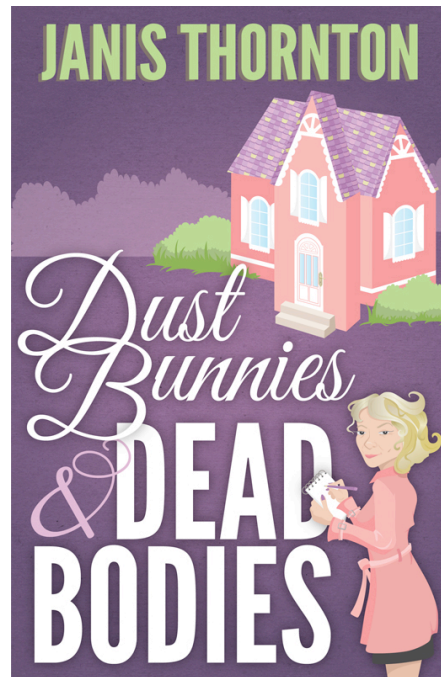


SAMPLE



CHAPTER 1

Funny where your mind goes when you're staring into the face of mortal danger. The night I stepped through Gertie Tyroo's dark back door, uninvited and all alone, my mind conjured up an old movie, starring me as the classic damsel in distress—fragile, frazzled, and befuddled, desperate for a white knight to gallop in on horseback and rescue me.

Crystal Cropper, I thought, revolted by the helpless self-image, *you are pathetic! You don't need a white knight. You're your own white knight. Now get on with it.* And get on with it I did. Without further hesitation, I drew a deep breath and called out, "Gertie! It's me, Crystal. You okay?" That's when the living room light went out, somebody screamed, and all hell broke loose.

Rapid-fire footsteps scurried toward me through the opaque darkness, prompting my Ladies Kick Ass training to kick in. I stiffened in a defensive stance—feet fixed at forty-five degree angles, knees bent, one hand clamped around my can of mace, the other poised to strike a crippling blow. I thought I was ready to rock 'n' roll, but I was quickly proved wrong when a solid shoulder slammed into my chest. It bulldozed me toward the open doorway and knocked the mace from my grip. I screamed "Noooo!" and swung my right fist, hoping it would connect with the assailant's face. Yes! My knuckles delivered a solid blow, and my attacker mewled weakly. Invigorated, I pressed on, determined to further stun my assailant with a head butt to the chin. Unfortunately, the plan was stopped when two strong hands grabbed my upper arms and shoved me with a force that dislodged my hairpins. As my topknot unfurled, the thug grabbed a handful of my hair and yanked me out the door. Before I could rebound, I found myself tumbling down the

back steps and onto the patio, where I landed hard on my left butt cheek, winded and dazed.

The intruder took my temporary incapacitation as an exit cue and bolted through the carport. My fears for Gertie pushed me up the steps and into the dark house. I groped the walls for a light switch, found one in the kitchen and flipped it on. An overhead fluorescent halo flickered to life, spilling light through the doorway to the front room. “Gertie!” I called again. “Where are you?” Still no answer.

Thinking I might catch a glimpse of the fleeing intruder, I rushed for the front door. But as I rounded Gertie’s sofa, I stubbed my foot on something large and doughy in my path. I nearly tripped and was set to give what-for to the poorly placed object, expecting maybe a hassock. But. Oh. My. God. It was Gertie.

The squeal of spinning tires resonated from the street, followed by the grinding roar of a souped-up engine. I scrambled for the front door, but my attempt to throw it open was stymied by the deadbolt. The louder the rumbling, the more my tangled fingers floundered over the stubborn lock. Finally disengaging the bolt, I threw open the door and dashed onto the sun porch as a light-colored pickup truck rocketed past. Although I hadn’t been able to read the license plate, I took note of the truck’s taillights—the left one was red, the right one orange.

With precious time wasting, I rushed back to Gertie. She was sprawled on her left side, wrapped tightly in her leopard-print coat. Her left arm extended unbent in alignment with her body and her hand rested on her tattered wool scarf. Her right arm jutted out before her at a ninety-degree angle gripping the strap of her straw handbag.

I grabbed a pillow and tucked it under her head. That’s when I discovered the blood soaking into the carpet. Its source was a deep wound on the back of her skull. I unbuttoned her coat and gently probed for her carotid artery with my fingertips. She had a pulse. It was weak, but it was there.

A table lamp lay on the floor within arm’s length. I set it upright and clicked it on. The room was chaos. The phone was off the hook and bleeping incessantly. I picked it up, tapped its plunger to get a dial tone, and punched 9-1-1.

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