

A man and a woman in period clothing 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 scenic.

MARGIT SANDEMO

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The
LEGEND
of the

ICE PEOPLE

SILENT VOICES

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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.

Part I: The Door That No One Could Open

Chapter 1

On the third night at the inn it returned – the anxiety that Ellen hadn't felt since that frightening event in her childhood.

She sat up in bed, motionless, ready to jump. Despairing, she looked for a sensible lifeline to hold on to but got the impression that the muffled, heavy breathing was not just her own but was emanating from the entire house.

The inn sign outside the small leaded windows creaked in the wind. Alone, alone, alone in the house, throbbed her pulse. Alone in a long, low, 250-year-old house full of nooks and crannies, with empty stables and creaking stairs, small misshapen rooms ... and that room!

Sitting at a table outside the restaurant in Oslo's Studenterlunden park it had all sounded so quaint – an ideal job for someone who had just graduated and needed to earn a little money during the summer vacation.

That day, the sun had been shining on the cheerful umbrellas and bright summer clothes, and there had been the buzz of voices and laughter. And Vivi had encouraged Ellen in her overly confident state.

“We passed that inn last year,” Vivi said eagerly. “It's a fantastic place, a genuine old-fashioned inn, so ancient and picturesque that you just can't believe it. You've got to answer that ad!”

Ellen folded the newspaper with the list of 'Situations Vacant'.

“I can easily handle a receptionist's job,” she said in a carefree tone, forgetting for a moment her tendency to be impractical and her incurable optimism, which sometimes broke down barriers for her and sometimes landed her in hopeless fixes.

“But I expect lots of people will be applying for it.”

“Not that far out in the wilderness,” said Vivi. “There isn’t another town for miles around. Just forest and then more forest, until all you can dream about is spruce trees for weeks afterwards.”

“But there can’t possibly be an inn right in the middle of such dense forest, can there?”

“No, of course there’s a village of sorts nearby. A tourist centre, that kind of thing. The inn was presumably built by an old ferry dock on the river. They serve wonderful food, and there’s a huge fireplace and ...”

“I’ll apply for the job,” Ellen decided.

And she applied for it and got it, thanks to her huge innocent blue eyes in her triangular face – perhaps not all that pretty, but friendly and eager to please – and to her cheerful smile and pleasant voice, and her raven black hair that curled just as it pleased, which for the most part was very nicely, except in the rain – then it just got messy, frizzled and chaotic looking.

But the man in the employment agency only had eyes for her appearance. He didn’t notice all the sensitivity or the sense of bewilderment in the movements of her hands or in the little insecure smile that appeared when she wasn’t laughing cheerfully and showing her bright white teeth. There was such a great sense of loneliness and puzzlement in Ellen – which she preferred to keep to herself.

The year was 1959, and Ellen’s life hadn’t yet begun to take shape. Like most young people, she had lots of plans; she wanted to do so much and get as much out of her life as possible. Find an occupation where she could test herself, in order to achieve the sense of equilibrium that comes with having found one’s place in the world and knowing what one is destined to do with one’s life. The problem was that she – like so

many others –was still looking for that magical job. There was so much to choose from, and what if she chose the wrong path?

And the quest to do so much often ended up with her not having any money. So instead of aiming for a big career she made do with this little receptionist's job, which was hardly going to lead to a career.

But you have to survive somehow. Eat. And live somewhere. And for those things you need money. That was the harsh reality of it.

But of course, the time spent at the inn wouldn't be a complete waste. She would probably gain a lot of experience that would make her stronger, she thought with optimism.

She had never seen such a deserted area before. The bus drove for hours through dense spruce forest, then along a narrow valley scattered with houses that emerged in open clearings, only for the road to be swallowed up by the forest again.

The number of houses increased as they finally came to a small village, and by the riverbank there lay a quaint little inn, painted white and well kept. Although it was as low as a one-storey house, it did have two floors; there was a wing for the stables, a low kitchen area with a French roof, and another two-storey building next to the kitchen on the opposite side. Two signs with identical ornate inscriptions, one above the low gate and the other on the end of the building, claimed that this was "The Old Ferry Inn, Pub and Guest House".

So there was no mistaking the functions of the inn.

Dusty from the long journey, but still very respectable looking, Ellen came across the manageress in the taproom. She was a still beautiful fifty-year-old, with hard eyes and well-groomed yellow-blonde hair. Her name was Mrs Sinclair, and she received Ellen with a cool friendliness and showed her around.

And Ellen tried not to show how terribly insecure she was feeling.

They looked into the low-ceilinged parlours, with their thick timber walls and old carpets, and passed through the discreetly modernized dining room, then started up the narrow staircase to the upper floor. They were met by the sharp odour of fresh paint.

“We’re not open for the season yet,” explained Mrs Sinclair. “The carpenters are doing renovation work up here. The previous owner did an absolutely sacrilegious job installing the showers and toilets up here on the first floor. Of course, it isn’t easy accommodating modern comforts in a seventeenth-century building, but this is just too much!”

She opened the door to an attic room below the pitched roof, revealing a feast of tastelessness. There was a loud chequered floor, and sickly green wallpaper coated in a kind of thick plastic and carelessly hung with brown glue visible in the joins. A plastic shower curtain, decorated with listless, brooding fish, concealed the shower.

“Ugh!” said Ellen.

“I know! This floor is meant for overnight guests, but I can’t show you the rooms now because it’s practically impossible to get to them. The room that will be yours once it’s finished is at the end of this corridor. Until then you’ll have to stay in the other building, which is only used in an emergency when everything else is occupied, because it’s in a rather poor condition.”

They went back down to the kitchen and over to the oldest part of the inn.

“There is an awful lot of administrative work that needs to be taken care of,” said Mrs Sinclair as they climbed another staircase. “That’s why we asked you to come in plenty of time.

The other members of staff will be arriving in ten days, when we open.”

“Do you live here in the inn?” Ellen asked cautiously.

“No, I have my own house in the village.”

“Ah,” said Ellen anxiously and didn’t dare inquire further. Thick floorboards creaked below their feet in a long corridor with deep window recesses.

But it seemed that Mrs Sinclair had registered Ellen’s unease. “You’ll only be alone here for a few days,” she said. “It’ll be fine. You can lock all the doors so you won’t get any unwanted visitors. So here we have the original inn. The previous owner didn’t seem to want to use this part of the house. But I think that was stupid of him. I’ve had some of the rooms here renovated. You can use this one.”

The room had a low ceiling and not a single right angle. The little window with its many curved panes had a view of the street. Ellen noticed that the second sign hung right outside her window.

“This is so cosy,” she whispered, admiring the old-fashioned rose-patterned bedspread and the copper engravings on the wall.

Mrs Sinclair was already back out in the corridor. Ellen had to stoop under the door frame to follow her.

“Numbers four and five are double rooms,” said the manager as she alternately opened and closed the doors. “Eleven and twelve are for families with one child.”

They turned a corner. “And these are single rooms: six, seven and nine. And this is the housekeeping room. The bathrooms are downstairs. We’re not quite fully modernized yet.”

“And what about that door? Where does that lead to?” Ellen asked, pointing to a low, crooked, unpainted door at the end of the hall. “I guess that must be room number eight?”

“That door is never used,” the manager answered curtly as she quickly made her way back to the staircase.

Before Ellen turned the corner, she cast a quick glance at the locked door. Every single inch of the hallway had been thoroughly polished and was freshly painted – but not that door.

Although everything in the house was old, that door looked as if it truly hadn't been opened for the last hundred years.

It had been daytime then, when the inn was full of the sounds of people working. Carpenters pounded, hammered and dropped boards, and Ellen was thoroughly engrossed in learning all about a receptionist's duties at an inn. She had never dreamt that these would be so numerous, and Mrs Sinclair had difficulty concealing her annoyance at the fact that Ellen knew so little about office work.

But then evening and dusk rolled around, and the house gradually quietened down. Mrs Sinclair bade her a conciliatory, friendly goodnight and asked Ellen to lock up properly after her.

Which she did. She took a glass of orange juice from the kitchen and plodded dejectedly up the hazardous stairs to her lopsided little room in the oldest part of the inn.

The sound of the river was much more distinct now in its desolate monotony. Deep in the forest she could hear a thrush singing. The sound echoed, lonely, lonely ... if there were any young people in the village you couldn't hear them. Not a single car or motorcycle, not a single voice could be heard in the quiet, early summer night.

Ellen folded up the rose-patterned bedspread and didn't feel at all at home in the ancient house. Outside her door there was a little crooked corridor with many closed doors. Below her was

an empty floor where the owner of the inn had once lived – and beyond that the kitchen wing extended towards yet another empty building, behind which was a stable where the carriage horses used to be kept.

And now only the 21-year-old Ellen Knutsen from the twentieth century was here. Not that she was scared of the dark or anything like that, but she did feel a certain unease about the whole claustrophobic atmosphere, and all the memories about which the house was silent.

It's in moments like these that a person really feels just how lonely they are deep down, Ellen thought. An oppressive sense of discouragement came over her. She had experienced many failures during her short life. With an incurable enthusiasm, she had concentrated all her efforts on wild projects, initiating fund-raisers and bazaars for one cause or another that just at that moment had managed to make her heart overflow with compassion. She had protested against injustices and stood up for the weaker members of society, only to discover that you can't always overlook the opinion of the majority because often the majority is right, and the weak are simply weak and unworthy. She had ...

Oh, she had received many blows! All that contempt, all that scornful laughter, and all the scoldings she had had to endure whenever her eagerness had got the better of her and led her in completely the wrong direction! All the dark hours she had had to face ... Such as right now.

Ellen had so much to give, but she was still too young to see it all in the right proportion and in the right way.

All these thoughts overwhelmed her, along with the sound of the thrush's lonely song and the eternal rushing of the river.

And the quiet creaking of the house sounded to her like an echo of the troubled years of her childhood.

For there was a dark stain on the family history, that had often plagued Ellen's thoughts, especially when she was a child. She never associated it with the terrible experience she had once had – the one she had never told anyone about. But this was the time and place to torment one's soul with such memories.

But luckily Ellen was exhausted, so she didn't have a chance to lie there for very long, amplifying sounds that weren't really there and weaving stupid horror stories about the past or the present, before she fell asleep.

The next day she went for a walk down to the village. There was an ultra-modern shop and a more basic general store, which Ellen chose. Something she shouldn't have done.

The lady in the general store was curious. "Are there tourists in town already?"

"No, I work at the inn. I'll be there for the summer."

"I see. Serving, I suppose?"

"No, I'm going to be on reception. But I don't know how that's going to work out. It's much harder than I thought."

The lady leaned her bosom on the counter. "So you live in the village?"

For the third time Ellen had to give a negative response to the lady's guesses. "No, I am staying in the inn itself. I must admit it feels rather lonely there."

The shop lady slapped her hand down on the counter. "What in the world? Is that crazy woman allowing a young girl like you to stay all alone in that haunted house? That's the most terrible thing I've heard yet."

Ellen's mouth quivered a little, partially from amusement and partially in bewilderment. "Haunted house?"

"Oh, but it's all right: thankfully they shut down the old part ..."

“You mean the part nearest the forest?” Ellen asked, turning pale. “But that’s where I am staying!”

“What?” shouted the woman. “Are you sleeping there? But that’s crazy! Nicolaysen would never have allowed that! Never in his life!”

“Now I’m getting scared,” said Ellen impatiently and reproachfully. “Is it really haunted, or isn’t it?”

Finally the woman realized that she had gone too far. “Well, there’s haunted and haunted ... no one’s ever actually seen anything. But strange things have happened there.”

“What kind of strange things?”

As though the woman were afraid that someone might overhear her, she looked over her shoulder and lowered her voice. “All I’m saying is: don’t touch that door!”

“The one at the end of the hallway?” Ellen asked somewhat uneasily. “What is it? Where does it lead?”

The woman leaned closer and said in confidence: “No one knows for certain what it leads to. No one alive now, that is. But they’ve figured out that there must be another room on the other side of it.”

Ellen recalled the structure of the inn from memory. “As far as I remember there was no window in that gable. Only the French roof that slopes down. But why don’t they look inside it?”

It was clear that the climax of the story was about to come, because the woman’s voice grew raspy with excitement. “No one has attempted to open that door since the start of the forties. And the one who tried back then died. Fell over stone dead just as he was about to break in. And everyone else who tried before him died, too. Either from the plague, or in an accident, or that sort of thing.”

When Ellen had discounted the rather dubious reference to

the plague, she tried to get a little clarity on all the mystery. “So the door wasn’t properly opened in 1940 either?”

“It’s never been opened. No one’s ever been able to manage it. When the Germans couldn’t even manage it during the War, how can ordinary decent citizens be expected to?”

“So it was a German who tried?”

“Yes. A captain who bawled and screamed and called his men cowards, and just when he took out his gun and was about to shoot his way in through the door, he collapsed on the spot and died from a heart attack.”

“He probably bawled too much,” said Ellen, who found it hard to believe that there was some evil force behind the door. “So no one’s been able to come up with an explanation as to why the door won’t open?”

The woman gave a crooked, sly smile. “Oh, yes, they most certainly have! They say that a nobleman committed suicide in the late eighteenth century. Locked himself in one of the rooms and lay there without eating or drinking until he just sort of shrivelled up. He was nothing but a mummy the last time they saw him.”

“The last time they saw him? You mean when they carried him out of the room ... out of the house?”

“No one knows,” the woman whispered secretively. “No one knows. The only thing that is ever said is, the last time anyone saw him, he was dry as a mummy. They say he suffered from a broken heart. And even though it was never talked about, it’s not hard to imagine which room he locked himself in.”

“But he doesn’t haunt the place?” asked Ellen, trying to conceal a little smile.

“How can one ever be entirely sure about that? It’s been ages since that part of the house was occupied by anyone. But there’s no denying that there’s something very strange about that door.

And now that woman has apparently fixed up the other rooms. She's mad. Does she really think anyone's going to want to stay in them?"

But as the summer day was so golden yellow and light green, Ellen had a good laugh over that mad ghost story on her way back to the inn. When she got back she mentioned the conversation she had had to Mrs Sinclair.

"Oh yes, I've heard that story before," the manager said curtly. "Village gossip! Nicolaysen, the former owner, took the story terribly seriously, but Director Steen, who has now purchased this place, seems much more sensible. In any case, the idea of restoring the old part of the inn came from me. And I hope that you also have a realistic view of the matter."

"I didn't notice anything last night. And I've never been impressed by ghost stories."

At this point a chilling memory swept through Ellen's mind. What she had experienced ...

No, she quickly pushed it aside.

Mrs Sinclair continued undisturbed: "Of course, I wanted to have the door opened, but the carpenters warned me against it. And since there was no key for it, I just let it be. It's not worth breaking it down. I'm not strong enough to do it alone and no one will help me. I couldn't even get anyone to paint it, so I'll have to do that myself – when I have the time. Anyway, I think it lends a certain atmosphere to the place."

That's easy for you to say, thought Ellen slightly bitterly. You don't have to sleep all alone in that big building. Yes, the door lent some atmosphere all right. A little too much atmosphere for Ellen's taste.

Again, the evil memory swept through her mind, the one for which she had never managed to find a proper explanation.

Blast! Why did it have to surface at this very moment? Just

when she least needed it!

Then came the second night.

Her mind filled with room reservations, service prices and bills, Ellen crawled into bed wearing her new nightgown, which may have been rather a rash purchase considering the lonely environment she was in, but she just hadn't been able to resist it. "A bridal nightgown," the shop lady had said, and Ellen had tried to look as though that was exactly what she had been looking for. The truth was she didn't even have a boyfriend, much less a groom. But she just had to have that nightgown. It was the kind that you only come across once in a lifetime. White with transparent lace, and so romantic that it took one's breath away.

But it cheered her up in this miserable, deserted wilderness, as she so bitterly thought of the area.

It was starting to get stormy outside, and the silence wasn't quite as penetrating as before. Furthermore, there were still a few painters working overtime in the main building, so she didn't feel lonely. Instead she fell asleep in the satisfied knowledge that she had done a good day's work. She was getting a better grip on it all. She even felt she was on good, friendly terms with Mrs Sinclair.

The carpenters left, but Ellen was asleep by then.

At some time during the night she was half woken by a sound, but she was too deep in her dreams to take any interest in it. She just thought irritably that her father ought to oil the door to the office because it was squeaking so much that it was practically screeching. And there was no reason for him to bang the garage door closed like that. It was echoing through the whole garage ...

There were three heavy, hollow booming sounds. Perhaps the

office door started squeaking again, perhaps not. Ellen was too far into dreamworld to be able to distinguish between dream and reality.

It was an unpleasant dream she had been having. It gradually sneaked up on her. A dream or a sense that she wasn't alone – in a place where she should have been alone. Ellen brushed off the dream, turned over and went back to sleep.

But the thing that happened on the third night really did wake her up ...

Chapter 2

During the day they were paid a visit by the new director, Steen, who was accompanied by Mr Nicolaysen, the previous owner. Steen, a bloodshot social climber who suffered from a threatening heart condition and had only one interest in life – money – listened somewhat perplexedly to Mrs Sinclair’s account of the restoration of the inn’s old wing and the reason why the door remained untouched. But he thought the idea of having a locked room would make good publicity for the inn.

“Spice it up with a tear-jerking romantic story,” he said to Mrs Sinclair. “Foreigners love that sort of thing.”

But Nicolaysen was upset. “You don’t know what you’re saying! We can’t put the guests’ lives at risk like that! Miss Knutsen here simply cannot stay in that wing. Move her at once!”

Ellen reassured him that she was fine, and that she didn’t wish to burden Mrs Sinclair now, when there were no other rooms vacant. Furthermore, she had absolutely no intention of opening that door; she didn’t even wish to enter that part of the hallway.

With some hesitation Nicolaysen finally gave in. He was a stressed, middle-aged man with nicotine-stained fingers and quivering eyelids. His hair consisted of a small coronet of an indeterminate colour around his shiny bald head. Since he also owned a small chemical factory in the village, he had ended up neglecting the inn to such an extent that he had been forced to sell it. He hadn’t wanted to, but the conscientious villagers had started to object to the respectable old inn falling into disrepair.

So Steen had purchased it a year ago and had immediately