

A man and a woman in historical attire are shown in profile, facing each other in a lush green field. The man is on the left, wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt with a ruffled collar. The woman is on the right, wearing a grey floral dress and a pearl necklace. They appear to be holding hands or a small object together. In the background, there are rolling green hills and a range of blue mountains under a clear sky. The overall scene is romantic and historical.

MARGIT SANDEMO

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The
LEGEND
of the

ICE PEOPLE

THE CITY OF HORROR

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THE CITY OF HORROR

The City of Horror

The Legend of the Ice People 37 - The City of Horror

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Acknowledgement

The legend of the Ice People is dedicated with love and gratitude to the memory of my dear late husband Asbjorn Sandemo, who made my life a fairy tale.

Margit Sandemo

The Ice People - Reviews

‘Margit Sandemo is, simply, quite wonderful.’

- *The Guardian*

‘Full of convincing characters, well established in time and place, and enlightening ... will get your eyes popping, and quite possibly groins twitching ... these are graphic novels without pictures ... I want to know what happens next.’

- *The Times*

‘A mixture of myth and legend interwoven with historical events, this is imaginative creation that involves the reader from the first page to the last.’

- *Historical Novels Review*

‘Loved by the masses, the prolific Margit Sandemo has written over 172 novels to date and is Scandinavia s most widely read author...’

- *Scanorama magazine*

The Legend of the Ice People

The legend of the Ice People begins many centuries ago with Tengel the Evil. He was ruthless and greedy, and there was only one way to get everything that he wanted: he had to make a pact with the devil. He travelled far into the wilderness and summoned the devil with a magic potion that he had brewed in a pot. Tengel the Evil gained unlimited wealth and power but in exchange, he cursed his own family. One of his descendants in every generation would serve the Devil with evil deeds. When it was done, Tengel buried the pot. If anyone found it, the curse would be broken.

So the curse was passed down through Tengel's descendants, the Ice People. One person in every generation was born with yellow cat's eyes, a sign of the curse, and magical powers which they used to serve the Devil. One day the most powerful of all the cursed Ice People would be born.

This is what the legend says. Nobody knows whether it is true, but in the 16th century, a cursed child of the Ice People was born. He tried to turn evil into good, which is why they called him Tengel the Good. This legend is about his family. Actually, it is mostly about the women in his family – the women who held the fate of the Ice People in their hands.

Chapter 1

Horror comes in many forms.

Horror can be a small, kind, middle-aged lady wearing a grey hat and coat, with an unfortunate desire to help people in distress.

It took this form in the Norwegian city of Halden during the cruel winter of 1937, when a short, inconspicuous woman held the city in such a tight grip of horror that it shook the whole of Norway, with the eyes of the Western world focused on the place.

One cold, dark morning in January 1937, as the sirens from the paper mill and the sawmill wailed discordantly with those of the other factories, the breath of death swept across Halden.

Nobody realized it at the time. Not the pale girls on the bus, who shuddered, half asleep, on their way to work at the cake shop or the shoe factory, exhausted after a long, exciting evening and too little sleep. Not the workers, wrapped in their winter clothes but casually bare-headed, who sloped across the square carrying their lunch boxes under their arms. Not the young policeman, Rikard Brink of the Ice People, who a few days later would be made to feel that the future of the whole city rested on his shoulders.

Clemens Post, the doctor, didn't know anything either. How was he to know that in a few minutes his telephone would ring? Not even after the conversation was over did he grasp the scale of what was about to happen, or had already happened.

Nine people were the first to be involved in the great horror. Nine individuals, then two large groups: one consisting of sixty-two people and the other of twelve. It fell to Rikard, a member

of the Ice People, to find them all and see to it that no more people became infected.

Actually, it had already happened, in several places, on the previous day.

Nine different individuals ...

Nos 1 and 2: Vinnie and Kamma

Kamma Dahlen, a widow, was a relic from the days of upper-class privilege. She would say *souper* instead of supper and called her hairdresser by his last name, now that she had no servants whom she could address by their surname in the British manner. She used to say how difficult it was to get household help and servants nowadays, and complain about how ungrateful and demanding they were. Even though she didn't have any. She habitually wore a tweed suit with a knee-length skirt and a cream crêpe de chine blouse with a bow at the neck. Her hair looked like a wig: ochre-yellow and curly, with a middle parting, forced into stiff waves right down to the hard, tight knot in the neck.

She was fifty years old and used a peculiar, spicy perfume. Young Vinnie felt a creepy unpleasantness in her vicinity.

The aversion was mutual. Karen Margrethe Dahlen, known as Kamma, couldn't stand the sight of her late husband's niece. But because she couldn't get hold of any servants, she exploited Vinnie's compliance, and felt that she had quite a good grip on the girl. The important thing was to sit on her constantly, letting her know just how hopeless she was.

They lived together in the big house by the lake. For many, many years, Kamma had been responsible for the orphaned girl's upbringing, and in recent years, there had only been Vinnie and Kamma, with Kamma's son, Hans-Magnus, and Vinnie's grandmother in the house. Now the grandmother, Kamma's mother-in-law, had died, and who other than Kamma

should now decide Vinnie's fate?

"Lavinia!" called Kamma in a well-modulated voice. The girl – if you could call a woman of twenty-eight a girl – entered the blue drawing room, stooped and with a shy, cowed expression on her face. Since Aunt Kamma had used her full name, she knew that something special was brewing.

Spinster, Kamma thought contemptuously. But it was she who had put the girl in that situation.

"Straighten your back, for goodness sake," Kamma said sternly. "Have you gathered all the belongings you want to take with you?"

"I think so, Aunt Kamma." The humble, almost whispering voice ... as if she wanted to excuse herself for being there, Kamma Dahlen thought.

"Well, I'm sure you agree with me that it's about time you had a home of your own, don't you? It's unhealthy for a young lady to remain in her childhood home all her life. You'll be in excellent accommodation with a splendid family with fine morals. They'll keep a tight rein on you and you'll be closer to everything ..."

They had been through it all many times. That is to say: Kamma had spoken nineteen to the dozen with conviction in her voice, while Vinnie had merely whispered "I see" from time to time.

The girl stood there with her head bowed and sad, dimmed eyes. She had no self-confidence left and no will of her own. She had hardly been allowed to grieve for her grandmother, who had always been so nice, though bedridden for years, trying to inspire Vinnie by squeezing her hand now and then and giving her a positive glance. Now Grandma was gone and Vinnie was completely unable to express her thoughts or her grief. Aunt Kamma said she was to move out, and the girl wanted to and

didn't want to. Of course, she would like to break away and be on her own, but how would she have the courage to do so? She had met the family she was going to stay with. They were people with the same kind of spirit as Aunt Kamma; they would keep an eye on her, rummage through her belongings, see to it that she behaved herself properly ...

As if Vinnie had ever had the chance to behave herself other than properly!

She had received no education, because her time had been spent being a domestic in her own home. Now Aunt Kamma had seen to it that Vinnie would "give madam a helping hand" in her new home. Her working hours would split her day up so there would be no time for her to find a job elsewhere or to study or attend evening classes ... Of course, she wouldn't be paid for her work. In short, her life would go on precisely as before, just in another house.

Vinnie barely knew what she looked like. Well, yes, she knew that she was utterly hopeless, that her brownish hair was lank, her complexion bland, her figure like a sack of potatoes and her taste in clothes a disaster. Aunt Kamma had made this abundantly clear to her day after day, year after year. So she dressed according to Aunt Kamma's taste in clothes – in unostentatious, demure, prim clothes in dark colours. Of course, Vinnie wasn't allowed to use makeup! The mere thought was horrifying! She used the soap that Aunt Kamma had selected, even if it wasn't kind to Vinnie's delicate skin, and her hair was parted in the middle and tightly plaited by the ears. It was a hairstyle that had never suited a woman, not even a German Gretchen or Heidi. Of course, that was something that Kamma Dahlen didn't know.

Or did she?

"Pop down to the dressmaker's and buy some blue embroidery

thread. Here's a sample, and please be quick about it because the removers will be here at any moment."

Vinnie ran off. The few pieces of furniture she would be taking with her stood in the hall. Kamma contemplated them. She had done most of the choosing. They were odd pieces that didn't fit anywhere in the house.

Grandma had insisted that the fine chiffonier with the intarsia was to be Vinnie's. It was her personal legacy. Far too many people had heard Grandma say that, which meant that Kamma didn't dare to keep it. Oh, what grief it was to see it leave the house! She walked around it, stroking its silky, smooth surface. It was locked, and Grandma had given the key to Vinnie. Kamma's quiet, cautious hint that they ought to see what was in it had fallen on deaf ears. It might contain valuables, which most definitely ought not to leave the house ...

Kamma frowned. The lowest panel at the back had come loose in one corner, probably when it was moved into the hall. Kamma bent down to try to fasten the plywood board. This was when she caught sight of an envelope sticking out of the corner. She pulled it out carefully. It must have been pushed out of a stuffed drawer and landed at the back. There were also a couple of Christmas cards from the year before that had fallen down with it.

The envelope was big and thick and didn't seem all that old. There was nothing written on the outside.

Without any particular pangs of conscience, Kamma opened the envelope and unfolded the sheets of paper ...

It was a will and a letter.

She decided to read the letter first. It was from Grandma to Vinnie. The shaky handwriting was easily recognizable.

My dear Vinnie,

Please give this will to Mr Hermansen, the lawyer. It's completely valid – those who witnessed it are good people. You see, I couldn't get in touch with Mr Hermansen. This is something I've never mentioned before because I don't want Karen Margrethe to know about it. Don't speak to her about it!

Well, I never, was what Kamma thought as she quickly skimmed the will.

It is my final will that my granddaughter, Lavinia Dahlen, is to be the sole inheritor of Bakkegården. My daughter-in-law, Karen Margrethe Dahlen, must not be allowed to reside there because she has a bad influence on the girl. Not even Hans-Magnus, her son from her first marriage adopted by my late son, has the right to live at Bakkegården, as he is fully capable of taking care of himself. What's more, in my presence he has said, 'Never mind about the old hag.' So I don't care about him either.

To Karen Margrethe Dahlen, I leave by will ...

Then followed a list of a few things of very little value, among them a brooch, a tea set and a fireside clock.

Even if Karen Margrethe pleads that she has taken care of me during the years when I have been bedridden, this is not, in fact, the case – she has simply ordered Vinnie to do so.

Vinnie has shown me warmth and compassion. All Karen Margrethe has shown me is coldness and often impatience. This is why everything goes to Vinnie, including what is in the bank, which, until now, Karen Margrethe has disposed of on my behalf. That written authority ceases upon my death.

B.E. Johannessen, notary public, and his wife, Marianne Johannessen, had witnessed the will.

Kamma was crimson in the face as she flopped in a chair. Her heart was beating furiously in self-righteous indignation. She lifted her head ...

Johannessen? She knew the couple. Elderly people. But hadn't they passed away? She certainly had and he had suffered a stroke when his wife died. They said that he was completely confused and unable to communicate anymore.

What about the date?

Kamma checked: 12 July. That was six months ago.

Six months ago?

That must have been when Grandma was temporarily feeling better. She had been able to move about and talk a bit, and Kamma had gone to Bergen with her son for a much-needed holiday. Yes, Kamma remembered that they had left in July.

Which was when that bitch had seized her chance!

The doorbell by the kitchen door rang and Kamma started. It was bound to be the errand boy from the grocer's shop.

Where was she to put ...

Kamma couldn't think of anything other than to stick the envelope back into the crack in the broken chest of drawers. Then she hurried into the kitchen.

It was the errand boy from the grocer's shop. Suspicious and particular as always, Kamma went over the list, item by item, checking the prices and the arithmetic. Meanwhile, her brain was seething with uncontrolled thoughts, bitterness, vengefulness and plans.

She, who had longed to have the big house to herself! Getting rid of that clumsy, nondescript girl. Then Hans-Magnus would have it when he graduated from military school. That was her plan. It would make a superb officer's house, where she, his dotting mother, would preside as hostess.

There were voices out in the hall. It was probably Vinnie who

had returned and Hans-Magnus, who had come back from his strenuous journey to Oslo.

Poor boy, he was really having a hard time living on his sparse cadet's salary, which just didn't suffice. It went without saying that Kamma needed to help him out from time to time.

Grandma's passbooks had been so useful. Now ...

This would be the end!

Everything would be taken from her! What would Vinnie do with money and a house when she was so ugly? Kamma was sure that she would always be a spinster, as she had told her every so often. Was Vinnie to roam about this splendid house all by herself? The only sensible thing would be for Hans-Magnus to take it over when he finished his officer's training. Then Kamma could take care of him and his future family – because she very much wanted grandchildren. A daughter-in-law much less. But she would know how to discipline the latter.

One of the prices didn't tally, and Kamma spotted this like a hawk and pointed it out.

"The loaf is more expensive. The price went up today."

After a pretty long discussion about the one-penny increase, Kamma finally threw the money on the table to show her annoyance at the price rise she hadn't been notified about. Then she went back into the hall.

She was shocked. It wasn't Hans-Magnus she had heard but the removers, and all Vinnie's furniture was gone.

Vinnie came through the door at that moment.

"Have they left?" Aunt Kamma asked hoarsely.

"The removers? Yes, they have. Here's the embroidery thread."

"The thread? Yes, of course."

Vinnie's digs were in Sarpsborg. How would Kamma manage to ...?

"When will you be moving?"

“I believe I’ll be ready the day after tomorrow.”

“I’ll come along and see to it that you settle in properly.”

“You don’t have to, Aunt Kamma. I know exactly how I want everything to be.”

“That is precisely what worries me. You’ve never had any taste, Vinnie. You’ve no idea how to furnish a room so that it looks stylish. And the curtains ...”

“The lady I’ll be staying with says that there are already curtains and quite a lot of furniture. It’ll be all right. Anyway, I’m sure you would rather be here when Hans-Magnus comes, wouldn’t you?”

Kamma was silent while her thoughts whirled in her head. She’d get hold of that letter, she really would!

The witnesses, the Johannessens, were out of the picture. Splendid!

If only Hans-Magnus would bring the car now! Then they could be on their way to Vinnie’s new home. Why didn’t he come?

Then it was the afternoon.

Kamma’s voice, which was cultivated and soft as velvet as usual, albeit now with a touch of shakiness to it, said: “Vinnie.”

The girl appeared in the doorway. True to form, she stood with her head bowed as if she was expecting to be scolded or hit. Kamma was irritated. Stupid girl, she thought, I’ve never slapped her.

“Stand properly, for heaven’s sake! Do pull yourself together! We’re going to a meeting!”

Vinnie couldn’t help shuddering. She was drawn to but also repulsed by these meetings. Aunt Kamma was one of Pastor Prunck’s devoted disciples. Prunck led a strange, newly formed sect, and Vinnie went along because Kamma wanted her to. And

perhaps because the pastor was the only person who treated her with a degree of dignity.

That was how Vinnie interpreted it. However, she wasn't so sure about what he preached. She had never been allowed to go out among other young people; her childhood and youth had been marked by shocking discipline and a degradation of her persona. Aunt Kamma had never allowed her to do anything. She had been desperately lonely and an outsider at school, because Aunt Kamma had forbidden her to play with "those simple children" and Vinnie didn't have enough willpower to defy the ban. She just withdrew, so, of course, she was the one that everybody picked on in class. Because of her clothes, her aunt's snobbishness, everything. But most of all, because she was the kind of child who would let the others bully her.

No wonder Vinnie weakened under Pastor Prunck's gaze of undivided sympathy. She didn't understand that he was also appraising her female attributes. She also imagined that she *just about* understood what he preached.

Of course, Prunck wasn't a genuine pastor. There were oceans between the sincere and generally accepted big congregation to which Abel Gard and Christa had belonged and Prunck's twisted ideas that he was chosen and that he had had a revelation. In it, heaven had ordained him as a pastor and asked him to set up his very own, new congregation, under the name "Prunck's Holy Chosen Ones". He had also been told that the world would end on 6 February of that year.

There weren't many days left.

For this reason, he had secretly occupied a half-forgotten cave under a cliff on the outskirts of the city. The members of the sect – sixty-four in all – had been given a message from heaven that they were to seek shelter in the cave. Only they would survive the catastrophe that was coming.

Pastor Prunck had ordered them to relinquish their worldly possessions, because this was part of the message from heaven. They wouldn't be purified until they did so. He, Prunck, had promised to take care of their filthy, earthly possessions, hiding everything that was obnoxious in the eyes of heaven. "You won't go to heaven with your pockets full of filthy lucre," he would thunder from the pulpit that had been rigged up in the cave where the meetings were held. "I promise to obliterate your earthly belongings for you, cleanse you in readiness for this great moment."

Some members of the congregation had hesitated, particularly Kamma. She found it difficult to part with the lovely money. She had given gifts, small amounts taken out of Grandma's passbook, but she found it difficult to part with the lump sum.

The pastor's congregation was strangely homogeneous. Ninety per cent were single, not terribly intelligent, elderly women possessed of a certain fortune. There were also some children and the odd sheepish man, who accepted the pastor's spate of words with a guilty, bent head, believing blindly in his tirades.

Some of them undoubtedly had problems seeing the logic in what Prunck preached. If the world was to go asunder, and only they were to survive, what was the point in shedding their riches? But their small brains couldn't be bothered to figure that out. Of course, the pastor knew best how everything was to be arranged when the time came.

Kamma had another problem: her son, Hans-Magnus. He too had to be saved from the apocalypse, but he didn't want to be. He said that Pastor Prunck was a humbug.

This was why Kamma had reached a compromise with the pastor. Her son's life and soul could be saved if Vinnie became his proxy and took his place in the shelter. Kamma didn't give a damn about Vinnie – she could perish. But the girl had to attend

the meetings on behalf of Hans-Magnus. To keep his place in heaven, so to speak. Then he would be bound to survive the catastrophe even if he was somewhere else.

It was all extremely complicated, and only the most simple-minded could make sense of the pastor's mental transactions.

Of course, Vinnie knew nothing about the agreement that her pastor and Kamma had entered into. She trudged willingly along to the meetings, listened fearfully to the pastor's sermons and was filled with warmth when his eyes sought hers. Now she suddenly meant something! Now somebody could actually see her!

The other members of the congregation gloated in other ways: they thought triumphantly of all the people outside. Those who knew nothing about this paradisiacal sect and would therefore perish. This was a delightful feeling. Some of them had certainly told friends and acquaintances about the end of the world, but they had been met with scorn and disgust. But just wait and see! They would get to see it for themselves! The day would come when they would be writhing in their death throes, knocking on the cave door to be let in. But then it would be too late! Only the chosen would be allowed in!

The cave had come into existence as a result of earlier attempts to mine ore in the area. The venture had been abandoned and the cave forgotten. Pastor Prunck had succeeded in getting hold of the key to the iron door, and thanks to the hard work put in by members of the sect, the bare grotto had been turned into a habitable, almost cosy, shelter. With electric light and wooden walls and simple amenities. The heating was also good.

This afternoon, Vinnie and her aunt arrived a quarter of an hour early, because there was something that Kamma wanted to discuss with the pastor.

Vinnie would have to wait in the hall while Kamma was called into the holy of holies – the grotto’s storeroom.

Pastor Prunck was a polished man of an uncertain age. His hair was shiny and pressed into waves and coloured a discreet dark brown. His brown eyes were deep wells of compassion and sugary sentimentality. He could place his voice at the pitch he wanted: brutal and sulphurous or fawning. His clothes were meticulously perfect, like those of a buyer on a business trip.

“My dear, dear Mrs Dahlen,” he simpered confidentially. “What can I do for you?”

Kamma had fallen for the pastor’s lion-tamer gaze a long time ago. Just like all the other women in the sect, she believed that he had a very special eye for her and now she was alone with him. Where might it not end? Maybe a tender stroke of her cheek? Or ... maybe he would finally admit that he was attracted to her?

“Dear Pastor,” Kamma said. “Something terrible has happened! You know the fortune I’ve talked about, which I had in the bank ...?”

“Yesss,” said the pastor, his reply sounding like a snakebite.

“It appears that it will probably go to Vinnie!”

His glance turned slightly cooler. “Well, that’s fine, Mrs Dahlen. Then nothing earthly will burden you when you walk through the gates one day!”

“No, of course not, but I was looking forward to giving the money to you for destruction. And to keeping a small sum for myself, because we, the chosen, are the ones who will survive!”

Prunck’s smile was broad but forced and it didn’t reach his eyes. He raised his index finger admonishingly. “Mrs Dahlen, now you’re an infidel! We’ll be the only ones left so what will we need money for?”

“No, but I thought ... You have a car. Perhaps we could drive

over to Vinnie's new home? There's a document there, which unjustifiably entitles Vinnie to grab my ... our money."

Pastor Prunck looked at Kamma, trying to understand what she was telling him. Then he patted her hand and got to his feet. "Rest assured, Mrs Dahlen! Everything will fall into place!"

Kamma breathed out. She was relieved. In her subconscious mind, she had probably felt that conquering Pastor Prunck would be so much easier if she had a large fortune to sacrifice to his holy destruction of earthly possessions.

For the rest of that day, Prunck's warm eyes rested almost incessantly on Vinnie, full of confidence and promises. Kamma didn't notice anything. She merely felt that there was a terrible draught in the Temple, as the cave was known.

That evening, Kamma shouted from the bathroom: "Vinnie, would you please take Blanzeflor for a walk this evening?"

Just as on every other evening, Vinnie called the little poodle with the exquisite name – Blanzeflor – to come with her. Not knowing that on this cold January evening Death was walking freely about in the streets of Halden, she walked out of the door – and straight into the arms of a nightmare. For her, the horror had begun.