

Night Kill

Ann Littlewood

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A lion as a murder weapon? That's what zookeeper Iris Oakley gradually comes to believe as she tries to fathom why her husband, Rick—who promised her he's quit drinking—would end up dead and apparently drunk in a lion's cage. But murder, particularly such a calculated one, presupposes the victim has an enemy, and Iris can't think of anyone in her professional or social circle who is that set against Rick. While she's trying to unravel this puzzle, she's also scrambling to keep her own job. Already she's been demoted from caring for the big cats (after one of them suspiciously attacks her) to merely assisting with the zoo's collection of birds and primates.

The more Iris probes into Rick's death, the more certain she is that she's onto something sinister. Her house is ransacked and set afire, and "accidents" keep happening around at work. Supporting Iris in her investigation is her best pal, Marcie, and her conspiracy—theorist ex-lover, Denny, who's also on the zoo staff. Their brainstorming sessions are spicy mixtures of old-fashioned sleuthing and interpersonal fireworks.

"Denny lounged in a corner of Marcie's white sofa," Iris observes, "wearing pale jeans, a purple tee shirt from a band I'd never heard of, and a green kerchief tied around his head. He looked surly and piratical, if not criminal. The Princess was a cream and brown oval in his lap, purrs grading into snores. I was surprised to see him serving as heated cat furniture, but surprise was Denny's specialty."

Littlewood sets her story in Portland, Oregon. A former zookeeper herself, she enriches the narrative with lots of behind-the-scenes details about running a zoo and several nicely done sketches of those who spend their time communing with animals. But she never goes overboard nor allows the urgency of Iris's quest to slow. A few of the animals take on human qualities, particularly Rick's dyspeptic iguana, Bessie Smith, a creature described as having "the personality of a meth addict."

Night Kill is Littlewood's first novel. Her mastery of plot and insight into character make one hope there are more to come.

Edward Morris