

Nick Aaron

# Daisy and Bernard

The Daisy Hayes trilogy III

ANOTHER IMPRINT PUBLISHERS

In the summer of 1989 the Iron Curtain was unravelling, and Daisy Hayes had just become a pensioner who liked to do her ironing while listening to the latest news on the radio.

The doorbell chimed. A police officer handed over a summons—printed in Braille. Daisy was being asked to testify about a baffling and gruesome murder, and had to follow the policeman at once. During the ride to New Scotland Yard, even before the first interview took place, the blind lady reflected that, though she knew nothing about this case, she would not be able to prove her innocence without revealing the two murders she actually *had* committed—many years ago.

In an original twist to the “good cop-bad cop” routine, the older police investigator in charge of this strange case seemed to be very much in love with the blind suspect, and encouraged her to come clean and find redemption at long last.

*“As we have almost come to expect from this author, Nick Aaron playfully tweaks and mixes the conventions of different genres, offering us a compelling murder mystery that is at the same time a heart-rending romance.”*

The Weekly Banner

This is the third volume of *The Daisy Hayes Trilogy*:

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

*A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to keep  
silence and a time to speak; a time to embrace and  
a time to refrain from embracing.*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

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## Prologue

The victim had been utterly crushed, so much was clear. The mangled body was lying on the concrete floor of the garage, just under a hydraulic lift. The vehicle lift had been raised by one Constable Collins, the police officer who had found the victim.

When Detective Chief Inspector Bramble arrived on the crime scene, stepping out of his car and through the workshop door, he automatically looked out for the highest-ranking member of the local police who was present. He stepped up to a man wearing the chevrons of a sergeant. “What do we have here, Sergeant, erm...?”

“Sergeant Thompson Sir. A suspicious death, to say the least Sir.”

“Any ID on the victim?”

“Yes Sir. Martin McCullough, sixty-eight years old, owner of the garage, well known to the police on account of links to the IRA... But he was retired. From the IRA, that is, as far as we know. Still liked to tinker in his garage, though.”

“I can see that.” The detective crouched next to the

dreadfully mangled body. It was a real horror show of spilling guts and brains. The dirty blue overalls the man was wearing had been mashed into his flesh.

“Any relatives we need to notify?”

“Yes Sir. I called the station, and they found out that there is a wife, Eileen, sixty-two, and a son, Neilan, thirty-three.”

“All right, I’ll have to go and see them... Any chance that it was an accident? A mechanical failure of the lift or something?”

“I couldn’t tell Sir. You’d have to ask an expert. We’ve already called in the forensic pathologist, of course.”

“Not much *he’ll* be able to do by the look of it... All right; who found the body, by the way?”

The sergeant pointed to the constable standing guard by the door and making sure that the curious onlookers didn’t come too close. “Constable Collins. He was on duty at the station when an anonymous call was made.”

“All right. I want to talk to Collins. You take his place.”

The detective motioned the constable to come over, and the eager-looking young policeman did so at once.

“So you received an anonymous call about this? Any idea what kind of person?”

“Male voice Sir, youthful-sounding, a bloke mumbling through his fist in a useless ploy to disguise his voice. Didn’t waste any words, though. The call lasted only a few seconds.”

“And what did he say, exactly?”

“That I should check on the McCullough garage. That it would be worth my while.”

“So you came over at once...”

“No Sir. The call came at half past one last night, and as I was on duty until six, I had to wait for the end of my

shift. I found the body at around six thirty this morning.”

“You were doing the night shift? So you’re not even on duty right now! Why are you guarding the door?”

“Well Sir, the sergeant doesn’t know that I’m off-duty, and I thought I’d stick around for a while. This is the most baffling case I’ve ever seen.”

When he had joined the Met, the constable had dreamed of heroic actions and of solving heinous crimes single-handedly. Instead of which he’d had long hours of office drudgery and unvarying patrols in a neighbourhood not originally his own. He was positively thrilled by the gruesome stiff that had now turned up on his turf. At last he was going to deal with a real case, after spending many nights at the station reading up on scientific criminology...

Detective Chief Inspector Bramble presently said, “What makes you say that the case is baffling, apart from the gore?”

“Well Sir, I couldn’t help overhearing just now. You were wondering aloud if it could be an accident; a mechanical failure. As it happens, my dad has a garage just like this one, and so I can assure you that an accident is out of the question. You see, that’s the whole *point* of a hydraulic vehicle lift. Hydraulics *never* fail: you want to lower the car, you have to release the lift by *actuating* a valve. You have to *do* something. The button for that is over there on that panel, at a safe remove from the installation. If an accident ever happens, it means somebody *caused* it.”

“And then he calls the local station in the middle of the night.”

“That’s right Sir.”

“Well-well, Constable, it seems that *you’re* the expert I was wishing for. I have a little theory of my own about your caller. In cases like this it is often a member of the

family who did it. It appears that the victim had a thirty-three year old son. You mentioned a youthful male voice on the phone, so what would you say? Could it be the son?"

"I wouldn't know about that Sir. Patricide is rather uncommon, but you could be right, of course. But even if it turns out to be the son, there is something else that is highly disturbing about what happened here, if I may say so Sir."

"Oh really? And what would that be?"

"If you care to take a look Sir."

Constable Collins crouched next to the body. "Do you see how the cloth of the victim's work overalls did not soak up any blood? That could be significant. It looks like the victim was bled dry before he was put through the meat grinder."

By now the detective was kneeling next to Constable Collins; he was all ears. "Wait a minute, what are you saying?"

"The victim was bled to death *before* he was crushed by the lift. You can see it on the grate of this drain well, right next to the man's head. There are traces of congealed blood. His blood just flowed into the well under the lift."

"Good God! What kind of sick ritual took place here?"

"Exactly Sir. But the *really* baffling thing is not that the victim was *bled* to death, it is rather that he was *bitten* to death. If you care to take a look at his neck—well, the part of the remains here, above his shirt collar—you can see the marks of the teeth. *Human* teeth, of course... The man was definitely bitten."

"Good Lord! But then why crush the body as well afterwards?"

"My guess would be: a useless ploy to disguise this sick ritual as an accident. This was done either by a very

dumb person, or by someone under the delusion that they were being very clever.”

“Hang on to me and act helpless, Baloo!”

The young man who said this was propelling himself through the Tube station in a wheelchair. Baloo was an elderly blind lady with pitch black round glasses and a white cane. She was tall and shapely, with a riot of half-grey, half-blonde curls gathered in an unruly bunch on top of her head. With one hand she was holding on to the shoulder of the wheelchair-bound man, while she tap-tapped spectacularly with the long white cane held in her other hand.

They approached the top of an escalator going down. Suddenly the blind lady let go of her companion, who twirled around in his wheelchair; then she stepped forwards onto the descending escalator. The young man propelled himself backwards after her, apparently bent on throwing himself down the sheer endless flight of moving stairs.

People gasped and cried out. The ones just ahead of this strange couple were quite alarmed for a moment. Already a guard from the London Underground was rushing towards them, but as the wheelchair keeled backwards, the young man leaned forwards and grabbed the rubber handrails left and right with his hands. As by miracle his wheelchair stayed in place on a step of the escalator, apparently perfectly stable.

Again the blind lady clung to the wheelchair-bound man, her arms around his shoulders, and seeing this, the guard stopped in his tracks and beat a hasty retreat. The lady was obviously as blind as a bat. He had intended to tell off the young man for his reckless behaviour—taking the escalators in a wheelchair was strictly forbidden!—but

under the circumstanced he thought better of it.

Still hanging on to his shoulders, the blind lady leaned forwards and giggled softly into her companion's ear: "Louie! How can I act helpless when I'm about to have a giggling fit!"

"No worries, Baloo. The guard has already scampered. Victory is ours! You know, the first time I saw you entering a Tube station with your white cane, I knew right away that you'd be a real urban warrior..."

"Warrior my foot. I'm a pensioner, for Pete's sake! And you, *King Louie*, are still wet behind the ears. I could be your mother, you know."

"Well, apart from all else, we have a lot in common, you and me. It takes a lot of balls and drive to get up in the morning when you're blind or wheelchair-bound. Normal people have no idea how hard we have to push ourselves, compared to them. That's why when we team up, we rule!"

It was a fine day at the end of May, and Hans Konradi was sitting at the dining table with his family, in their small flat in Lichtenberg, Berlin. "Listen, Grete, children, there's a serious rumour going around about the new regime in Hungary. They're tearing down the border fence with Austria. That's not just propaganda from the West. How about that? Apparently you can get across the Iron Curtain there..."

His remarks were greeted with an uncomfortable silence. This was Papa's dangerous talk again, using words like "regime" and "Iron Curtain". If they were being wiretapped they could get into serious trouble. But on the other hand, they were not important people, just your average Hans and Grete, not into politics at all, so why would they be bugged? "We even have it pretty good,"

Hans Konradi reflected. He had climbed up the ladder to become a shop manager. They had a flat of their own, albeit a small and derelict one. It included a private kitchen and bathroom. And they had a car, a little Trabant, parked outside in the street. But life was stifling and excruciatingly boring under the communist regime. You had no freedom. Hannelore and Hanspeter were due to finish their secondary school in a couple of years; they were bright kids, but they would not be allowed to choose their studies or their profession. If the State needed engineers you became an engineer. With his work at the State shop, Hans had always felt that he was performing under his abilities. He'd wanted to be an English teacher, but the State wanted children to study Russian only...

"Listen up, gang, here's my plan: we're going to Hungary on a weekend trip. So far nothing dramatic. But once we're there, we'll have a look at that border crossing, and if the rumours are true, we'll drive on into Austria and we'll never come back."

"Oh Hans," his wife gasped, "isn't it dangerous? It could be a trick; a trap. They'll arrest us... or even shoot us!"

"Don't worry, Gretchen, we're not going to do anything reckless. We'll take a good look at what's going on; we'll proceed only if we all agree that it's safe."

"All right, but you have to *promise* that we won't be the *first* ones to do it. I want to see *someone else* ahead of us crossing the border unharmed."

"Of course, darling, that's the idea. Now, the most difficult part for the moment is this: we may never come back, but we can't take all our possessions with us. It has to look like we're going on a weekend trip, remember? For my part I've already decided that I'll take only the clothes I'm wearing, plus our photo albums in the small suitcase;

maybe the marriage and birth certificates as well. Our family history is all that matters to me. Now, I want the three of you to think along the same lines: one bag each; take only what you want to keep for the rest of your life..."

Suddenly young Hannelore became tearful. "Papa! I'm scared... and what about my friends? Will I ever see them again?"

"Impossible to say, sweetheart. But you *do* understand that you cannot say goodbye to them, don't you? Officially we're only having a weekend outing to Hungary. Nothing more than that."

## CHAPTER I

“...they are called *Traby's*, they have two-stroke engines and sound a lot like mopeds. And as these ungainly little cars cross the border, a handful of Hungarian border guards just stand by and look on with studied indifference, as if they've seen it all before. But in a not so distant past they would have been called upon to shoot on sight any citizen of an Eastern European country trying to cross the Iron Curtain without a valid exit visa...”

Daisy was ironing her handkerchiefs and her summer blouses while listening to the radio. Ironing had always been a chore she liked, because it was difficult and dangerous for a blind person to do, but she *never* burned her fingers. And: she had always prided herself on the impeccably starched and ironed overcoats she had worn on the job as a physiotherapist. Now that she was retired, she still liked a crisp style of clothing, smoothly ironed blouses and skirts, ditto summer dresses.

“...What fate awaits these very unconventional East

German holidaymakers? Well, according to West German law, these people are entitled to benefit from a “return” ruling that will automatically grant them German citizenship in the West. And as the Federal Republic applies rather generous social security programs, the newcomers will be entitled to a roof over their head as well as to social benefits that will put food on the table. Some of these GDR-citizens even have family ties in the West that will help them get back on track. But having said that, the refugees will have a hard time finding their footing in their new environment. Nothing in the communist way of life of the GDR has prepared them for the hard-headed struggle for survival in the West. Their future lies wide open...”

Daisy no longer lived in the small flat in Tufnell Park. When her father had passed away, she had decided to invest her inheritance in a basement flat under a Georgian-style house in a more central part of London. She now lived just under street level on a lovely garden square not far from Earl’s Court Tube station. A light well in front, with its typical area railing and steep stairs, gave direct access from the street. It was a very posh street, too; therefore, apparently, a very good investment. Daddy would have approved. Daisy’s friends had second thoughts about how dark and gloomy her place really was, but she told them that there are no dark places for the blind. No, for her the biggest bonus was the earthy smell coming from the square, and of course the birdsong bursting forth from dawn to dusk. On top of that, her upstairs neighbours—a young couple with a baby—had offered straight away that she make use of their garden at the back of the house. So sometimes Daisy took up a canvas chair and spent a couple of hours sitting on their

tiny lawn in the shade of their tree, reading her Braille copy of *The Hunting of the Snark*, or other short works she possessed, or larger books from the public library. The young daddy had said, "As you're blind, dear Daisy, we'll never have the feeling you could be spying on us."

"Yes, well, don't forget that there's nothing wrong with my hearing!"

Suddenly the doorbell rang, or rather an unearthly electronic chime echoed through the house, a legacy from the previous owner. In some respects this place still didn't feel like home. Daisy no longer left her front door unlocked when she was in, as anyone could enter directly from the street. She opened the front door, and a man's voice asked politely, "Mrs Daisy Hayes?"

"Yes, and what on earth is the police doing at my door?"

"Gosh! How can you tell that I'm a police officer, if I may ask?"

"The smell of the uniform is very familiar to me, but as I no longer have any military acquaintances, it *must* be uniformed police..."

"I see... You're right, of course. I am Constable Collins, from New Scotland Yard, and I'm here to hand you a summons and take you with me to the Yard. If you will reach out, I will hand it to you now."

"You do realise that I can't read your summons anyway? Am I being arrested?"

"No! No, please relax, Madam. Here, the summons is in Braille, by the way, so please read it. You'll find that you are only being called upon to testify... say: as a witness."

Daisy took the firm sheet of paper the man had pushed in her hand, and felt the familiar embossed

pattern of the Braille script. "I'll need to sit down to read this, so please come in. Can I offer you something to drink?"

The front door gave directly into the kitchen, a quirk of such basement flats that Daisy rather liked. She motioned the man to take a seat at the kitchen table.

"Just a tumbler of tap water would be fine, Madam. Take your time."

And so they spent a few peaceful minutes at the table, the uniformed man sipping water, and the blind lady reading the document with a frown over her strange, hollowed-out eyes. The constable marvelled at how the woman's slender fingers raced over the invisible print; it seemed frightfully difficult to him, reading Braille. At length she concluded, "All right, it is as you stated. I'm summoned to testify. But can you tell me what this is all about? I have no idea, and it doesn't say here..."

"Well, I'm not supposed to disclose any details, but we're investigating a murder."

"A murder! All right. And I'm supposed to know something about it? Who's the victim, anyway?"

"Well, again..."

"You're not supposed to tell; I get it. Well, really, that's wonderful!"

The blind lady was now frowning fiercely, which made the constable very uncomfortable. "Erm... does the name Martin McCullough ring a bell?"

"Oh! Sure does. Now I get it. So McCullough was murdered, huh? Doesn't really surprise me."

"Well, don't tell anyone that I mentioned his name."

A moment later they were driving through the London traffic on their way to the Metropolitan Police headquarters at 10 Broadway. Daisy was now wearing dark glasses, to the constable's great relief, and she was

holding her white cane between her legs. She hadn't said a word for quite some time, and she was still frowning as her mind was racing. McCullough murdered! Even though she knew perfectly well that she had nothing to do with his death, the news was extremely unsettling. Especially the fact that the police wanted to talk to *her* in the first place. On the other hand, the link between her and Martin's daughter Loretta had been public knowledge... twenty years ago. Then there was another problem. How on earth would she manage to prove her innocence without revealing the two murders she *had* committed... in a distant past? Both cases had involved McCullough, so this was not looking good... Not good at all.

After a long interval of tense silence, Constable Collins couldn't help himself and said, "You know, Mrs Hayes, if you're innocent, you have absolutely nothing to be afraid of."

"Oh, but that's the thing, don't you see? In my experience *nobody* is ever entirely innocent."

Daisy was introduced into an office, led to an armchair in front of a desk and asked to please sit down. Then a soft male voice said, "Thank you, Collins," and the police officer left. When Daisy heard the unknown man's voice, she pricked up her ears. Somehow he sounded familiar. Then the man spoke to her.

"Welcome, Mrs Hayes. Sorry for plucking you from your home like that, but it can't be helped. My name is Bernard Thistlehurst, Detective Chief Superintendent at the Yard."

"Bernard Thistlehurst? I know who you are! I spoke to you on the phone on V-E Day. You said 'Please call me Bernard,' but that was more than forty years ago."

"So you remember? I wondered about that. I certainly

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