

# THE HUNTED HARE

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# The Hunted Hare



*Fay Sampson*

The first volume in The Aidan Mysteries

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To Jack

## *Author's Note*

All the characters in this novel are fictitious, and bear no resemblance to any real person, living or dead.

The shrine church at Pennant Melangell and the St Melangell Centre are real, and well worth a visit. For the purposes of this novel I have added the fictional House of the Hare and Capel-y-Cwm. My apologies to local landowners, some of whose land I have appropriated for this.

I have also invented Caradoc Lewis's museum in Llanfyllin.

My thanks to the priest and congregation of St Melangell's Church and the St Melangell Centre for their welcome. The site has a special aura of holiness. My apologies for the fictional damage I have inflicted on their historic church in the course of the novel.

I am grateful to Sergeant Darren Brown for advice on local policing.

To Joyce Perry for her careful critique.

And to my husband, Jack, for allowing me to drag him over steep and thorny Welsh hillsides.



## *Chapter One*

**T**HE BERWYN MOUNTAINS closed in around the narrow lane. Bluebells gleamed in the hedge banks. Aidan wondered whether his camera could capture the subtle blend of young green ferns and violet-blue flowers.

The sign ahead warned them that there was no through road. They drove on.

Two walkers with backpacks flattened themselves against the hedge. The fair young man was almost dwarfed by his rucksack, while the darker-skinned girl carried a lighter load. Aidan steered round them.

In the rear-view mirror, he caught his daughter's small intent face, under its mop of light-brown curls. He grinned at her.

"When your mother and I came, that's what we did. Walked all the way from the village. It's the best way for pilgrims to come to Pennant Melangell. In a little while, there's a footpath you can take over the side of the hill to the church."

"I'm sorry. I'm going to be holding you two back." Jenny's quiet voice came from beside him.

Aidan glanced at her, guilt-stricken. The pink-and-purple scarf hid her bald head, which chemotherapy had robbed of its own unruly curls.

"I didn't mean..."

"I know you didn't." She laid a hand on his knee. Too thin a hand. "Don't worry. Once we're at the House of the

Hare, you two can set off wherever you like. You have to take Melangell to the waterfall.”

“Did you call me Melangell because I was conceived here?” The child’s voice came from the back seat.

The car swerved as Aidan started.

“Don’t look so shocked, Daddy. Michael Jackson called his daughter Paris because that was where she began. Everybody knows that.”

Aidan caught Jenny’s eye. “Did you know that sort of thing when you were seven?”

She smiled. “Melangell knows a surprising number of things we didn’t.”

She leaned over the back of the seat. “We stayed in that pub back in Llangynog last time. The one where we had lunch. There was no accommodation at Pennant Melangell then.”

“I’m glad there is now. The House of the Hare. I like the sound of that.”

“Yes, the hare was St Melangell’s animal. Even before that, it was an ancient symbol of new life. But, really, we called you Melangell because we just fell in love with the place, as soon as we got there.”

“It’s one of those ‘thin places’,” said Aidan. “Like Iona. Where heaven and earth come close together. You can feel it.”

“Aidan!” Jenny cried.

He braked sharply. A large car came hurtling down the narrow lane towards them. There was no room for two vehicles to pass. At intervals along the way he had seen passing places. There was none in sight here. The black Jaguar screeched to a halt, only feet from their bumper. The horn blasted. Two faces were hardly discernible from behind the tinted windscreen.

Aidan felt a surge of anger. Idiots!

He took a deep breath. He must not lose control of his



temper. There were two precious lives, as well as his own, to consider.

He reversed the car back down the road until he reached one of the indentations. He pulled over. The Jaguar shot past. Through the side window Aidan had a glimpse of pale shirt fronts and darker suits. The driver did not raise his hand in acknowledgment.

He waited several seconds more, while his blood pressure steadied.

“So much for the spiritual atmosphere.”

“They didn’t look like your average pilgrim,” Jenny said. He pulled out on to the road again.



“I can see it! I can see it!” Melangell bounced on the back seat.

The low tower of the ancient chapel emerged from between the budding branches. It rose hardly taller than the slate roof, and was capped with a small latticed bell turret. Around it lay a scatter of whitewashed cottages, with their own slate roofs.

Aidan turned off the road and drew up by the churchyard. The car had hardly come to a halt before Melangell jumped out. She was running for the gate when she stopped dead. She stared up. Her mouth fell open in awe.

“It’s gi-normous! And that one! And those two!”

Aidan glanced at Jenny and met her smile.

Around the church grew five gigantic yew trees. Centuries had swelled their girth to a size Aidan could not recall having seen anywhere else. These were not the disciplined churchyard yews he was used to, clipped into neat cylinders. Their canopies were vast. Two of them had split their trunks,

so that you could see the sky between the two halves. The one nearest the gate had a hollow tall and deep enough to stand inside. Melangell ran and did just that. Her elfin face peeped out at them from a doorway of hoary bark.

Aidan swung the Nikon from his shoulder and caught the moment. The frame of his photograph held the frame of the yew tree, with his daughter captured inside both.

“I’m the hare. I’m Melangell’s hare, hiding from the hunters under her skirt. You’re the hounds, and you can’t get me.”

She jumped out, too excited to stay still for long. “Can we see the carvings in the church?”

“All in good time,” Aidan said. “Let’s find the House of the Hare first. I expect your mother could do with a rest, before we start exploring.”

“I could murder a cup of tea,” Jenny laughed. She turned slowly, taking in the remembered circular churchyard, the long, low shrine church, the whitewashed buildings beyond.

“The St Melangell Centre’s down that lane, isn’t it? It was the Cancer Help Centre then. Funny.” Her smile faded. “When we came here before, it never occurred to us that I...”

He gripped her hand. “There’s a lot we didn’t know then.”

She reached up her free hand to stroke the bark of the yew. “I seem to remember the women recovering from cancer saw these trees as part of their therapy. And it’s true. You get taxol from yews. It’s one of the best treatments for ovarian cancer. The only trouble is, if you strip too much of the bark, the tree dies.”

Aidan was silent. They both knew that Jenny’s condition was worsening. The drugs had not done what they hoped. Jenny had been given only months to live.

He turned his head towards the church. His heart filled

with longing. If any place could work miracles, surely this was it. There was an aura of holiness about Pennant Melangell, these quiet meadows at the head of the valley, where the road ran out. Already, standing in the shadow of these yews, he could feel the stillness reaching to his heart. If they prayed here, if they really believed, could the power of this place reverse the conclusion of the oncologists?

Jenny was looking about her, more confused now. “I can’t see anything that looks like the House of the Hare. There’s no new building. Just the cottages and the Centre, as there used to be.”

“There are gates over there.” Melangell pointed.

A little way along the road, before it ended at the foot of the mountains, there were indeed two stone gateposts, with circular globes on them which must be lit at night.

Aidan got back into the car. “Come on. Let’s try it.”

Melangell was right. A decoratively carved slab of slate bore the inscription: “The House of the Hare”. They turned into the drive. Trees screened the way ahead.

“It’s certainly well hidden,” Jenny said. “They’ve done their best not to let it ruin the place.”

“There must have been a house here before. These are mature trees.”

The drive curved. Melangell gasped.

The house soared in front of them. Timber-sided, with huge, floor-to-ceiling windows. The roof of blue Welsh slate tilted at steep and unexpected angles. Aidan’s eye delighted in the complex planes of sunshine and shadow.

“Wow!” he said, reaching for his camera. “I guess the planning committee took some convincing, but I bet this design knocked them sideways. It’s stunningly modern, yet everything belongs in this locality.”

“The views from the top windows should be fantastic,” Jenny said. “I can’t wait. I’m so glad we booked here, and not

back at the pub as we did before.”

Aidan started towards the glass doors. The foyer was empty. He rang the bell on the reception desk. But as he did so, there were voices on the stairs. Down the wide sunlit flight came two people.

The first was a large man in expensive-looking cream linen slacks and a crisp short-sleeved shirt. The white of the fabric set off the sandy brown of his skin. Close black curls topped his wide face. Dark eyes surveyed them. Then he broke into a dazzling smile.

Behind him came an equally striking young woman in a pale green dress and a darker cardigan. Her heart-shaped face was almost white. Jet black waves of hair fell around her shoulders. Her eyes were a startling blue.

The man reached the bottom step and held out a broad hand to them.

“Thaddaeus Brown. Welcome to the House of the Hare.” He released Aidan’s hand and waved at the foyer around them. “I hope you’ll find everything to your liking.”

“It looks amazing,” Jenny said. “We’re the Davisons. We’ve booked to stay for a week.”

“Ah, yes... *Sian!*” His voice boomed along the resonating wooden walls. “Guests!”

It was not the young woman behind him he was summoning. She still stood on the lowest stair, clutching her cardigan around her, unsmiling.

Thaddaeus Brown turned back to them.

“I can’t tell you how excited I am. This is the fulfilment of a dream. Well, Lorna’s dream, actually.” He threw the girl behind him an affectionate smile. “People in need, able to stay here at Pennant Melangell, in the House of the Hare. We built this just for someone like you, Jenny.”

He turned his deep brown eyes on her. The woman he had called Sian came hurrying along the corridor into the

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foyer, but he did not turn to her.

He had not introduced the girl in the green dress he called Lorna. Aidan looked her way, and saw her standing a little apart, biting her lip. He could not be sure whether the pallor of her lovely face was natural, or whether she looked frightened.



## *Chapter Two*

**I**T WAS LONG MOMENTS BEFORE Thaddaeus Brown's dark eyes released Jenny's. Only when he moved on towards the door did she realize that she had been holding her breath.

The girl followed him out into the sunlight. Jenny hardly noticed her.

She was suddenly immensely tired. She leaned against the reception desk for support.

"Mrs Davison? Are you all right?"

Sian the receptionist came hurrying forward. Jenny looked up with a forced smile.

"I'm all right, thanks. Just a bit tired from the journey."

Aidan, always watchful, was steering a chair towards her. She sank into it thankfully. His ginger-bearded face leaned anxiously over her.

"Sorry. I was doing fine until just now."

"Can I get you something? A cup of tea?" The woman's voice had a warm Welsh lilt.

Now that her attention steadied on Sian, Jenny thought she looked more like a park ranger than a hotel receptionist. She wore a khaki short-sleeved shirt, khaki denim trousers and canvas boots. Her full round face was framed by fair hair. She had the kind of plumpness that bounced with health.

Jenny was conscious anew of her own wasted frame. She looked down at her hand on her knee. Too thin, too transparent.

She drank the offered tea and felt the glow spread through her body.

“Who was the girl?” Aidan asked.

“With Mr Brown? That’s Lorna, his niece.”

“Do they live in the house?”

“Oh, no. But this is the beginning of our first season. Thaddaeus... Mr Brown... wanted to be here to make sure it was a success. He’s so excited about it. We all are.” Her wide smile turned to include Jenny. “This is just what we hoped for. A place where people like you could come and stay. Pennant Melangell was always a healing place.”

Jenny caught Aidan’s eye and saw the flicker of apprehension. This was dangerous ground. After the last round of chemotherapy there had been a long discussion between her oncologist and the two of them. Jenny had made her decision. No more treatment. She would conserve her energy to live the last months of her life to the full, not shuttling between home and hospital for sessions that left her weaker than before.

But they had long known the reputation of this place. Medieval pilgrims had come to the saint’s shrine just for this. More recently, the Help Centre had offered support to women with cancer, before it extended its remit to others in need. There was still a weekly service with the laying on of hands. It lay unspoken between Jenny and Aidan, the possibility that beyond the power of medicine there might be something more.

But could this hope itself gnaw away at the serenity she sought for these last precious months?

“Can you show us our rooms?” she asked.

“Of course. There’s a lift.”

Sian seized a pair of keys from the rack behind the desk and led the way.



Jenny gasped as Sian flung open the door. Light flooded across the centre of the room. A tall window gave on to a balcony. Beyond, above the darker woods, the purple ridge of the Berwyn Mountains was bathed in afternoon sunshine. The sky over the hills was the singing blue of springtime.

She sank down on the folkweave bedspread. Everything about the room spoke of this locality. The timber walls, the framed watercolours of Welsh landscapes, the slate top of the dressing table. There was a vase of wild flowers on the chest of drawers.

“It’s lovely.”

Sian beamed. “It is, isn’t it? I’ll say that for Thaddaeus, he’s got taste.”

Melangell ran to the balcony. Aidan followed her.

“There’s a swimming pool!”

“It’s got a cover over it.”

“It’ll be a bit cold yet,” Sian laughed, crossing to join them. “If the house does well, Thaddaeus wants to heat it. He’s thinking of solar panels, though the sun goes down early below the hills.”

Jenny made an effort to rise from the comfortable bed and join them. Behind the house, the trees that, at the front, screened it from the road had been cleared. There was not just the swimming pool to the right, but a tennis court, and to the left... she craned further to look...

“Are those archery butts?”

Sian nodded. Her broad smile tightened. “Thaddaeus has big ideas. He had a big fight to get planning permission. There was a lot of local opposition. Still is. He told them he wanted facilities that guests could enjoy even if they’re... not on top form.” She glanced anxiously at Jenny. “Swimming’s good for that, isn’t it?” Jenny nodded. “I was all for that. I



gave up my job as a PE teacher to be the warden here. But... I don't know. Today he's been talking about waterfall walking and rock-climbing."

"You'd have to count me out."

"That's what I mean. I thought I heard them say something about extending the clientèle with team-bonding for executives. I hope he's not losing the plot. Maybe Caradoc Lewis had a point... He's the leader of the anti-brigade..." She frowned, staring down at the wide gardens of the house. In a low, bitter voice she said, "If he did anything to change the character of this valley, it would break Lorna's heart. I think I'd kill him."

Jenny saw her go suddenly rigid. When she looked down, following Sian's eyes, she saw Thaddaeus and Lorna walking round the corner of the house. An expression, almost of fear, twisted Sian's face. She backed away from the balcony, as Thaddaeus lifted his hand to wave to them.

Next moment, she snapped back into her professional smile. "Sorry. I shouldn't be talking out of turn. Don't tell him I said that. I don't want to lose my job!"

But Jenny sensed it was not a laughing matter.

Aidan smiled. "Don't worry. We'll be discreet."

"Mummy's good at archery," Melangell said from the balcony.

"Was." Jenny gave a difficult smile.

"Really? That's great!" Sian's laugh was back. "We must get you out there."

Jenny's tired arms remembered the strength it had needed to bend the stave and draw the bowstring back to its fullest extent.

As if she read Jenny's thoughts, Sian reassured her. "Don't worry. You can do archery sitting down, if it helps. Did you know that? They have it in the Paralympics. We've got a wheelchair you can borrow. Really, you'll be fine."

Jenny felt herself brighten in the warmth of the young woman's enthusiasm. "That sounds great. I might give it a try. I'm not sure I could handle a full-strength bow, though."

"No problem. I'll help you choose a suitable one." Sian turned for the door. "I've put Melangell across the corridor. Is that all right? Give me a shout if there's anything you need. Supper from half past six."

She left them. Jenny heard her steps bouncing down the wooden stairs.

Melangell grabbed the second key and darted across to the room opposite, faster than they could follow her. When they caught up with her, she was laughing with joy.

"Look! I can just see my yew trees, and the tower of the church."

This room was smaller and had no balcony. Through the screening branches outside there was indeed a sidelong glimpse of the churchyard with its massive dark trees, of the little church of St Melangell and the cottages around it.

"Can we go and see the church now? Can we? And the carvings?"

"But you already know what they look like. They're in your book. Daddy's photographs."

"I *know*. But I want to see them *really*."

So do I, Jenny thought.

She felt Aidan's eyes on her. He knew how much this meant to her. Bringing Melangell to the place where her story began. Showing her the church with the carvings of St Melangell's legend. Reliving their first discovery of it, when it had been just herself and Aidan. Jenny researching for another of her books on Celtic saints. Aidan taking the photographs to illustrate it. Both of them falling in love with this place.

"When your mother's rested," Aidan said, "we'll all go."



Jenny lay back on the bed, letting her body relax. “I can see the mountains without even getting up. Bliss.”

Aidan came over and kissed her. “I’m glad it’s worked out as you wanted. It’s a lovely place. And we always said we must bring Melangell here.”

“‘One day’, we said. ‘One day, we’ll take her.’ As if we had forever.” She rolled over and drew his sandy-haired head back down to hers. She placed her finger on his lips, feeling the brush of his beard. “No regrets. Remember? We have today. We’re here. Let’s make the most of it.”

“You’re amazing,” he murmured. “And you’re right. As always.”

She watched him struggle to hold his smile in place.

He sat down on the bed and caressed her hand.

“This Thaddaeus is an amazing guy, isn’t he?” she asked. “To do all this.” Her hand gestured at the room and the tall window. “I bet there was a lot of opposition to building here. But he’s done it so sensitively. It... *fits*. As though it grew here.”

“Let’s hope it stays that way, then. Sian seemed worried about it. I think she’s scared of him.”

She sat up. “Scared of Thaddaeus? I thought he seemed a lovely man.”

She did have a momentary recall of the sudden change in Sian’s face when she thought Thaddaeus might have overheard her. But her memory went back more vividly to their meeting in the foyer. The dark brown eyes that had held hers for such long moments. Her face softened, remembering that look.

“And the girl. Lorna? She looked nervous too.” Aidan’s face was sober.

Jenny turned a wondering face to him. “Did she? I didn’t notice.” She lay back on the pillows and settled herself comfortably. “You’re imagining things.”