

Nick Aaron

# D for Daisy

The Daisy Hayes trilogy I

ANOTHER IMPRINT PUBLISHERS

World War II. During the attacks on Berlin in the winter of 1943-44, wave after wave of British bombers swept over northern Europe and dropped their lethal loads on the German capital. A fair percentage of the bombers would fail to return from these *operations*, and RAF planners calculated the life expectancy of the airmen in weeks rather than months.

Therefore it did not seem strange when a Lancaster named D-Daisy landed at its base in England after a bombing run, and a member of the crew was found dead.

However, one person soon came to the conclusion that this man had been murdered. And the person who discovered this happened to be blind since birth. Her name was Daisy and she was the victim's wife. She was very blonde and very pretty; also very young. Therefore, no one would listen to her. So she was going to have to find the murderer on her own.

*“Using the carefully plotted twists and turns of the murder mystery, throwing in a highly unconventional blind sleuth with her very own take on the world, Nick Aaron lifts the genre to a more thoughtful level.”*

The Weekly Banner

This is the first volume of *The Daisy Hayes Trilogy*

- I D for Daisy
- II Blind Angel of Wrath
- III Daisy and Bernard

*We roar all like bears, and mourn sore like  
doves: we look for judgment, but there is none; for  
salvation, but it is far off from us.*

Isaiah 59:11

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## I 1943: Murder over Berlin

That night, as they finally flew over the Dutch coast and reached the North Sea, the crew on board D-Daisy became very nervous. They were almost home, which should have been a relief, but their skipper had been knocked out, and Derek, the flight engineer, had taken over the controls. He had never landed the aircraft before. He was now shouting to his crew-mates over the intercom.

“Rear-gunner! what do you say? Can the bomb-aimer leave his guns now?”

“Yes, yes, I think so! We’re still in range of the ‘bandits’, but if they attack, it will *definitely* be from behind. So leave them to the mid-upper and myself. We’ll take care of them...”

“All right! So, Ken, get up here at once! I want you in the flight engineer’s seat pronto. And don’t forget your chute; we’re still in bailout readiness.”

“Right! Coming!”

It took some time for Ken to disconnect his mask from the oxygen supply, his flight helmet from the intercom lines, and to extricate himself and his bulky flying suit from the narrow nose-turret of the Lancaster. In the meantime Derek called out to the wireless, who was stationed right next to the first aid bed, “Wireless! how’s the skipper doing?”

Can you feel a pulse?”

“Dunno! I thought I felt something a while ago, but right now I’m not sure. I’m still feeding some oxygen into his mask, though...”

“Good! Can’t you put a pocket mirror between his teeth or something; check if he’s still breathing?”

“I don’t *have* a pocket mirror, dammit! *Who’s* got a pocket mirror on this kite? You don’t fly all the way to Berlin to have a *shave!*”

“Hold your horses, for Chrissake!”

Derek and the crew were assuming that their skipper had been hit by flak, even though there was no visible wound. On their mission that night they had flown through several flak barrages, on the way out and coming back. It was inevitable on an op like this, deep into enemy territory. It meant you just had to fly on through exploding high altitude shells, with shrapnel bursting forth in all directions. And that in its turn always meant taking your chances in a deadly lottery where there were few winners. Tiny pieces of shrapnel would shoot right through the aircraft’s skin and could hit an airman, acting like a dum dum bullet. Sometimes an unlucky chap took a direct hit, and his head or his chest just exploded. You heard gruesome stories. In this case, it seemed that the skipper had been badly injured by some freak splinter that had shredded a vital internal organ but hardly left a mark on the outside.

Meanwhile Ken had climbed from the bottom of the nose up to the flight deck, and connected himself to the engineer’s station, to the right of the pilot’s seat. “Bomb-aimer reporting, I’m at your station now, Derek, what do you want me to do?”

“Just read out the figures on every gauge on the panel in front of you. Start top left and go down row by row, like a book...”

Ken started to call out the figures.

“Faster! Faster! We haven’t got much time!”

When he had finished reading out the figures, the bomb aimer asked anxiously, “What do you say, Derek, are we all right?”

“Yes, the kite is sound, thank God. Fuel readings good. Hydraulics good. ‘D for Daisy’ can land.”

“Yes, but can *you* land her?”

“I don’t *know*, for crying out loud! I’ve never done it before. It’s not that easy... Listen up, you chaps. I’m no good at yawing and breaking with the flaps to decrease our speed on the glide path. All that is just too tricky, as you can imagine. So we’ll touch down at a much higher speed than we’re used to, all right? It’s going to be a rough landing... Now, wireless, I think it’s time to call ahead and tell them this: skipper down; flight engineer in charge; emergency landing imminent; wounded man on board in critical state... All right?”

“Roger that! I’m on it.”

As soon as the people manning flight control received the message, it was their turn to be nervous, even though for them it was all in a day’s work. It wasn’t unusual for a bomber to have dead or wounded crew-members on board. And sometimes it was the skipper, the pilot himself, who had been knocked out. But of course there was no co-pilot on a bomber nowadays, for the simple reason that pilots were scarce. So it was the flight engineer who had to land the bomber, and that was the part that made everyone nervous. Landing such a behemoth for the very first time was a risky business and a frightening experience for all concerned.

Flight control had a slot prepared for the poor chaps; they needed a cleared runway; the other bombers would be put on hold while they landed. An experienced pilot on a direct link with the flight engineer on board the Lanc would try to talk him through the landing procedure. By the time

D-Daisy approached her base, with the first intimations of dawn lighting up the horizon behind her, everything was in place.

So the Lancaster banged down onto the tarmac at high speed, Derek immediately cut back the engines, raised the flaps as high as he could, and hit the brakes on the wheels of the landing gear as much as he dared. By some miracle the big machine kept steady and screeched to a standstill, just as the ambulance and the firefighters came rushing along. Then the crew sprang into action, lifted the inanimate body of their skipper off the first aid bed and clambered along the narrow gangway to the entry door at the back. The paramedics stood ready with a stretcher; the skipper was carried away immediately and the ambulance sped off.

Three of Daisy's friends sat yawning and grumbling at her kitchen table, in her small flat in Tufnell Park, on that same winter morning at half past seven.

"I'm not even awake yet," the first girl sighed.

"I should still be in bed, nicely warm and cosy," the second one added.

"I'm going to fail that exam anyway," the third one—who thought she was very wise—reflected. Her failing was not likely, but she believed in being pessimistic so that you could rely on the outcome exceeding your expectations.

At that moment Daisy returned briskly to the kitchen, and in the slightly hectoring tone that was typical of her, she exclaimed, "Cheer up, you girls! I can hear you grumbling all the way from the other end of the flat."

She was holding a plaster and papier-mâché model in her hands, which she had just retrieved from her bedroom. Her flat was strewn with these anatomical models, on loan from the professional training school: the skeleton, the muscles, the nervous system.



“Now let’s see, what have we here? The muscles of the human torso...”

Daisy sat down at the table with the model in front of her, and with her head held high, not looking at her hands, she proceeded to remove the muscles of the chest and shoulders one by one, giving the name and the particulars of one part after another. Her three friends took turns looking up the answers in their anatomy manuals. She was rather impatient, and spurred them on relentlessly, running one muscle after the other by them.

“Gee whiz! This is uncanny, Daise,” girl number one exclaimed, “your knowledge is already word-perfect!”

“Yes,” Daisy admitted, “I believe I have it mapped in my mind pretty well...”

“It makes me wonder why we’re here. You don’t really need our help,” girl number two remarked.

“Well, darling, as they don’t have these anatomy books in Braille, I still need your eyes to check the answers for me, don’t I? Besides, has it never occurred to you that in fact it is *I* who am helping *you* girls to memorize this stuff properly, not the other way round?”

“Be that as it may,” girl number three grumbled, “*you* certainly don’t need to worry about that exam!”

They continued to rehearse the muscles of the chest, Daisy taking them apart and then putting them back together. By the time the torso was complete again, Daisy suddenly remarked, “Why are these models always male, anyway? How are we supposed to treat a patient when there’s a pair of *tits* in the way, right *here...* and *there!*” And she smiled, deadpan, her tiny teeth and the dimples in her cheeks imparting something childlike and innocent to her whole face.

The girls chuckled fondly. You could always rely on Daisy to have an original point of view on things. That was why they were so devoted to her. Of course you just

couldn't refuse to help a blind girl, but in Daisy's case there was more than that involved. There had to be, as she was so demanding.

To start with, the girls were proud to be training for a profession, and a medical one at that, at St Mary's Hospital—University of London, no less! Most girls didn't get any training at all, and the few who did mostly wanted to become nurses, but as physical-therapists-to-be, these girls felt far superior to the nurses-in-training. Daisy had once told them, "Nurses only do what the doctors say, and they want to marry one as soon as possible. As a physical therapist, at least, you're going to be your own man!"

That was another thing about Daisy: she was already married—to a bomber pilot, no less! Officially she was Mrs Ralph Prendergast. She had a flat of her own, the place where they were right now. She had sex each time her husband came home on leave. The glamour of that! And not only did she have sexual experience, but she was quite frank about it and willing to share her knowledge. "The proper terminology is 'making love'," she always corrected them. But as most of her fellow students were still virgins, the subject was shrouded in mystery and held endless fascination to them all.

Presently, at the kitchen table, girl number one was saying, "Oh, please, Daise, don't give me your Gorgon stare, everyone can make a mistake. Can I help it that the trapezius and the deltoid sound so similar to me?"

"Well I'm sorry, but I hate it when you sow confusion in my mind, that's all."

In a placating spirit, girl number three, who was new to the group, cried out, "It must be frustrating to be blind when you're so intelligent!"

But that only brought on another withering frown. "It must be frustrating to have eyes when you're so stupid!"

"Ouch! That hurts!"

The two other girls sniggered uncomfortably, and girl number two said, “Darling Daisy, sometimes you remind me of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde... Not that I’ve read the book, but you know what I mean.”

The others laughed, “Yes, yes, we get the picture!”

Daisy laughed too. Then there was a knock at the door. “Who on earth could that be, this early?” the friends wondered aloud, but Daisy muttered, “I’m afraid I have a fair idea...”

When she opened her front door, she asked, “Major Mannings?”

“Good Lord! Mrs Prendergast, how can you tell?”

“Your uniform comes from the same cleaners as Ralph’s, I can smell it. And of course, ever since Ralph started flying operations for you, I have been waiting for this moment...”

The man in front of Daisy had known in advance that the girl who would open the door of this poky little flat would be totally blind, but what was even more striking was her physical appearance and her self-assurance. She was exceptionally beautiful: tall, shapely and blonde.

Her hair formed a halo of wild blond curls around her head. Not the wavy perm of the forties, but a thicket of natural curls like Shirley Temple’s. She looked extremely attractive in every respect, even rather sexy: hourglass silhouette; Hollywood glamour, so to speak—the major gulped. However, as she stood there in front of him, Daisy frowned fiercely, and the major was taken aback by her eyes. All one could see were ungainly slits, and what remained of her eyeballs reminded one of very unappetising scrambled eggs. As she frowned, the empty buttonholes of Daisy’s atrophied eyes added something frightening and withering to her expression. That was what her schoolmates called “the Gorgon stare”.

“Please come in, Major. I’ll ask my friends to leave us

alone now...”

A moment later, her three friends left the premises in a subdued silence. As graciously as she could, Daisy said, “Thanks for your help, girls, and good luck with that exam. I’m afraid I won’t be taking it with you this time around...”

Then, when she had put aside the anatomical models cluttering the kitchen table, and they had both taken a seat, Daisy said, “I guess you are here on account of Ralph?”

“Yes, alas, Mrs Prendergast...”

“Please, call me Daisy. I know I’m just a young girl to you... Tell me what happened.”

“Well, *D for Daisy* did land safely at base last night, but Ralph’s inanimate body was carried off to the sickbay, and later our Medical Officer sent back word that he was dead. There was nothing we could do...”

The girl said nothing. She just sat there at the kitchen table, frowning. The major peered intently at her face; with blind people, he supposed, it was not rude to do so as they couldn’t tell. He now observed that her lower lip was trembling, observed the slight wobbling of her chin as she visibly fought back her tears. How long could she hold out before breaking down?

“Are you all right... erm... Daisy?”

The trembling stopped; she shook it off and pulled herself together.

“Yes... yes. Well, now you’re here, you might as well take me back to the airbase at once!”

“Oh? I see! Yes, of course...”

“Have I just been ordered around by this girl?” Major Mannings wondered, as he and Daisy were driving out of London in his big black saloon car.

For Major Mannings this was an unusual notion. He was the Commanding Officer of a large RAF station in

Essex; he was in charge of around seventy bombers, Lancasters, “real biggies” as he liked to call them. A pretty exciting and exacting job that put huge responsibilities squarely on a man’s shoulders. And it had taken him longer than most to get to such a position, what with his RAF career stretching on endlessly after the Great War...

Lately he had suffered heavy losses, like all of Bomber Command, because of the massive attacks on Berlin. One night after the other saw the loss of a fair number of bombers on their long-range operations deep into the Reich. All over the country many crews would fail to return to base.

Last night’s operation had been all right, however, even rather successful. His men had been part of a bomber stream of 800 aircraft, but losses had been moderate. Perhaps the new system of dense flying formation was paying off after all. Still, one of his best pilots had been killed, even though his Lanc had made it back to base unharmed.

So, all was not well. Now that Ralph was dead, it was he himself, the CO of the airbase, who had to drive into London and go tell the widow about it. That was now the established procedure at his station, and it was the very same Ralph Prendergast who had insisted that it be so. “Wouldn’t you agree, Sir, that it’s the least you can do when one of us dies?” Such a well-bred young fellow... However, there had never been any question of taking the widow along to the airbase!

As they drove on through open country, Major Mannings marvelled at the blind girl sitting next to him. She was now wearing dark glasses, two simple black discs mounted in a wire frame, and she had a white bamboo cane by her side, and a brown leather handbag on her lap. But what was truly eerie about her was her total composure. Not a sob, not a sound, not a tear from her. On

his way into London the major had dreaded and loathed the idea that once again, he was going to have to deal with a very young war widow who would break down completely when she heard the news he was bringing. But none of the usual spectacle with this one. No shrieks, no bawling, no throwing oneself on the ground and beating the floor with tiny fists. That had been a tremendous relief, of course, but it felt awkward all the same to be sitting next to this forbidding blind Sphinx now, who was still frowning fiercely, and to be driving back to the airbase in complete stillness...

At length the major couldn't help himself; he had to speak up. "I say, er, Daisy, you don't seem to cry easily, do you?"

"No, you're right, Sir. But believe me, if I could cry, I would."

They drove on for a while, then Daisy asked, "Did you see Ralph's body? Was he badly maimed?"

"I wouldn't know, I didn't see him, no..."

Daisy frowned some more. "How strange..."

"Well, you know, you get word from the Medical Officer and you just act on it: I didn't find it necessary to go and see the body as such."

"Well, *I* want to see it if I may. That is: touch it with my fingers, obviously."

"Oh yes, by all means! You will be brought to the morgue if you so wish, of course... So that is why you wanted to come with me... You know, it was Ralph himself who made sure that I myself, or one of my senior officers, should break the news to you in person..."

Then an idea struck the major. "I say, Daisy. Tonight we have another operation on; I'll be quite busy. So do you mind taking a train back to London when we're done? I can arrange for someone to escort you to the station... Or someone could drive you home?"

“No, not necessary. I can take the train on my own. There are so many kind and helpful people around. I will always find someone to help me on board, and even on a crowded train a seat is almost guaranteed...”

“Oh, splendid!”

And that is how Daisy ended up sitting on a hard chair in an office at the morgue in Great Dunmow, a small town near her dead husband’s RAF station. The middle-aged official who received her marvelled at how beautiful this blind girl was—he even gulped. Then he said slowly, as if talking to a child, “Normally we would require of you, as the widow of the deceased, the painful duty of identifying your loved one. However, as you are blind...”

“Yes, yes, I know, I cannot legally identify Ralph. But believe me, I’ll know it’s him all the same. I only wish to touch his face. I want to hear and smell his absence, so to speak. Exactly as normal people would say: I need to see him. So please, I beg you...”

The official picked up the phone and asked the morgue attendant to come and escort the lady, then they waited for his arrival in a deadly silence. The man just didn’t know what to say to this blind girl with her dark glasses and her white cane. She was holding her handbag on her lap with one hand and had placed her little brown suitcase neatly on the floor next to her chair. She looked very young, awfully young for a war widow, like a little girl play-acting at being a grown-up. But a lot of the war widows he received in his office nowadays were like that.

When at last she was in the presence of Ralph’s body, Daisy placed her fingertips on his face and started to stroke his features. It was Ralph all right, the great love of her life: the man she had been in love with since she had been sixteen, and had been married to for almost three years. She caressed his face softly, lovingly, for a long time. She

started to cry. Silent and mucous tears issued sparingly from the hollows of her atrophied eyes and trickled slowly from under her dark glasses and down her cheeks. After a while she asked the attendant in an unsteady voice, "Excuse me, I'd like to touch the wounds. As I am blind, you understand, I can only know how my husband died by touch. Would you be kind enough to guide my hands to the wounds?"

"Certainly, Madam. Let me take away the shroud..."

There was a silence while the attendant drew back the sheet and started looking for the wounds. Daisy could hear that he was swallowing hard, probably on account of her, probably fighting back a few tears. After a moment he managed to mumble something about turning over the body, then there was a longer pause as he turned the corpse back and forth while still looking. Finally he gasped and said, "I really can't seem to find any wounds, Madam, I'm awfully sorry..."

"This is certainly very strange, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Now that I think of it, it does seem a bit strange, yes."

Daisy mulled this over, all the while probing the corpse with her fingertips, and finally asked, "You're the man who cleans the corpses, I take it? Did you ever before have an airman who died during an op and had no wounds?"

"No. Now that you ask: never, Madam."

"So when you washed Ralph's body, didn't it strike you as odd that he didn't have any?"

"Well, I didn't think of it at the time. I guess I was assuming that this young man was a civilian..."

"Oh no, this is Ralph all right. Pilot Officer Ralph Prendergast, he was the skipper on a Lancaster."

"Yes, Ralph Prendergast, that's what the label attached to his left toe also states. But no military rank, they must have forgotten to write it down at the station... Normally



they also write down the rank.”

While they were talking, Daisy’s fingertips kept going up and down her dead husband’s body, not even skipping the most intimate parts, which caused the attendant to swallow hard again. After a while the blind young woman said, “Thank you ever so much for your patience, you’ve been a great help...”

Back in the morgue official’s office, Daisy explained the situation to him. She made a conscious effort to sound subdued and deferential, a tone not natural to her, and asked if it would not be advisable to perform an autopsy on the deceased in order to determine the cause of death, “That is, assuming it hasn’t been done already, of course.”

“Well no. We don’t normally order an autopsy on dead airmen. Surely you can understand why.”

“Yes, but as it appears that my late husband has no wounds...”

“Well, first of all, we don’t have a positive identification yet. Officially we don’t know that this is your husband we’re talking about.”

“All right, I get that. I’ll call my mother-in-law as soon as I can get to a phone. I assume a mother is entitled to identify her son?”

“Yes, yes, of course. But even so. As I said, we receive too many dead airmen...”

“But how many of those had no wounds whatsoever? That is what I am asking you.”

“But you are blind! How can you be so sure?”

“Then go and see for yourself! There is not a single wound. And as a widow, am I not entitled to know what happened to my husband?”

“There’s the rub, Madam. I’m sorry to have to say this, but I’m afraid your grief is leading you astray. You are grasping at straws. Just grasping at straws.”

“Well, I don’t understand what that has got to do with

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