



# flipped

Tracey Hawthorne

'A deeply moving tale and at the same  
time an unputdownable page-turner.'  
Tony Park, author of *The Pride and  
Blood Trail*

# 1

At 2 a.m., Terry Bronson put on her boots, coat and scarf, and left her house, locking the front door behind her. She'd looked in on her friend, Nicky Hallett, who was dead to the world, snoring loudly. The little tabby cat, who'd claimed this room as her own since her son Patrick had left for varsity, was crouched uncomfortably, and clearly indignantly, at the foot of the bed.

Terry started her car, switching on the windscreen wipers and the demister for both front and back windows. Scratching around in her bag, she found her glasses, and put them on.

She hated driving in the dark, and it was infinitely worse in the rain – although, fortunately, it seemed to have stopped for now. She hoped it would hold off for a while.

She pulled away from the pavement and drove to the stop-street at the end of the block, then she turned left, right at the next stop, and left onto the main road to the farmlands.

This would have been the route her daughter's friend, Jess, had driven earlier – if, Terry thought, Rosanne and Jess had actually gone to a party on Ryan Chapel's family's farm, where they'd said they were going, and not somewhere else completely. Her 17-year-old daughter, Rosanne, or Annie, as most people called her, had become so economical with the truth that Terry never knew when she was being told fact or fiction; she suspected that almost everything Rosanne told her at the moment was a lie of some dimension.

At this time of night and in this weather, the road was deserted, for which Terry was grateful. She drove slowly, concentrating hard. It was pointless for her to scan the roadsides. Her extreme shortsightedness and night-blindness made it impossible for her

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to see much beyond the headlights. What she did do was open the car's front windows. If there was anything critically audible in the cold, still night, she didn't want to miss it.

She drove the eight kilometres towards the bridge like this, hearing the shushing sound of the car's wheels on the wet road, but nothing else. Twice she had to swerve to avoid tree branches lying in the road, and once a tiny creature, its eyes glittering in her headlights, dashed across in front of the car. Thankfully she was driving slowly enough for it to make the crossing unharmed.

Approaching the bridge, Terry could hear the roar of the water. The heavy rains had swollen the river to the point where it had broken its banks, flooding the surrounding vineyards and putting them under water that would take weeks to subside.

She drove slowly onto the bridge, and the sound of the river became much louder. It was the continuous thunder of an unstoppable life force ... sobering to think that mere water could make such a powerful noise. She had to swerve to avoid something low, squat and solid protruding a short distance from the hard shoulder into her lane, but, again, it wasn't hard to do because she was driving so slowly.

Terry exhaled with relief when the car got safely to the other side.

The Chapel farm was down a dirt road to the left, about a kilometre on. As far as she could tell, the only thing growing there was old cars in various states of dilapidation, up on bricks. The front yard was full of them.

She'd dropped Rosanne at the farm on a few occasions since her daughter had started seeing their son, Ryan. The father seemed to be as poorly socialised as his offspring. Although Rosanne had absolutely forbidden her mother to come in and meet him, Terry had waved to him from the car from time to time, but she never got a friendly reaction. Once there'd been a

very brief, almost imperceptible nod, but usually it was just a short, hard stare. The mother, according to Rosanne, had run off when Ryan was a baby. No surprise there.

The dirt road was a horror story, churned to mud by the rain and the passage of other vehicles that had come this way before her. Terry tried to keep her speed slow and steady but she could feel the tyres slipping, and was afraid that if she stopped, she wouldn't be able to get the car moving again.

She hunched over the steering wheel, staring through the windscreen at the chocolate-coloured waves of road ahead, carefully navigating holes and ridges, the car occasionally slewing sideways. She was all too aware of the powerfully rushing water of the river in the inky darkness somewhere to her left, running parallel to the road. Fearful and anxious, she was suddenly also filled with anger at Rosanne: how dare she put her through this bloody worry!

At last, she saw the entrance to the Chapel farmstead on the right. It had no identification other than an untidy hand-lettered sign wired to the gate that read 'Trespassers will be shot. Survivors will be persecuted'. The message – and the mistakes – tell you all you need to know about the people living here, she thought uncharitably.

She stopped her car in front of the gate. Her headlights illuminated the car graveyard. She could vaguely make out the looming shape of the house behind it, and could see only one dim light on in a room at the far end of the building.

She turned off the engine, killed the lights and sat quietly, listening.

There was silence, other than the perpetual rumble of the invisible river, now behind her, across the muddy road. The party – if there had indeed been a party here – was clearly over.

She took her phone out of her coat pocket. It was 2.45 a.m.

## 5

‘Sure, I can get a warrant, but I don’t want to officially search your premises. That’ll mean lots more cops, dogs, the works. We don’t want that, do we? It’d be so much easier to just have a quick chat, you, me and your son.’

Sergeant Cupido was standing outside in the muddy road, leaning on the farm gate, her muscular forearms taking the weight of her torso, her spatulate hands hanging.

Ryan’s father, Charlie ‘Vlieg’ Chapel, stood inside the gate, fuming. He had refused to put the giant dogs in the back, so the noise of their barking and snarling dominated, filling the air with guttural wrath, making it almost impossible to be heard, which was clearly the point. The man was holding both by their collars, one in each hand, and the dogs were twisting and lunging.

‘That girl wasn’t here. I told the mother and I’m telling you!’ he shouted.

‘It’s not that I don’t believe you, Mr Chapel,’ Cupido shouted back, seemingly unconcerned by having to compete with the boerboels in order to be heard. ‘It’s just that this is the last place she said she’d be, and she hasn’t been seen since last night. Maybe Ryan knows something – maybe it’s something he doesn’t even know he knows.’

The two stared at each for a moment, the stoic woman with her steady brown-eyed gaze and the irate fat man with the cartoon moustache and the muscular dogs twisting at the ends of his ham hands. It was hard to believe that Vlieg had earned his nickname for being in the flyweight division of the amateur boxing league he’d belonged to when he was a teenager, thirty years and the same number of kilograms ago. And while life

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hadn't been exactly cruel to him, it also hadn't delivered the fame, glory and riches he'd expected back then, when he routinely won every fight he entered.

Sergeant Cupido shrugged her shoulders, apparently in defeat, and began turning away. 'I'll get a warrant and come back this afternoon.'

'No, just wait,' Vlieg shouted. 'Let me put the dogs away.' He didn't want the police poking around here. Not every single car on the property had been procured in a one-hundred-percent legal way, and if talking to this bloody woman meant getting the cops off his back, fine.

Sergeant Cupido nodded. She'd expected his capitulation, not least because the red Alfa Romeo Spider with the black soft-top that she'd spotted in the back corner of the yard, half-covered with a tatty tarpaulin, didn't look like the kind of car someone might bring to a backyard mechanic for attention. She also recalled that a 1980 model of this very car had been reported stolen from a nearby town a couple of months before. In an area where most crime was petty, nicked expensive classic cars tended to make an impression.

Chapel manhandled the dogs to the back of the property, shutting them behind a small gate. They continued to bark.

As he walked back towards the farm gate, Sergeant Cupido let herself in.

'Wait on the stoep,' Chapel said. 'I have to wake up the boy.'

Not ideal, thought Sergeant Cupido. She wanted to get inside the house. But, as is the case with so many things in life, it was better than nothing. She stood stamping the mud off her boots, looking out over the front portion of the property. It was a kind of junkyard of car bits and pieces, but she also saw household appliances: several fridges, some chest freezers, a stove, a pile of old airconditioners. She could now see the half-covered Alfa

Romeo more clearly. It was missing its rear number plate, but looked to be in perfect condition. She felt more certain than ever that it didn't legitimately belong here.

Chapel came out the front door, banging it open hard so that it slammed against the house wall. He was followed by a young man who had his father's facial features but was considerably taller, and who would, Sergeant Cupido could see, very soon beat his father in girth too.

'Ryan,' Chapel said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at his son by way of introduction.

The young man, whose mouth, like his father's, was naturally downturned, was rubbing his heavy-lidded eyes and porcine nose, and pushing his hands through his thick black hair. Stick an over-large ungroomed moustache on him and he'd be a dead ringer for Chapel senior. The younger version was wearing pyjama bottoms and had on a thick winter coat, but was barefoot. It was clear he'd been dragged out of bed.

Sergeant Cupido looked up and down the stoep. There were four wire chairs and a folding table at the far end, but it seemed they weren't going to be sitting there. Chapel was going to keep them all standing. He wanted this interview to be as short as possible.

'Morning, Ryan,' the detective said. 'I'm Sergeant Cupido. Your friends Rosanne Bronson and Jess Hallett are missing, and I just want to have a quick chat to you.'

'That bitch Jess Hallett isn't my friend,' the big teenager said in a phlegmy voice. Already a heavy smoker, Cupido thought. 'She's just Annie's handbrake.'

Sergeant Cupido nodded mildly, then said, 'Okay, let's start there, then. What's your relationship to Annie?'

The teenager leered at her. 'We hooked up, you know?'

'I don't know,' Cupido said. 'Let's assume I'm the total idiot

## Tuesday 23 February

### 4.15 a.m.

She's not sure if her eyes are tricking her or not, but the quality of the light seems to be changing again, and Imelda prays that it means dawn isn't far off.

She's not doing well. She's sore all over, and that ache in her right side that not so long ago felt manageable as long as she didn't move isn't just an ache any more. It's a hot, radiating pain. Although she's pretty sure she still can't feel her legs, she can also weirdly feel pain in them, which is a contradiction she can't explain but is just the way it is. Her head is full of pounding pain – the worst headache she's ever had – and the pounding is also in her face, which feels swollen and feverish.

And flip, she's thirsty.

She's spent the last few hours – it's felt like days – trying to distract herself by remembering how she and Dewald met, and their 'whirlwind romance' (it's what they call it when they refer to it to each other – they both enjoy the silliness of it), and their marriage, and their life since. And it's worked, up to a point. But now all she can think about is how much she needs water.

She stares out of the passenger window, through the trees – searching for visible light or movement, for anything to break the terrible monotony of this endless flippen night. But all remains darkish and still.

She'd got married in a dress she'd bought at the town's secondhand – 'pre-loved' – clothes shop. It was pale blue, knee length, with cap sleeves and a sweetheart neckline – not most people's idea of a wedding dress, but she loved it.

Dewald had paid for it, although she had refused to let him see it until their wedding day. It had been on sale because it was a summer dress and she'd bought it in the middle of winter.



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By some miracle the late-July day when they got married had dawned clear and had warmed up so much by early afternoon that when they had to present themselves at the magistrate's office, she hadn't even had to use the woolly cardigan she'd bought to go with it.

Dewald had worn jeans and a smart shirt, pale yellow. He had looked so handsome.

They had put a picnic together – just egg-mayo sandwiches and a bottle of sparkling wine, and some crisp green apples – and driven to the river, where they'd had their 'reception'. The river back then was overfull. It had broken its banks already once that winter and drowned the vineyards alongside. The water was fast-moving and noisy.

Dewald had used the wine to toast her: 'To the bride.'

'To the groom,' she'd countered with a smile.

They were a perfect family of two. Imelda had never believed in love at first sight, or that there was only one special someone out there for each person on earth. It just seemed so completely unlikely that out of seven billion people, there was one made exactly for her. But it turned out there really was, and that he'd found her. They'd found each other.

Even now, hanging upside down in her crashed car, with pain in every part of her body and her tongue grotesquely swollen from injury and lack of water, she gives a tiny grin: she can hardly believe how lucky she's been.

They had only known each other for two weeks when they got married but it had felt, right from the start, as if they'd known each other forever – from other lives, maybe. She felt that Dewald got her on a level she'd never experienced before, and she knew that he felt the same. He told her often enough.

They'd had the 'children or no children' talk early on. It

had, in fact, been among their first conversations, as if they'd both known by some sort of instinct that it was an important subject to address. Neither wanted children. Neither had had a happy time growing up; both had had parents who had at best disappointed them and at worst made their lives a misery. They had no wish to either revisit this with their own offspring, even if not intentionally, or to try to correct the wrongs of the past by doing it over again.

'Just you and me,' Dewald had said, holding Imelda tightly in his arms on their wedding night. With perfect timing, the rain had started again in the early evening, and by the time they'd got into bed, it was bucketing down outside. Their little home was a warm cocoon, their double bed a nest.

'Just you and me,' she tries to whisper to herself, remembering, but her throat is too dry to produce recognisable sounds.

## Wednesday 24 February

### 2.49 p.m.

Dewald hears car tyres crunching on the gravel drive outside the house, and he rushes to the front door, Vumba on his heels. But it's not Imelda's little VW; it's a police patrol van, and he can see Detective Cupido in the driver's seat. She's early.

She notices Dewald glance at his watch, and winds down the driver's window to call out, 'Things were slow at the station.'

Dewald nods. Good, he thinks. Let's get this search going.

Cupido hasn't told him there's going to be a search, but he assumes that now that the missing-person paperwork has been completed, the actual search will begin. And, he thinks, of course Detective Cupido would want to start with their home – it's where he last saw his wife, after all.

'That dog friendly?' Cupido asks, nodding her head towards Vumba, who's circling the vehicle on loping legs, sniffing the wheels.

'Ja,' Dewald replies. 'Not a mean bone in her body. She only looks like she might eat you.'

Cupido doesn't seem completely convinced, and Dewald understands that: before Vumba, he wasn't that keen on dogs either.

Vumba had been the pet of a colleague at the quarry, raised with the kids and much loved by her family. The guy's youngest, a toddler, had drowned in a bucket of recycled water placed in the bathroom for use to flush the toilet. It was an unthinkable tragedy, ghastly collateral damage of the water shortage, and it had shattered the family. The guy's wife had left him and taken their other two kids, and he'd eventually sold their family home and moved into a flat. Dewald had volunteered to look after Vumba for a while, until the guy got himself sorted out, and a

while has turned into almost a year now, and the guy, who is still in the flat and doesn't look like he's going to get himself sorted out any time soon, has stopped asking how the dog is doing.

As it happens, she's doing just fine. She's an incredibly chilled animal, and although her size, wolf-like demeanour and jet-black pelt give her the appearance of an attack-dog, nothing could be further from the truth. Her endearingly mismatched ears, one ever erect, the other permanently flopped over, are a clue to her real personality, which is both fiercely intelligent and protective, and ridiculously laid back.

She'd taken to Dewald immediately, and apparently accepted him as her new owner without a backward glance at her previous life. She's happy with him and Imelda as long as they feed her and pay some attention to her occasionally. While they're both at work, she's content to snooze away the hours inside, and she seems equally happy on her walks with Dewald, which he takes her on whenever he can find time. She seems to just have the most amazing trust that everything will always turn out fine in the end, and Dewald often finds himself looking at her with admiration but also something approaching envy. He certainly could do with a big dose of that trust right now.

Dewald watches Captain Cupido stride over to him, studiously ignoring Vumba, who's sniffing searchingly around her ankles. Now that she isn't sitting behind a counter, Dewald notices that the police officer is short and squat, with squarish hands – they make her look strong and capable. He likes the confidence in her walk, too – he has a feeling that if anyone can find his wife, it's this woman.

She shakes his hand firmly and gestures with her chin at the open front door. 'Should we go inside?'

They take a seat in the breakfast nook, which puts them in uncomfortably close quarters. It's fine when Imelda is sitting

practically in his lap but Dewald isn't sure how to deal with having the detective's frank gaze so close to his.

Vumba pushes her long black nose between them, for which Dewald is grateful. He offers her a hand to lick, to keep her there.

'Okay, so,' Detective Cupido begins. 'Your wife disappeared on Monday evening. You didn't report her missing until today.'

'Ja, and I told you why,' Dewald says, wishing he didn't sound so defensive.

'Ja,' Cupido says, pushing herself back in the chair, then turning and stretching her legs out in front of her before crossing them at the ankle. The kitchen is so small that, short as she is, her boots are now more or less in the middle of the room. 'But how do I know you didn't kill her, Mr Uys?'

The suggestion floors Dewald. '*What?*' he says.

'Well, it looks suspicious,' Captain Cupido replies, casually linking her hands behind her head. 'You say you and your wife are like this' – she briefly holds up her right hand, entwining her pointer and middle finger – 'but somehow you don't even notice she's gone for two days and two nights?'

'But I explained that,' Dewald says, feeling anger working its way up from somewhere in his stomach area towards his jaw. 'I was working. We often don't see each other for—'

'Ja, but still,' Cupido cuts him off. 'You see how it looks, hey?'

Dewald stares at the detective, defensive, furious and appalled, as she continues.

'I've spoken to Mr Roberts at the municipality – a real charmer, that one.' She rolls her eyes. 'He told me the same thing he told you, that Mrs Uys had signed in and signed out at what seemed like normal times. What he couldn't tell me was that he'd seen her himself with his very own eyes.'

Dewald is working at tamping down the anger. He doesn't

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Tracey Hawthorne is the author of many non-fiction books, including an award-winning biography of the artist John Meyer. Her short stories have been published in magazines and journals locally and internationally. She works as an editor for mainstream publishers and private clients. *Flipped* is her first novel.

