

DEAD GIVEAWAY

by Charlaine Harris

I was changing the sheets in the fourth bedroom when I heard the screams from next door. My first reaction was irritation; not noble, I know, but the Winthrop house is large and Beanie Winthrop is demanding, and I'd been there all morning trying to make the house look clean and polished. Finally I'd made headway in fourteen-year-old Amber Jean's room. I knew when I heard the screams that I'd have to stop what I was doing (tucking in the corners of the flat sheet) and run outside to see if I could help the screamer.

Patsy Caplock, whose brand-new brick home was only slightly smaller than the Winthrops' huge spread, was outside her garage shrieking her aristocratic head off. I hardly knew the woman, since she wasn't the kind of democratic gal who hangs around with domestic help—but I did know the women who worked for the cleaning service Patsy employed. I'd talked to the Shining Brite team leader, Nita Fisher, before. According to Nita, Patsy was Beanie Winthrop multiplied, and Patsy's only child, Jenna-Beale, made as much mess as all three of the Winthrop children.

In fact, the Shining Brite station wagon was parked in the Caplock's driveway right now.

I gripped Patsy's thin arm. "Hush, and tell me what's wrong!" I said, though I didn't intend my voice to be as brusque as it emerged. But at least Patsy stopped screaming and looked at me, and I saw she wasn't crying.

Patsy Caplock was around my own age, somewhere in her early thirties, and she was a Caucasian, but I figured that was where the similarities ended. Patsy was bony thin, as tan as toast, and wore her brown hair in a smooth shoulder-length style. She had the long painted fingernails and expensive, delicate clothes of someone who does not expect to do a lick of work. She was an inch taller than my five foot six, and she was wearing high-heeled sandals with her dress. A paisley-patterned bib apron was tied over all this magnificence, an apron with deep quilted pockets and a fringed sash, which I figured had cost more than my total work ensemble.

I was wearing my usual baggy jeans and a gray T-shirt, and my Nikes, though new, were strictly practical. I lift weights, and I clean houses for a living, so I have practical clipped fingernails and practical short curly hair. I do wear makeup, but my simple application was no match for Patsy's full Merle Norman workup.

"She's dead!" Patsy wailed in her high Southern voice, her accent trailing out the syllables to

“de-e-aid.” “You’ve got to do something, Lily!” She pushed back her long hair and I saw a small and undoubtedly expensive green earring.

“Why?”

Patsy stared at me as though I’d suggested she divorce her lawyer husband and marry a garbage collector.

“Why what?” she asked, in a calmer tone.

“Why do I have to do anything? Haven’t you called the ambulance? The police?”

“Well, no, I . . . just ran out of the house.”

“What about the other two women?” Shining Brite sent a team of three.

“They’re in the house.”

“Are they all right?”

“I guess so.” She sounded uncertain.

I steered Patsy to the wrought-iron loveseat by the rose bushes. “Stay,” I said, only afterwards realizing it sounded as though I were ordering a dog.

But Patsy stayed, and I reluctantly entered the house through the door into the garage, which she’d left standing open. After I’d passed through a little mudroom that held pegs for hats and coats and a rack for dirty boots, I entered the Caplock kitchen. There was a doorway opposite the one I’d entered that led to the living room. On my left was an informal dining table and the doors to a bathroom and a pantry, both open. To my right was the food preparation and storage area. Large, almost square, with pale rose-colored Formica counters running all the way around, a huge refrigerator, two ovens, and a central island with a vegetable sink just for good measure, it was a dream kitchen.

The room was spotless and the counters bare except for a line of items set out by a recipe card: some packages of frozen chopped spinach, some cubed cheese on a cutting board, a colander, some spices, some bowls, a large spoon, and a can of condensed milk by a can opener.

So Patsy had put on her apron and lined up her ingredients and utensils to start cooking.

Two women, both wearing dark green coveralls with the Shining Brite logo on the chest, were staring down at something lying on the gleaming linoleum just beyond the island with its vegetable sink. I recognized the women, Gwen Linder and Frankie Whitney. Red-haired and thickset, Gwen was slow mentally and physically, but a reliable worker, I’d heard; and Frankie Whitney, who had her arm around the weeping Gwen, was also a hard worker if you were willing to put up with her mouth, Nita Fisher had told me on the one occasion we’d talked to each other for any length of time.

I remembered that day and that conversation with remarkable clarity, since I don’t often have long talks with passing acquaintances, or with anyone, for that matter. I don’t have the time or the inclination. But that summer Saturday it was raining heavily, and I’d seen Nita Fisher parked on the shoulder of the highway bypass when I was leaving my gym, Body Time. A woman alone and without transportation is defenseless, as I’d learned from bitter experience, so I’d stopped to offer Nita a ride.

For Nita, that car breakdown had been the last straw. While I took her to the bakery where her husband worked so she could explain what had happened, Nita had shared her problems, and I had listened. I had learned more about Nita’s family and her coworkers than I’d ever wanted to know. But I’d found myself liking the woman, too.

Now, I was afraid the feet I could see protruding from behind the counter were Nita’s.

Frankie looked at me. The whites of her eyes had turned red from tears, and so had Gwen’s.

Somehow the contrast was not as great against Gwen's white skin as it was against the chocolate brown of Frankie's. Frankie's heavy makeup was melting down her face, and her cerise lipstick was smeared, too.

"Nita?" I asked.

"Yeah," Frankie said, and Gwen sobbed even louder. "She's dead, Lily. There's something in her mouth."

I went to the only visible telephone, which sat on the counter next to the door into the living room. There were three things by the telephone: a message pad, a pencil, and a framed picture of Patsy's daughter Jenna-Beale in her cheerleader outfit. The local high school colors were purple and gold, and blond Jenna-Beale was posed with matching purple-and-gold pompons.

I picked up the phone and punched in 911. I described the situation briefly to the dispatcher who answered the phone. The voice sounded like that of Patrol Officer Joyce Moffitt, who looked more like a bulldog than any human being I'd ever met.

"We'll be there in a few minutes," she growled.

"What?" Surely this merited a little more urgency.

"There's been a five-car pileup on Main Street," she explained defensively.

Main Street was Shakespeare's most heavily traveled traffic artery, naturally enough; here in Shakespeare, Arkansas, we're not afraid to be obvious. A five-car pileup would take almost all the small town's police power to unsnarl.

"What do we do in the meantime?" I asked.

"Nothing. Just wait. Don't touch anything. You're sure the victim is dead?"

That gave me pause. What exactly had happened to Nita? No one had said.

With the phone to my ear, I edged past Gwen and Frankie to look down. I bit my lip to keep from exclaiming when I saw the face of that woman I'd shared a ride with a month ago. Nita, pale and goggle-eyed, had been a tad froglike in life. Now that Nita's eyes were wide and staring in death and her mouth was jammed open, the resemblance was even more marked. I fought a gag reflex as I tried to make out what had happened to Nita's mouth. There was a deep worm of dark blood running down her chin to her chest, and a few spatters on the floor around her, spatters I was careful to avoid. Something shiny was protruding from Nita's throat, something that winked in the fluorescent light. When I was sure I had myself under control, I squatted down to press my fingers lightly to Nita's neck. No pulse.

This close, I could see that the protrusion was a handle, and I could glimpse the point at which thin wires came together to be bound into that handle. I made a little sound of disbelief and disgust.

Someone had rammed a whisk, the kind I kept in my own kitchen to beat eggs, down Nita's thick throat. I put a hand up to my own neck, almost feeling myself choke as Nita must have. Only sheer rage could have forced that whisk into the mouth of the cleaning woman.

Nita's right hand was lying on her chest, and between its clenched fingers I caught a tiny glimpse of color. Her left hand was flung out to the side. I remembered all the little worries she'd conveyed to me that day in the car. Mostly, Nita had been worried about her daughter, who seemed to have inherited her mother's hot temper. And she'd been concerned about the symptoms of kleptomania her cousin Gwen was exhibiting, and her other coworker's defiant attitude.

And all her caring had ended in this horrible death in another woman's kitchen. It was a little, bitter thought, and it made me curt.

"Dead as a doornail," I said into the phone, and heard Gwen gasp. "Murdered."

"Cold?" asked Joyce Moffitt, from her safe chair at the police department.

"She hasn't been dead long," I answered, and looked up at Frankie and Gwen, who nodded in confirmation.

As I rose awkwardly, with the phone still clutched in my hand, I was very close to the two other cleaners. I sniffed some smells that shouldn't have been there, and inhaled deeply to verify my suspicions.

"We'll be there as soon as possible," Joyce Moffitt said with a remote assumption of efficiency. I heard the hum of a dead line.

I was glad of this excuse to step away as I replaced the phone in its charger.

"When are they coming?" Patsy had just come in from outside, looking tense but much more calm. Maybe she'd snapped out of her bout of hysteria just because no one besides me had come in response to her screams; it was a sign of the times that even in this affluent neighborhood, there was no one else home on a weekday morning.

"Soon. There's been a bad car accident on Main Street."

Gwen said, "I guess the police'll tell Don. But who's gonna call Heather?"

"That's Nita's daughter?" I asked, looking at Frankie. To my surprise, it was Patsy that answered.

"Yes, Heather's Nita's girl. She's on the cheerleading squad with my Jenna-Beale."

Frankie snorted meaningfully.

Patsy, who had carefully not looked at the dead woman, flushed a nasty shade of red. "Jenna-Beale will get that all straightened out at school today," she said, just as if Frankie had spoken.

"Miss Jenna-Beale," Frankie said, aiming her remarks at me, "got her butt kicked off the cheerleading squad."

Gwen looked from one angry face to another. "My cousin Nita is lying here dead with something stuck down her throat and you two are arguing about cheerleaders," Gwen said, her pale lashes blinking up and down rapidly in her agitation.

"You're right," Frankie said, ashamed. She fumbled in a pocket of her Shining Brite coverall and came up with a tissue. She patted her eyes with it. I eyed the other shapes in the deep front pocket of the coverall.

"Where were you, Frankie?" I asked. "When Nita was killed?"

"I don't know when that was. First I heard about it was when I heard Ms. Caplock yelling. I been up in Jenna-Beale's room, picking up that girl's dirty laundry," Frankie said. But she didn't quite meet my eyes.

"And you, Gwen?"

"I was cleaning the big bathroom off the master bedroom," Gwen said, lifting the cloth in her hand up to her cheeks. She reconsidered at the last minute and pulled a paper towel from a roll on a holder mounted above the counter. I didn't blame her. I'd smelled the rag, too.

"Patsy, I see you were about to cook."

"Yes, I have my bridge club coming to supper tonight," the tall woman said as if she hardly knew what words were coming out of her mouth.

"Was the whisk out on the counter?"

"No, I wouldn't need it," Patsy said. "It must have been in the drawer there."

I opened the drawer she'd indicated, which was right under the section of the counter where the ingredients were assembled. I glanced at the contents, laid out neatly on clean lining paper. Spatulas, the beaters for a mixer, a smaller whisk, some long knives. I scanned the directions for the Spinach Madeleine, which involved cooking frozen spinach and then blending it with a sauce

made from evaporated milk, liquid drained from the cooked spinach, and cubed jalapeno-spiced cheese.

I could feel my eyebrows crawl up my forehead. Mighty strange.

"So where were you when Nita came into the kitchen?" I asked.

"Me?" Patsy seemed astonished that anyone would want to know. "I'd gone into the downstairs bathroom. When I came out, there she was." She pointed across the dining area to one of the half-open doors. I could see the white porcelain of a toilet. I stepped over and swung the door all the way open. This little bathroom had obviously already been cleaned; the chrome fixtures of the sink had nary a spot on them, the bowl of the sink was polished, and the toilet smelled of a strong pine-scented bowl scrubber.

"Did you hear anything?" I asked Patsy.

"Hear anything?" Patsy Caplock looked at me as though I were a mouse or some other disagreeable house pest.

"Like someone arguing with Nita?"

"No. I'd heard someone arguing with her earlier." And Patsy's eyes significantly skewed around to Frankie.

"Did you hear anything, Gwen?" Gwen, who'd been pressing her red hair absently, as though hair was arranged by smoothing, shook her head. Her pale lashes contrasted unpleasantly with her vivid hair, giving her face a scrubbed, incomplete air.

"Like I said, I was up in the master bath off the master bedroom," Gwen said dully. "I had the water running, and I wouldn't have heard nothing."

"You been getting along with Nita lately?"

"All that stuff is done and over," she said immediately. "I wouldn't touch nothing now."

Frankie looked at me as though I'd just kicked a small dog, while Patsy merely looked contemptuous.

"Why do you just have on one earring, Patsy?" I asked.

Patsy's long nails touched first one ear, then another. Her face was white as a sheet.

"Oh, I remember now," she said. "I wanted to wear these earrings today, but after I'd put in one, I couldn't find its mate. How embarrassing, running around with one earring."

"Is it jade?"

"Ah, yes, I believe it is," Patsy said casually. "Jason gave them to me last Christmas."

"No matter what Nita told you, I didn't take nothing!" Gwen said angrily. She had turned as red as her hair.

"Hush, Gwen, this woman ain't the police!" Frankie told her, her voice sharp.

I thought of the Winthrop house, of that last remaining bed with its sheets half on, or, as Beanie Winthrop would undoubtedly see it, half off. I thought of remaining with these three uncongenial women for another half-hour or so, until the police could get there. I eyed the door longingly. I would so much rather be at the gym, or at my karate class, or in my own little home by myself.

"What do you think happened here, Patsy?" I swung around to look at the maids' employer. Patsy Caplock had been staring into the distance, her face all creases and angles with the stress of her thoughts.

"I guess some . . ." and her eyes darted to Frankie and back again. "I guess some man was wandering from house to house looking for yard work and he knocked on the door when I was in the bathroom." Patsy gave a little shrug of her slim shoulders, as if to say, Who could know what such a man would do?

Frankie bridled at the unspoken implication that the hypothetical unemployed yard man was black.

"Oh, you'd just love that, wouldn't you?" Frankie asked, her voice clotted with fury. "So this man—and I'm sure you're picturing a man with skin as white as snow—just comes into the kitchen, grabs your egg whisk, and rams it down Nita's throat for no reason whatsoever?"

"They do on TV," Gwen said shyly.

"That's right," I agreed, my voice dry as the Sahara. "But I think in this case, life didn't imitate art." Gwen stared at me blankly. I sighed. "Gwen," I said, trying to sound gentle (which I'm not), "are you sure you didn't do something to upset Nita today?"

"No," Gwen insisted, her pale eyes seeming to protrude even more with the vehemence of her sincerity. "I have been so good," Gwen went on. "I haven't lifted a thing."

"But Patsy's jade earring is missing."

Patsy's carefully made-up eyes fixed on Gwen in amazement and outrage. "Gwen, you took my earring?" Once again, Patsy's fingers went up to her earlobes. "Where is it?"

Gwen just shook her head, over and over, the picture of guilty denial.

"And I don't think you were in the bathroom," I went on, plowing Gwen into the ground. "Your rag has furniture polish on it, not glass cleaner."

Gwen's face flushed deep red. "I made a mistake," she admitted. "Now, that I did do. I promised Nita I wouldn't make that mistake no more, and she said I better not. Them counters in the bathroom and that mirror will be all smeary. I'd better go over 'em again." Gwen seemed sure that using wood polish on Formica was her biggest problem.

"And you, Frankie?"

"Me, what?" Frankie put her hands on her hips and eyed me challengingly.

"What were you doing when Nita was killed?"

"I done told you, I was changing the girl's sheets."

"Why'd you have words with Nita? Why do you smell like cigarette smoke?" The shape of the package and the lighter were plain to see in that overall pocket.

"You smoked in my house while you were cleaning it?" Patsy shrieked, as if something much worse had not been done in her house at the same time. "You know how I feel about smoking!"

"Uh-huh, I know. And Nita and I got into it about that. But I also know what Jenna-Beale got kicked off the cheerleading squad for. If you think her room don't already smell like cigarette smoke, you're fooling yourself."

Patsy flushed as deep a red as Gwen had, a color I'd never seen on Patsy before. "You know my daughter would never do such a thing," Patsy said, her voice actually shaking. "My daughter worked and worked to be a cheerleader, and just because that little bitch Heather lied about Jenna-Beale smoking at practice does not mean Jenna won't get reinstated to the squad."

I worked through that sentence with a little difficulty. "Heather—Nita's daughter—was the one who told the . . . ?"

"The cheerleader sponsor," Gwen supplied unexpectedly.

"Okay, the cheerleader sponsor. Heather was the one who told the sponsor about Jenna-Beale smoking at practice?"

Patsy nodded, short little jerks of her head.

"So what did you say to Nita today in this kitchen?"

"Nothing. She cleans my house," Patsy said grimly. "Whatever that woman's opinion may be, it has no effect on me or mine."

"You and Nita didn't discuss your daughters at all?"

"Oh, I think Nita and her precious cousin were too busy talking about Gwen's little light-fingered ways!" Patsy said viciously.

"That true?" I asked Gwen. The sooner we got to the bottom of this, the sooner I could go back to finishing the Winthrop house.

"Patsy complained that her pearl stickpin was lost the last time we worked here," Gwen said, her broad, thin lips pinched together in misery. "Nita reamed me out all over again, though I'd promised her I'd quit. She hurt my feelings so bad!" Once again, tears began to flow down Gwen's broad cheeks. "But it wasn't true. The good Lord knows that."

"Did Patsy say anything to you about her earring this morning?" I asked Gwen.

Gwen shook her head, crying even harder than before.

"Did Nita come up to catch you smoking in Jenna-Beale's room?" I asked Frankie. Her dark face impassive, Frankie shook her head.

"How'd you cut up the cheese?" I asked Patsy.

"A knife, of course." Patsy eyed me like I was a moron.

"Where is the knife?"

Patsy examined the items spread out on the counter. "I don't know," she admitted. "It was there."

"The knife was there, but the whisk wasn't?"

"Yes."

I squatted by Nita's body once again, examined her minutely. After a long and careful look, I straightened up and moved a little away from the three women. I took a step to my left. Now I was between them and the door.

"You weren't working in Jenna-Beale's room, you were smoking. Since Jenna-Beale smoked, too, you thought the smell of the room would mask the fact that you were breaking the rules," I told Frankie flatly.

Frankie's dark brown eyes met mine. She shrugged. That was Frankie, all attitude, just like Nita had told me.

"And you say you were cleaning the bathroom, but with the furniture polish," I told Gwen. "You might not even have gone in there. You might have been down here instead, arguing with Nita."

"But she would've heard me," Gwen said, nodding at Patsy, whose hands were balled in unlady-like fists.

"No," Patsy said sharply, as if she were addressing particularly slow serfs. "I was in the bathroom. Understand? All of us have to go sometime."

"But you weren't," I said.

The room got very quiet, and in the distance I could hear the siren of a police car, finally on its way here. But not fast enough.

"I beg your pardon?" Patsy's tone made it clear she was doing no such thing.

"You weren't in the bathroom. There was still foamy cleaner in the water in the bowl, and if you'd used the toilet, you'd have flushed it down. And the sink is dry. You, the fastidious one, didn't wash your hands? I don't believe that. What were you really doing? Instead of being in the bathroom with the door closed tightly, I think you were standing in the pantry right by it, getting something you needed for your casserole. I think you'd heard Nita remind Gwen not to steal and that gave you the idea you could get away with killing Nita. A random stranger, Gwen and Nita fighting, maybe Nita and Frankie going at it about Frankie smoking on the job . . . all possibilities, but they couldn't be thought all the way through because you didn't have time."

Patsy's bronze lips pressed together and parted several times in a row as she began, then discarded, several things she wanted to say.

"Nita told me herself that she had a bad temper," I said. "I think you said something to Nita about her daughter, and I think that pushed Nita over the edge. Nita was more aware than anyone that if this cheerleader incident kept festering it would degenerate into a she said/she said situation. And who would be favored in a situation like that? The girl from the family with the social standing and money. If there were a shred of doubt about Jenna-Beale's breaking the rules, if it was only Heather's unsupported word that Jenna-Beale had smoked at the school, Heather would be the one to suffer. What did you say to Nita that made her lose her temper?"

Patsy just kept shaking her head back and forth in silent denial, her eyes fixed on me as if I were a cobra.

"You know," she began finally, "I could never have forced that whisk down her throat. She was a strong woman."

"I think that's why you were scared when she came at you. I don't think you killed her by forcing that whisk down her throat."

"Oh," said Patsy, relieved. Her shoulders slumped as she relaxed. "Oh, thank goodness. Who did do it, then? Frankie?" Patsy's eyes lit up with pleasure at the idea of Frankie getting into trouble.

"No one."

They all three gaped at me.

"She done it herself?" Gwen's eyes were about to pop out of her head.

The police siren was even closer, but not close enough.

"No."

"Tell us," Frankie said, "Miss Muscles."

"Patsy." There was a long silence in the kitchen, still immaculate—except for the corpse of the woman who'd cleaned it.

"You just admitted I couldn't have rammed that whisk down her throat," Patsy said, shaking her head as if I were an unreasonable child.

"You didn't kill her with the whisk."

Patsy edged a little toward her right. I didn't budge. I knew I could keep Patsy Caplock from reaching the door if this was the door she went for. But there were a lot of other doors in this house.

"So what, pray tell, is that sticking out of her mouth?" Patsy asked sharply. If she expected me to look over to the corpse again, she was mistaken.

"That's a whisk handle."

"So what do you think killed her?" Frankie's eyebrows were drawn together as she tried to follow my thinking.

"The missing knife," I said. "Look at Nita's chin. There's a bloodstream going down, the way it would if she was standing up when she was bleeding. I think she came at Patsy while Patsy was cubing the cheese for the sauce. I think Patsy just thrust the knife at her, and it went in Nita's mouth. I think Nita choked on the blood and the blade, and that's what killed her. The whisk just makes the killing look crazy. And it would have had to be out already, to blend the cheese with the milk as the cheese melted."

"Why would Patsy want to take the knife out?" Frankie asked.

"The knife was a dead giveaway. Who else would be cubing cheese for the sauce, except the cook? I'll bet there are traces of cheese left on the knife."

"So where is this knife, Miss Know-It-All?" Patsy asked smartly.

"You carried it in your apron when you ran outside screaming," I said wearily. "Did you think I wouldn't notice that you didn't have it on when you came back in? I guess you hung the apron up on the hooks in the little mudroom, thinking no one would recall you'd had it on."

Patsy snarled at me. "There's no knife in my apron!"

"Of course not," I said, "I'm sure you hid it outside after I came in here. But I bet if the police know what to look for, they'll find it. And there'll be a blood smear inside the pocket of the apron."

"That could be from where I stuck my hand in the pocket after I'd touched her to see if she was really dead," Patsy protested.

"That doesn't explain the fact," I said, hearing the police car pull to a stop outside the house, "that your missing jade earring is in Nita's right hand. You may try to blame the earring on Gwen, but I guess Nita grabbed it when you were struggling. I guess Nita pulled it clean out of your ear."

The other two women eyed Patsy with clear horror. No one had ever looked at Patsy that way, I was sure. She twitched under their regard. "Don't you look at me like that!" she said shrilly. Her perfect fingernails went back to scraping at her ear, where there just might be a tiny dot of blood at the pierced hole.

"I'm not going to look at you any way at all," I said thankfully. "I'm going back to clean the house next door."

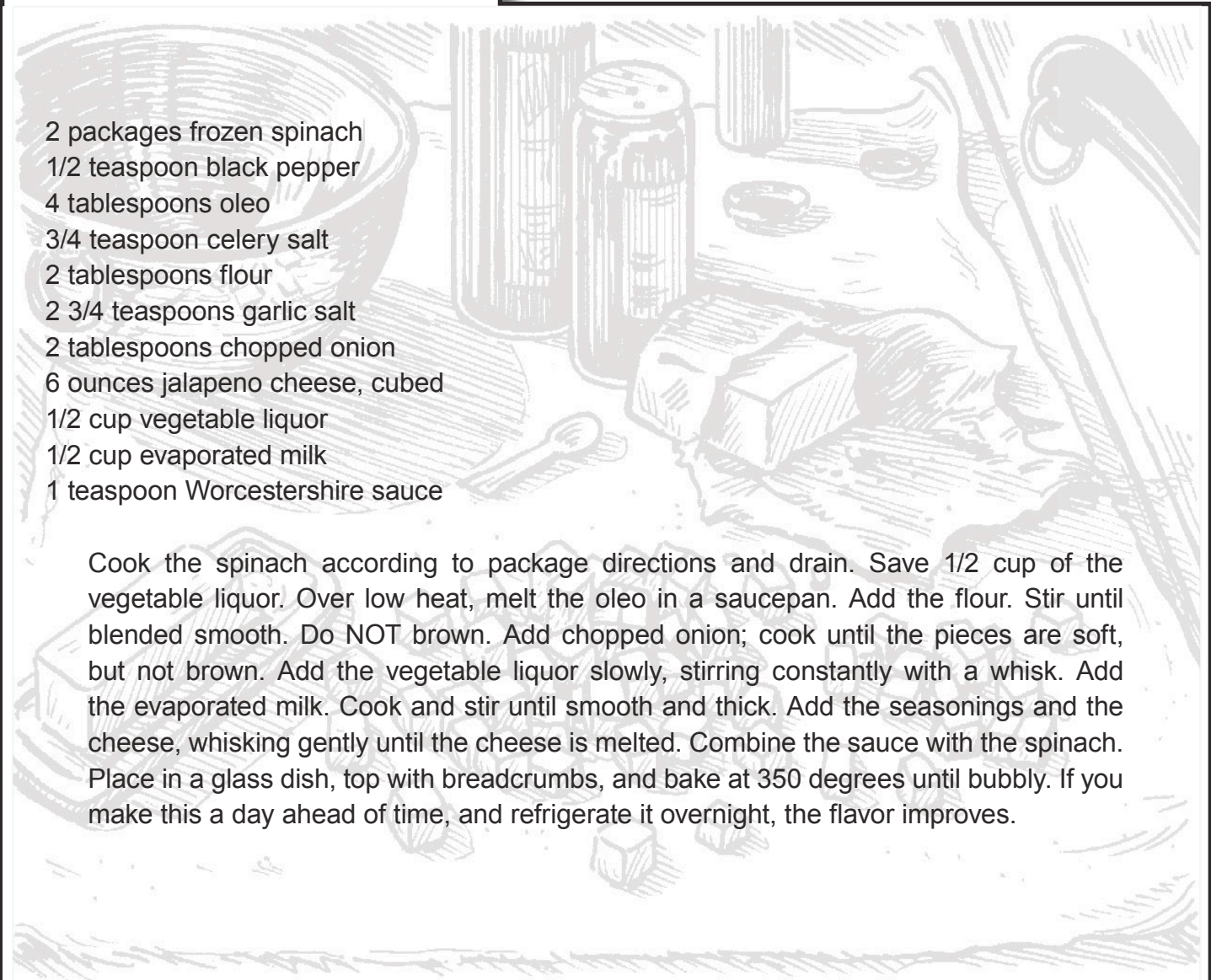
And as soon as the patrol officer had put the handcuffs on a shrieking Patsy Caplock, that's what I did.

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SPINACH MADELEINE



2 packages frozen spinach
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
4 tablespoons oleo
3/4 teaspoon celery salt
2 tablespoons flour
2 3/4 teaspoons garlic salt
2 tablespoons chopped onion
6 ounces jalapeno cheese, cubed
1/2 cup vegetable liquor
1/2 cup evaporated milk
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

Cook the spinach according to package directions and drain. Save 1/2 cup of the vegetable liquor. Over low heat, melt the oleo in a saucepan. Add the flour. Stir until blended smooth. Do NOT brown. Add chopped onion; cook until the pieces are soft, but not brown. Add the vegetable liquor slowly, stirring constantly with a whisk. Add the evaporated milk. Cook and stir until smooth and thick. Add the seasonings and the cheese, whisking gently until the cheese is melted. Combine the sauce with the spinach. Place in a glass dish, top with breadcrumbs, and bake at 350 degrees until bubbly. If you make this a day ahead of time, and refrigerate it overnight, the flavor improves.