



There's a body, a prime suspect and one helluva mystery. Who can crack the case? Forget the cigar-chomping wiseguys. The modern sleuth is more likely to be a sharp-witted, designer-clad gal – just like her creator

GUMHOES

BY SARAH MARINOS

StilettoS

Cassidy Blair is 29, cynical, single and addicted to pot noodles. She's also up to her eyeballs in debt – \$10,000 of it. Much of Cassidy's financial predicament can be blamed on her underwear obsession. Lace, G-strings, camisoles, bra and brief sets ... Cassidy is a girl who can never say no to the allure of lingerie.

Unfortunately the \$435 a week she earns working at a DVD store can't keep up with her pantie passion. Cassidy has to earn some extra cash – fast. When a colleague offers to pay her to test her unsavoury fiancé's fidelity by tempting him at a tacky nightclub, Cassidy hits on a new money-making scam. She'll clear her credit-card debt by going undercover to check out cheating partners. Along the way she runs into a cast of sinister characters and sticky situations.

Smart-mouthed, soft-hearted Cassidy Blair is the creation of Kirsty Brooks, an Adelaide writer tipped to be the next big thing in Australian crime fiction. *The Vodka Dialogue* is Brooks' second crime novel and it has caused a shiver of excitement in the publishing world.

Brooks, a 31-year-old blonde who admits to her own extravagant underwear habit, is the freshest face among a growing list of home-

grown and international female crime writers staking their claim on a genre once dominated by cigar-chomping, trench-coated gumshoes. With their hard-as-nails heroines and keep-erm-guessing plots, they're tapping into a public hunger for stories that jangle the nerves and keep readers guessing until the last page. A recent best-seller list by book-store chain Dymocks included three crime stories by women – Elizabeth George, P.D. James and Janet Evanovich – among its top-10 novels.

"Crime fiction has been strong since the days of Sherlock Holmes and Agatha Christie, but there are now more crime authors, more crime books being written and there are definitely more people buying them," says Meredith Drake, who is in charge of buying titles for Dymocks' 80 Australian stores. "A growing number of crime authors are women, too."

"The international market is dominated by female writers," says Lisa Highton, publishing director of Hodder Headline Australia. Of the 11 novels Hodder will publish this year, two are crime stories by Australian women – Brooks and psychological thriller writer Gabrielle Lord. "Women pay attention to detail and perhaps they have an inside track on the emotions that drive people to crime and murder."

Kirsty Brooks admits there's a fair bit of herself in Cassidy Blair. "We have similar tastes in music and movies, and I do spend too much on underpants," she laughs. "Cassidy is braver than me though. She makes mistakes, but she will get in there and have a go. She's strong but she's also flawed and vulnerable."

Brooks was born in Whyalla, South Australia, but moved with her family to Adelaide when she was five. She remembers falling in love with the Famous Five and Secret Seven and most nights fell asleep dreaming of joining in their adventures. "I was a reading nerd. My parents were always encouraging me to read, but probably not to the extent I did."

Even after studying visual arts and journalism at university and writing two non-fiction books (*Hitching: Tales From the Byways* and *Superhighways*, and *Mad Love*, about relationships) memories of the Secret Seven's adventures still captivated her. She realised her heart lay in writing crime fiction. Her first novel, *Lady Luck*, was published last year, followed by *The Vodka Dialogue*, which hit bookshelves last month. Brooks says she wanted to write the sort of crime story she longed to read – a book with a quirky but sympathetic protagonist, a tightly written plot, romance and plenty of

Kirsty Brooks wears Morrissey trench; hair by George Giavis/The Blonde Room; and make-up by Michelle/Tarte Cosmetics.