



The Ringmaster

Vanda Symon

Orenda Books (Nov 1, 2019)

Softcover \$15.95 (320pp)

978-1-912374-65-6

There's a string of seemingly unrelated murders occurring in New Zealand, and it takes Vanda Symon's sassy, smart detective Sam Shephard to tie them together. *The Ringmaster* is a multilayered, absorbing mystery that is full of atmosphere and well-rounded characters.

Sam left her hometown after a devastating case involving her ex-boyfriend. She joined the police force in a city just large enough, and far enough away, for her to make a new start. Not everyone on the force wants her to succeed, though, and she faces pressure from her new boss to prove that she belongs.

When a young woman turns up dead in a local river, Sam vows to find out who killed her. When she digs deeper, she realizes that a traveling circus that's making headlines because of its treatment of animals may be involved. There has been a mysterious death in every town the circus stopped in, and Sam believes a member of the troop is to blame. However, when the circus is a victim of arson, most of her leads go up in smoke.

The Ringmaster is full of action and plenty of plot twists, but the star of the show is always the small but mighty Sam Shephard. With her dry sense of humor, indomitable spirit, and constant need to prove herself, Sam is the perfect heroine to root for. Her struggles with her move, her guilt-inducing mother, and her conflicted feelings for an attractive coworker provide a human element that makes the book powerful on multiple levels—the perfect contrast to the increasingly dark and disturbing case. The threads start coming together in an unpredictable yet believable fashion. The tension is high until the book's satisfying conclusion.

Atmospheric, emotional, and gripping, *The Ringmaster* proves that Sam Shephard will continue to be a force to be reckoned with.

ANGELA MCQUAY (November / December 2019)

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