

**This book is dedicated to my aunts Carole Anderson
and Annie Smith who are no longer with us, but
as passionate readers they inspired me from my
childhood to read and write.**

If only I could send them a copy of Night Driver...

A novel by MARCELLE PERKINS





You won't kill me; I'll be back – yes,
I shall be amongst you for all eternity.

Fritz Haarmann (1879–1925)

A novel by MARCELLE PEREYRÉ



Prologue

In the **black and white photograph**, he looks too cheerful to have killed anybody. But because of what he did he was the first serial killer to make newspaper headlines all over the world.

Look again and his expression is less benign, as though he's concentrating on something. The eyebrows are thick, like furry stripes, but his eyes are set too close together. Perhaps he is just frowning. The pre-war Hitler moustache he sports, with a bald stripe in the middle, makes him seem worse than he really is. His hat is broad and jaunty, with a light-coloured ribbon around the crown. It fails to hide his sticking-out ears. There's a flap of loose skin visible above his tight collar. The tie is a ridiculous miniature, in the dapper fashion of the time. Even all these years on, this middle-aged man is still trying to impress. He took so much, when he needed so little.

Every time Lars the lorry driver looks at his good-luck photo of Fritz, he feels a tingle of recognition.

When Lars picks someone up, they usually ask about the photo attached prominently on the dashboard.

'Who's that?'

'That's our Fritz,' he always says, zinging on the 'z' at the end. Usually he laughs then. If they know about the killer Haarmann already, it gets them thinking. He likes it better when they're scared.

Not that he knows who he will take and who he will just drop off at the next rest stop or wherever he's heading. That's *Schicksal*.

On the open road, anything's possible, especially after dark. Real life just seems to disappear under the wheels of his lorry. The only world that stretches out into infinity is the burning strip of *Autobahn* he is travelling on and the possibilities that it carries: boys wanting to hook up with drugs or danger. Or something else. And if Fritz were here right now, in this world, Lars knows that he would embrace it. Sometimes he wants to be Fritz; sometimes he is Fritz.

Such a force of nature could never be completely extinguished.



Chapter One

What Francesca Snell disliked, she did badly. And when she tried her damndest, *trotzdem*, to fight her inborn stubbornness, every part of her body sweated strife. At thirty-one it was hard adjusting to life in Germany. Until recently she'd worked for a dot.com company and travelled every month alone on business to amazing Caribbean islands. There'd been the unexpected thrill of the turquoise blue sea, and the warm balmy air that calmed her senses. She'd never even been with her parents on holiday before to a foreign country. After years of struggling to get a decent job with her English degree, of her parents being disappointed that their talented daughter only bounced from one lousy short-term contract to the next, suddenly she was an offshore B2B publishing consultant. She had a year-round glow and was always going off somewhere in a plane.

True, the job was more sales than creative, but she felt that her natural talent had been finally spotted. She could work anywhere and do anything as long as she had access to a laptop.

But then the recession came, and the publishing sector in which she'd worked was hit hard. With the rise of the internet, readers could search most things for free. She lost her fancy job and struggled to find a new one. She panicked and sold her East London three-bed terraced house rather than risk falling behind on the mortgage.

She'd had to struggle to find work in the creative industries, arts graduates were inevitably exploited, and it always irked her that the scientists and engineers who'd studied at university with her had it so much easier. Her parents didn't have much money to support her and resented the fact that she'd studied the soft option – arts rather than a profession. Her dad had hoped she would be a doctor or IT expert and never got tired of telling her so.

Of course, her husband was cut from another cloth. Not only was he an engineer, he was German. She'd met Kurt when he was testing a wind turbine project in the Cayman Islands. He'd been so relaxed then. He was naturally attractive, with wide-open features and deep blue eyes. His was the kind of face that made you think of old-fashioned movie stars in double-breasted suits. He hadn't tried to get her into bed instantly like the English guys she was used to. Instead he took her to dinner and showed her the best place for scuba-diving. He dated her, fastidiously, as if they were sixteen. Her every whim mattered to him. He wasn't a genius creative like her previous boyfriends, a crazy film director and a brash journalist, but his interest in her was overwhelming. And that was addictive. The only thing they had in common was mutual attraction, but at first that was enough.

That first week in the Cayman Islands they drank one Mudslider Sling after another as they watched the sun go down. After a year of commuting, seeing each other every three weeks, when she'd lost her job she'd taken the plunge and moved over to be with him. She'd sold her house at a good profit and thought she could always move back if things didn't work out. But then the property boom in London went crazy, and before she knew it she was priced out of the market.

Things were good with Kurt the first year or so but then they had got married and moved here, and after that their relationship

had solidified in a direction she didn't like. What for Kurt was normality was, for her, oppression. After being an international jet-setter, suddenly she was stuck in the German suburbs with no driving licence. There was a bus once an hour. It was like living in the fifties. In their village there was no takeaways; you actually had to cook if you wanted to eat. If you went to the local pub, people only went there for nosh and were in bed by ten. Their house and garden were big – that was why they had chosen the village, and Kurt had grown up in the suburbs and was comfortable with it – and they had enough to live on, but every day was the same. Kurt worked, earned the money, but there was the unspoken assumption that she had to keep house. As a previously independent businesswoman, she was terrible at handling that. It upset her, having to live with her own clutter with no real job to pour her energies into. For the first time in her life, she felt as though she'd taken the wrong path. She just couldn't shake it off, a secret dread that her father had been right all along. All this time she had been wasting her talents.

A lot of the time she would throw herself into creative projects she could never bring to fruition. Two non-fiction books fell through. The never-ending cycle of housework deadened her, and she knew that her ambivalence, in her occasional phone calls, worried her parents. She was proud and stubborn and didn't like to reach out to anyone. A lot of her friends had distanced themselves now she was in Germany and not available to go down the pub.

Most of all she was frustrated with herself. She'd wanted security, a partner, to have children, but not this stilled life. She missed her old ways; the feeling of doing something with meaning and purpose.

When she had got pregnant accidentally, after a stomach upset made her pill ineffective, she hadn't known how to react. This

had been part of her long-term plan, but she hadn't yet settled in Germany and had been secretly hoping to persuade Kurt to move back to the city and that she would find a job. Kurt had initially said he wanted her to keep the baby, but as her pregnancy had become visible, and her previously small breasts had become full and her flat stomach ballooned – and, she acknowledged, as getting heavier had made her more irritable – he'd started withdrawing from her. He wouldn't admit that, of course. Every time she tried to discuss it, he gave her a shopping list of her failings that she was supposed to improve. And they hadn't been intimate since the third month.

When they had first moved in, Kurt had convinced her that the key to coping with her new lifestyle was getting mobile, so she was taking daily driving lessons. But she hated the stupid driving rules. She had quickly realised she had a fear of driving; nothing else had the capacity to make her so anxious. She had persisted, but now it was even worse: it was hard to concentrate when you were hot and bloated and had to pee all the time.

The struggles with her driving instructor reinforced her view that living in Germany was miserable. But before she'd fallen pregnant she'd convinced herself that if she could just master this one mechanical skill, then she'd be able to drive to the local city, Hannover, and potentially find a new job and new friends. And if that was now out of reach, with the baby coming she would need to be able to drive just to buy baby supplies, to take the baby to its checkups, and so on. There was no corner shop and the doctor was three miles away.

Her driving instructor was laughably abrupt. His English was confined to a few words that he used inappropriately. Heinrich had been wearing drainpipe jeans since the eighties; he was fifty going on fifteen. There was no allowance made for the fact that she

didn't really speak German. She had learned quite a lot, but Kurt's English was very good so they spoke English at home. Most of the vocabulary relating to cars, like 'windscreen wipers', was unknown to her, yet Heinrich would bark a command and expect her to instantly comply; he forced her to drive in that pushy style which was curiously German. Today was a typical lesson.

'Right,' he said, in his broken English, '*Nächste rechts*, go!'

Frannie squinted at the peculiar way the road snaked into the curve ahead. Could she make the turn? The car already seemed to be falling down the hill just moving into third gear. Her hand wavered on the gear stick. Should she change down to second gear already and risk the Mercedes behind going into her, or try and take the bend going at fifty? She fluttered with indecision.

'*RECHTS!*' Without warning Heinrich grabbed the steering wheel. The car dived sharply right. Through the windscreen, the road was a twisting blur. The wheel felt alien in Frannie's hands. It was a struggle not to instinctively brake to control her panic, because doing that annoyed her driving instructor more than anything else. And when he got angry, he shouted in German and forgot all his English.

Shit. There was another parked car blocking her side. The road was alive with dangers. The car screeched left, right. She was having a hard time being delicate with the wheel. She checked the mirrors. Thank God there was no one behind her. Other motorists terrified her. She could only drive comfortably when she had the road to herself.

Her face was screwed up in concentration. The car lurched suddenly forward, and the engine screamed with a grinding wrench. The speedometer topped seventy. She looked down, wondering if she'd pressed the accelerator by mistake. No, it was Heinrich again.

‘Go! *Gehen!*’ His foot was furiously working the parallel pedals. His face bristled with indignation. The car groaned as it responded to double commands. They sped abruptly left, forcing an oncoming vehicle to give them priority. Heinrich began to shout terse stuff in German she didn’t understand.

‘*Was machst du?*’ He looked as if he was about to slap her. His startlingly green eyes, which once must have made him cute, didn’t fit the rest of his face.

She flashed him a warning look. She was older than his teenage regulars, and they were both frustrated that it was taking her so long to master the basics. Not speaking each other’s language didn’t help. And the fact that she was heavily pregnant.

The first five months or so she’d almost ignored her pregnancy, telling herself not to stress about it. Then she’d hit the sixth month and woken up a crazy woman, consumed with the overwhelming desire to get everything ready for her baby, which she knew now was a boy – Kurt had insisted on finding out, and the evening of the scan had been almost as nice to her as when they’d first met, as if getting an heir was their singular reason for being together. He said he loved her but seemed to prefer the company of his mates. She had focused on getting the nursery just right, on having all the toiletries on hand (even the ones she might not even need). It all had to be perfect. And she’d booked a driving lesson every day so she’d be able to drive and look after her baby like a proper mother.

And now, alarmingly soon, tomorrow was her driving test, and if she didn’t pass there wouldn’t be another chance to do it again before the baby was born. She couldn’t imagine how it would be once he was there, but she was sure it would be even harder to summon her energies.

Houses whooshed past. It was hard actually driving at the speed limit; Frannie always wanted to go much slower. She hated the

constant pressure to concentrate on the road every second. She tried to sit straight, forget about her bump.

Suddenly, the road opened out, as a stream flows into a river, into a Schnellstrasse, the B6. The long, straight road thrummed with gleaming cars. Frannie's knees trembled. Now she'd have to somehow filter in and keep up with the flow of traffic that drove so close that if the windows were open you could smell their aftershave.

'Gehen!' shouted Heinrich. He flapped his little notebook at her. There was a dreadful screech, as if the car was driving over something broken. Frannie hadn't quite got into fifth gear. Heinrich shouted something. Frannie grimaced. Her white maternity dress was limp with sweat; it was an exceptionally hot June. Desperately, she looked for a gap in the traffic to get off the feeder road. The speeding cars ignored her frantic signals. Meanwhile, the entry lane was merging, but some idiot was behind her gunning for her tail-lights all the way.

Shit. Frannie went, pushing the car in front of her practically off the road. There was the whisper of a near-collision. Beside her, Heinrich gasped. Normally he had to tell her not to drive so slowly. Now, with the devil in her, she was belting down her side of the white line for all she was worth. When she really wanted something, she could surprise herself.

She was going to pass the driving test. She must.