

EXCERPT FROM

## Three Strikes and You're Dead

A MURDER, SHE WROTE MYSTERY

*Jessica Fletcher visits old friends Meg and Jack Duffy who live in Arizona where their foster son Ty Ramos plays AA baseball. Following an afternoon watching Ty's team win the championship, Jessica unwinds with her hosts in the Duffys' pool. She thinks she could come to like this idyllic existence-- until the phone rings in the middle of the night.*

In my dream, I was being chased by a dozen giant scorpions wearing cowboy boots, the spurs jingling. Away from home and in a strange bed, I was still groggy trying to fend off the scorpions. I reached for a button to shut off the ringing alarm, but the clock didn't have one. I awoke confused, until it came to me that it was the sound of a telephone that had stirred me from my sleep. After three sequences, the ringing stopped and I realized where I was.

"We'll be right there," Jack said outside my door. Meg and Jack spoke in hushed tones. I glanced at the clock: 4:06 a.m. I put on my robe and slippers and walked cautiously into the hall where Meg met me.

"Jessica, I'm so sorry we disturbed your sleep."

"Don't even think about it," I said. "What's wrong?"

"It's Ty. He's—he's been arrested."

"Arrested? For what?"

"We don't know. Jack's getting dressed. He's going to the jail. I'm going with him."

"I'd like to go, too, if you think it's all right."

"Of course it's all right, but only if you want to. I don't want to put you out."

"I'll get dressed right away," I said. "I'll only be a minute."

We spent most of the 30-minute car ride to the jail without speaking. It was one of those times in life when you have so many questions but are afraid that to ask them would be inappropriate, considering the shock my friends were

suffering. Jack's face was set in stone, eyes focused on the road, his square jaw in motion as he chewed his cheek.

Meg and I stared out our respective windows and watched as Mesa began to stir. It was already in the 80's, and the horizon grew lighter as the desert sun promised to peek through at any time. We passed several strip malls, a school, and a succession of neighborhoods.

"Jack phoned a lawyer friend of his in town and asked him to meet us at the jail," Meg finally said.

"That's good," I said, "although hopefully it's all been a mistake and an attorney won't be needed." While my words were positive and meant to comfort, my inner feelings didn't match them. Somehow, this was no mistake. I could feel it in my bones, and in a stomach that had been churning ever since Meg told me that Ty had been arrested.

"I pray that you're right," Meg said.

"What's the drinking age in Arizona?" I asked.

"Twenty-one," Jack growled, never taking his eyes off the road.

"Is it possible that in the midst of the celebration, Ty might have had a beer or two and had been taken in for driving while under the influence and for being under-age?" I asked.

Meg sat straighter and brightened. "I'll bet that's it," she said. "Boys that age do so many silly things."

"I wouldn't call that silly," Jack said, taking a corner too fast and pressing me against the door.

"You know what I mean," Meg said. "Maybe foolish is a better word." She turned to me. "We bought Ty a used Jeep Wrangler, one of those small ones with a canvas top. First year ballplayers make so little money. Jack said he'd heard that Ty drove too fast when his teammates were with him. I hope he hasn't been in an accident."

“I spoke with Buddy Washington about it,” Jack said as we turned into the Police Headquarters parking lot. “I suggested he have a talk with the players about responsibilities *off* the field as well as on. He said he intended to do that, but – damn it!”

“What’s wrong?” Meg asked.

“Look,” Jack said. The press is already here.”

A television station van was parked, its floodlight lighting up the lot like a Hollywood set. I recognized the reporter from the locker room at last night’s game, Karen Locke. She leaned against the van, her arms crossed. Another female reporter, a pretty black woman, stood next to Locke and primped herself in a mirror attached to the side of the van. Jack got out of the car first. When Locke recognized who it was, she alerted the cameraman and they rushed toward us. Ms. Locke shoved a microphone into Jack’s face and asked, “Judge Duffy, how do you feel about your foster son’s arrest for murder?”