Skull

Steve Williams
Steve Williams
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Skull is a polished, uneasy mystery featuring a sinister killer and a gregarious pair of detectives.

In Steve Williams's procedural mystery *Skull*, a pair of detectives tackle the case of a murdered family and their unlikely killer.

Detectives Mitchell and Sandovan receive a tip from a low-level thief. The thief burgled a house only to discover a macabre scene comprised of an entire family dead at their dinner table with no obvious cause of death. In an odd turn, the family's daughter is missing; she's found locked in a panic room and close to death herself.

Mitchell and Sandovan dig deeper into the family's story and into that of the local gated community, discovering darkness lurking at the edges of their society. Suspicion hangs over every resident, but none have a clear-cut motive or means for the murders, driving Mitchell and Sandovan into a murky world of mixed morality.

While it is a continuation of a series, *Skull* functions as a standalone mystery. There are some references and relationships included that were built earlier in the series, but every detail is contextualized as needed, and the novel maintains a strong focus on its core mystery. Mitchell and Sandovan are fantastic leads who have rich lives outside of their careers and a unique bond at work. Their dynamic plays a role in how they solve their case, and their banter helps to highlight clues as they provide insight to one another. Their rapport and chemistry with others is also engaging. Sinister characters are constructed with similar care.

Subplots focused on secondary characters are used to interject levity and tension. Conversations between characters sometimes employ detective jargon, but they are generally witty and rapid fire. In one, Mitchell and his mother discover a hair in the soup at a prestigious restaurant, and while the staff accuses Mitchell's mother of planting it, Mitchell deduces the restaurant hid the offending waiter, who admits defeat with a witty retort while paying the exorbitant bill.

Crime scenes and everyday settings are sketched in a thorough way without distracting from the story's action. The core mystery—the family's unusual deaths and their surviving daughter—wraps up in a way that feels far-fetched, but the conclusion is still detailed, chilling, and satisfying.

Skull is a polished, uneasy mystery featuring a sinister killer, a gritty and violent crime, and a gregarious pair of detectives.

JOHN M. MURRAY (January 12, 2022)

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