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Mystery

Red, Green, or Murder: The Posadas County Mysteries
Steven F. Havill
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Green chiles might be red herrings—the heat's on in Havill's latest Posadas County mystery as Bill Gastner, former sheriff, learns there's more to an old friend's death than a simple heart attack.

Gastner, now a New Mexico cattle inspector instead of a lawman, was supposed to have lunch with George Payton. But H-Bar-T cowboy Dale Torrance lands on the wrong side of his horse's hoofs, and Bill finds himself instead racing to meet the ambulance. Returning from the handoff, he learns Payton has been found dead at home by his son-in-law, after only a few bites of his takeout lunch from the Don Juan de Oñate restaurant.

Although nearly everyone, including Gastner, is ready to take Payton's death at face value—Payton was elderly, his health failing—undersheriff Estelle Reyes-Guzman treats the kitchen as a crime scene. She bags Payton's lunch as evidence and collects the spilled wine from the floor, as well as his glass, the bottle, and an empty bottle in the trash. Events, of course, bear out her suspicions.

The chiles at first look guilty: instead of fresh green chiles, sliced and seeded (Payton has diverticulitis), the dish is garnished with canned chopped chiles with seeds. Perhaps an allergic reaction, they think, the chiles setting off a heart attack. As it turns out, the cause of death was anything but natural.

That's not the only crime afoot. Pat Gabaldon, a puncher for the H-Bar-T who stepped in to move cattle after Torrance's mishap, disappears, as do the truck and trailer. The cattle are found wandering on the road, herded by Socks, a working blue heeler. Gastner knows that even if Gabaldon planned to sell the rig, he wouldn't have left the dog behind. Then the rig is reported crossing the border with two people in the cab—neither of them Gabaldon.

Havill weaves carjacking, land disputes, and greed into the tale with skill and enthusiasm, his writing easy and tight: "At the same time, a high, thin sound keened through the

night, like the desperate sound a deer makes just before a mountain lion breaks its neck.” The chile is indeed a red herring, disguising a real and obscure murder weapon, and the rig theft leads to more death. Readers will be eager to see how hot things get as the former sheriff and his colleagues uncover the truth.