawmen who'd get along together just fine.

Midwest Geek says

This is my first in the series about undersheriff Bill Gastner, of which this is #4. The story was just ok, although it is a good mystery. I didn't much care about the victim or her family; she seemed to be a spoiled brat who never grew up. I also didn't care who the killer was or why. I find Gastner's behavior in the face of danger (whether human or natural) implausibly reckless; he would not have lived to reach his present age. I might read another in the series but not soon.

Lois Blanco says

I like the Bill Gastner character...

Janice says

I like this series and Bill Gastner. Had some trouble getting interested into the first half of the story, but the last half was good.

Ralph W Case says

Excellent book, hard to put down. Havill does it right.

A good read written by an expert in keeping you guessing.

I just ordered book 5.

I have every intention of reading all of his books in the series.

Karen Murphy says

I quite enjoyed this book in the series by New Mexican author Steven Havill. Posadas County is a fictional place in southwest NM, and a lot of the story took place where I live. That wasn't the only reason I liked it, though! The author weaves a tightly constructed mystery involving the death of one of the under-sheriff's own deputies. I was on edge throughout waiting to find out if the only badly wounded witness to the murder would survive.

Sally says

This is number 4 in the Sheriff Bill Gastner mysteries. I listened to it before book 3 because the previous one wasn't available for check out from my local library yet. And so, there was a little gap in what I missed in the third book.

I am still impressed with Steven Havill's plots. So far he has come up with plots that are not typical of police procedurals or cozy mysteries. Unlike "Murder She Wrote" stories, where you wonder how so many murders can happen in such a small town, the crimes in the fictional Posadas, New Mexico are believable, although there are some characters with pretty messed up lives that commit these various crimes (mostly murder in some way). I'll be listening to more in this series.

E says

I greatly enjoy this series and its self-deprecating, middle-aged, overweight protagonist Undersheriff Bill Gastner. The development over several books of his mentorship of, working relationship and friendship with Estelle Reyes-Guzman is realistic and lovely to see. I do get tired, however, of the stylistic quirk of his always referring to her with all three of her names. Surely once she has been introduced the first time in each book, we could dispense with the formality. This quirk appears with references to several other characters in the series as well, including Martin Holman and Robert Torres. We really don't need full names used throughout the entire book. But that is a very minor complaint in a series chock-full of interesting characters and settings. Rusty Nelson's down-home audio narration is perfect.
