

Honest Abe

By Kathy Childs

Honest Abe, they called me. When my friends were stealing sweets from the newsagent I was the stooge, the one buying 10 cents of milk bottles as a cover for my friends spurious activities. I was the one who paid to get into the music festival while all my friends jumped the fence. And then I started writing crime fiction.

I am Abigail Readstone, the girl who blushes when telling a lie and avoids anything spurious. And now I am here, in the lock up, sharing a cell with Celia and Minnie, two working girls?

You've heard the jailhouse line "it wasn't me" but this time it's true, it really wasn't me. I was nowhere near the bank, in fact I wasn't even in Rye but then there is the problem with my alibi. I was home alone watching TV. Could I describe what I was watching - actually no, I fell asleep halfway through – I mean who has actually watched Kevin Costner in Waterworld all the way through?

They had the security tape from the bank and watching it I must admit she looked like me, walked like me but I wouldn't have had the gall to wink at the camera. Explaining this was a setup didn't impress the Detective in charge. They had my bank accounts showing I was broke and my credit cards maxed.

Of course I'm broke - I'm a writer. The clothes found in my wheelie bin matched those in the security video.

Well duh, I live above the bakery and my wheelie bin is out the back easily accessible by anyone who wandered through the back alley. I mean I may be honest but I'm not dense – I would have put them in someone else's wheelie bin not mine. They also found a knife in my kitchen that matched the one the crooks used, and guess what, the knife in my kitchen had my fingerprints on it. I did happen to mention that the home wares store down the road had a sale on these knives last week but they weren't too interested. There was no touch of blood on mine but I had supposedly washed it clean. They took it away for analysis. I asked how I was supposed to carve my roast tonight but they seemed to think it wasn't a problem. Sunday night is not roast night in the lock up.

They want me to give up the names of my partners in crime. Two of them, both male seemed to have disappeared into the ether. One was a large rotund chap with a tuft of scraggly hair in the middle of his chin and a barking laugh – he had rolled up his balaclava at one stage to scratch his nose – so let's go with all bravado and very little brains. The other fellow was your average 20 year old in a baggy white shirt and bicycle shorts. The balaclava he wore really hadn't gone with the rest of the outfit at all but at least he kept it firmly in place.

The detective spoke to everyone I knew and many people I didn't and everyone said the same thing – Honest Abe no way. Besides, she can hardly talk to blokes, much less set up something like this. She's a shy bookworm

type, she writes, she researches and then she writes some more. She always sits with her laptop at a café or down by the beach but seldom talks to anyone. Then the clichés started – it's the quiet ones you know, still waters run deep, you could never tell what she was thinking. But after 24 hours in lock up they had to let me go – even I know that much about the law. They would watch me, track my calls and see if I tried to spend any of my ill gotten gains but no alibi doesn't count as sufficient evidence to hold me.

And so I retreated to my writing table and wrote about Celia and Minnie – a tale of two girls down on their luck who met a pimp who decided that they would add an exotic touch to his stable of girls.

But this was a delaying tactic as I still had a major problem. I had entered the local short story competition and the story I submitted was about a bank robbery committed by a redhead and her two male companions. It had the knife and an outfit that was remarkably like the one found in my dumpster. Explaining this was going to be tricky if it came to light so I needed to erase this complication.

I deleted the original from my hard drive and ran a program to ensure it wasn't recoverable. And now I needed to get back the hard copy. It was a post-box in Rye that was my first port of call. Celia had kindly put me in touch with a friend of hers who manipulated locks and so it was that very night that I peered into the empty post-box with despair. Nothing. Obviously the short story judge Dani had decided to get an early start with her reading. I didn't want to ask around for her home address so I decided to do a little detective work.

I write about private investigators and surveillance but in my books it's never mind numbingly boring, an oversight I will need to correct in future. But along

came Dani, one chilly afternoon and emptied the post box. Tailing someone I have learnt is actually as easy in real life as it is in a book. I was outside Dani's home in 10 minutes. Later that night Dani and her husband left to attend a new gallery opening and I was over the back gate and patting the dogs before their car had got half way down the road.

The house was easy to get into and the pile of competition entries was sitting on her desk in the master bedroom. A quick skim of the entries and I spotted mine. Even in my current predicament I was pleased to see it was in the "yes" pile. But so were quite a few others. Now I am not usually competitive by nature but I was interested to see how I would have gone if I had left my story to travel the path to publication. I took a seat and started to read some of the others in the yes pile.

There was one about a wife poisoning her husband that had potential and I pocketed this one too – there's an idea I could use, and then there is that one on white-collar fraud that needed some work but the idea was good. It wasn't until I saw the lights coming back down the driveway that I realised I had been sitting around rather too long. I was well into the story about the pizza shop crematorium and I wanted to see how it ended so I picked up this along with the others and quietly slid out into the night. I nipped over the back gate and sauntered down the lane, the short stories tucked under my jumper.

They never found out who committed the bank robbery, holding the teller up with the carving knife. Rye however became a black spot on the Peninsular - what with the baker allegedly poisoning her husband and the secretary thought

to have rigged the books at the local accountants. I wondered what they were going to make of the body that they were soon to find in the oven at the local pizza shop.