

Flight of the Tarantula Hawk: A Lance Underphal Mystery

Michael Allan Scott

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Not for the faint of heart, Michael Allan Scott's thriller balances mystery and horror in equal proportions.

This psychological thriller delves into the psychotic motivations of a murderous predator stalking unsuspecting human prey with a paralyzing drug. Inspired by the grotesque feeding ritual of the tarantula hawk, a bold insect that disables the hairy, intimidating spider with venom so that her larva can consume it alive, Michael Allan Scott carefully spins his *Flight of the Tarantula Hawk*.

Juxtaposing supernatural interludes with grisly crime scenes, while balancing mystery and horror in equal proportions, this inventive tale deserves a high mark for intricate plotting. Detailed procedural investigation, along with commendable character development manifested in the art of pinpointing embedded personality traits, sets this novel apart from countless mediocre stories of serial killers that tend to give away too much information or, in contrast, disclose too little essential motivation.

Lance Underphal, a psychic, is a protagonist with a painful past. As he mourns the death of his wife, he receives paranormal guidance from her protective spirit—clues to his search for an elusive annihilator with a deranged personal agenda. Presumably rendered insane by trauma, this lethal individual is intelligent enough to evade detection and will strike repeatedly if not apprehended. Detective Frank Salmon persuades Underphal to assist him in this bizarre homicide case, which turns into a full-scale hunt as this mentally ill criminal terrorizes a baffled, vulnerable community.

Scott maintains sufficient tension to propel the action, keeping the story moving at an appropriate pace. Introspective, italicized narrative builds a sense of impending doom in strategically placed dream sequences: *I sense a presence. A thick shadow undulates at the center of it all, immune to the inferno. The dark entity spins in fits and starts, spitting sparks, spewing jets of flame, like some unholy god of destruction with its hair on fire. I sense there's more I need to know about this person.*

Graphic descriptions show the fatal conclusion of each foreshadowing view of the future. "The air hurts to breathe, burning my eyes, harsh and heavy, thick with the stench of stale feces and decaying flesh. I blink rapidly and breathe shallow through my mouth, trying to avoid the worst of it, swallowing hard at the bile rising up my throat."

An excessive attempt to nauseate seems overdone at times, yet this stylistic technique is typical of hardcore pulp fiction. Scott writes mysteries and speculative literature. *Flight of the Tarantula Hawk* is his second novel. The book opens with a warning to the sensitive, an obvious indication that the material is not suitable for children. For thick-skinned, desensitized horror fans seeking a creative spin—perhaps "nest" would be a better term—in a genre that invites the most unthinkable nightmares, Scott will surpass expectation.

JULIA ANN CHARPENTIER (March 28, 2014)

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