

# Untitled NaNo Project

by Ingrid K. V. Hardy

## **Threads From The Thirsty Boot**

**(working title only)**

### **Chapter One: Of Many Disguises**

My name is Sydnée Figge, and this is the beginning of my story.

I suppose it should be said that even though people call me Syd, I am not a man. People who can actually see me know that right away, and I'm not ashamed of that even though I'm a bit older than I was... But then, aren't we all.

Let me warn you now, if you have mind that does not wish to change it's view of the world, you might be best to put away this notebook promptly because, if you stay with me through the long course of these pages, you may read things you would rather never know. I had always prided myself on being open-minded but even I have had a bit of difficulty convincing myself that I've not lost my mind.

Perhaps this notebook you hold is *why* I have not lost my mind; the book can do that job for me.

Alright then off we go. One should begin at the beginning I suppose, but my birth was dull and uneventful. At least, it must have been since I remember nothing of it. So then, why not start that early evening in October, on All Hallow's Eve to be exact, as the sun was nearing it's death, the lovely rays clinging desperately to the colorful leaves that refused to stay on trees any longer, spilling to the ground and assaulting our ears with the crunching of their small brittle bodies as Ruthie and I marched over them with little thought.

It had been her decision to go out that day, to take me away from sulking in my apartment, bonding with my cat, eating ice cream and playing games with dust bunnies. Frankly, I saw nothing wrong with that, but Ruthie thought otherwise. She always does.

"Syd, you are going to LOVE the food at this place! It's just your style: nothing fancy, but tasty and just a bit different."

"Ruthie, is that another way of telling me I'm a slob?"

Pieces of dead, and very beautiful, leaves flew around our feet as we walked down the city street, passing numerous zombies, aliens and buxom secretaries in search of the new restaurant we were to assault with our working class palates.

"Um, no of course not! Wouldn't dream of it. Keep your eyes open now, we're looking for a street called Island Road."

"Why would they call a 'street' a 'road'? That seems rather silly..." I returned the evil eye of a passing serial killer.

"I guess for the same reason they call some streets 'boulevards' when they are anything but." A group of slightly-disguised teenagers passed us by, pointing and giggling. "We should have dressed up as sore thumbs, Syd,"

"Sore thumbs? What for?"

"Because we stick out like two of them."

"Ruthie, Halloween is just a kid's game. And nothing but a money-making opportunity for..."

Ruthie rolled her eyes and looked directly at me, "Not another conspiracy, please?"

"Look out for the Bumble Bee!" I grabbed Ruthie and dragged her in front of me, avoiding a very young Bee as it buzzed along, claiming the entire sidewalk and trailing its parents along behind.

"Eep! So sorry!" Ruthie reached out a hand to ruffle the little Bee as it walked on obliviously, in search of more candy to collect. The Bee's parents gave an apologetic smile and continued on. "Happy Halloween!" they uttered as they passed.

As we continued on, the sunlight ended its time, though not by the horizon, but by a large mass of clouds that rolled in from the north, bringing a bit of wind along with it. Definitely not a summer wind, I snuggled deeper into my dark blue fall jacket, stuffing my hands into my pockets. Ruthie lifted up the collar of her own coat and dug out a piece of paper from her pocket.

"Well, according to the directions, we should be getting close. Another block and we should be there."

And as she said, there it was, Island Road.

I've lived in Stonehart all my life and couldn't remember having heard anything about this street before or even the restaurant itself. Quite frankly, I had been suspecting the Ruthie was playing some sort of trick. We had been friends for a very long time and she knew me well enough to know what would cheer me up. I've a soft spot for a really nice meal. Hey, some people gamble, some drink, some pick up a one-nighter. For me, it's a nice meal in an interesting place. Works out rather well as I've been able to publish some restaurant reviews from some of my experiences. Enough of them that I actually had a small following of readers and have had a few suggestions for future explorations. But not this place.

And Ruthie, dear friend that she was, did her best to tag along. Just to give a second opinion of course.

We turned left from colonial Avenue onto Island Road and continued our walk.

"Is it very much further?" I asked.

"No, it should be a few minutes. Perhaps catching a bus to go back would be a good idea though... It is farther that I thought it would be." She sheepishly looked at her paper.

"Ah, the fresh air and all those costumes is good for the appetite!" I didn't want her to feel bad about taking me away from the appointment I had with my cat.

Island Road, which looked very much like any other residential street, was full of trick-or-treaters. With the sun completely gone now, house lights and lit pumpkins gleamed everywhere as adults and children weaved in and out of driveways. A bit of fog was beginning to drag along the ground as we advanced further down the street, creating a parchment paper-like scene with spots of light poking through here and there.

"My gosh the fog comes up quickly here!" Ruthi looked around, surprised.

"I'm not sure, but I think the river is close by. I've... I've never been on this road. Can't say I've ever noticed it on the map either. Do you know this area?"

Ruthie shook her head, staring at the fog as it became very thick.

"Actually I'm beginning to think we should just go back and try another place. To be honest, Syd, even the way I heard about this place was rather strange..."

And as she said the words, nothing but a few little wisps of the fog remained; it seemed we had passed through it. What we had finally arrived at was not so terribly impressive, but it had an inviting feel to it. With that sentiment, my Food Critic began to kick back in again and though I would never admit it to Ruthie, I was relieved and looked at the abode with an appraising eye.

Ruthie herself was already at the door of a place that looked nothing like a restaurant at all. With what looked like a hand-carved sign with the name The Thirsty Boot chiseled on it. It resembled more of a... an *inn* was the closest thing I could think of, with walls put together with rough brick interspersed with smallish windows, the glass separated into even smaller squares. The corners of the wall were set with very large cornerstones, each one a variation of slate grey, in contrast to the deep rust of the bricks. The oddest part though, was the fact that the two-level building didn't have a "shape"; it wasn't laid out rectangularly, nor in a square, nor any other specific shape. It looked an awful lot like a group of children's blocks had been tossed together and declared fit for habitation. I hoped it was.

"Enough with the inspection, let's get inside! I'm hungry!" As darkness finally claimed victory, Ruthie held open the well-used, and surprisingly thick, wooden door as I approached and together we crossed over the wide doorstep.

I felt a slight disorientation as we walked in and I guessed Ruthie felt it too, because she grabbed my arm for a moment. It passed as quickly as it came, though, and we were immediately taken - or at least, I was - by a sense of welcoming. The spacious room was full of people talking, eating and talking, wandering around and talking...

A red-headed young girl dressed in what resembled a laboratory coat and old, black-rimmed spectacles came up to us.

"Can I help you two? Are you hungry, this fine Hallow'een evenin'?" She pushed up her glasses as she spoke.

"We were hoping for a table... It looks like you have no more room." I could almost hear Ruthie's tummy complain even with the noise.

"Oh no worries," came the cheerful answer, "We always have a free table. Just follow me!" And off she went.

As we walked across the bustling room, I admired the myriad costumes everyone wore: two men appearing to be World War II soldiers were at the bar, huddled over two very large drafts. Besides them were several young men dressed in strangely fitting clothes of the nineteen-fifties. I saw people as Romans, swashbucklers, farmers from the Middle Ages, and several disguises I could not figure out. As my eyes roamed the room, they fell on one small corner table between a wall filled with framed drawings and suspended objects, and the wall lined with smaller sections of windows side by side to make an area that must have been filled with light during the day. At that corner table sat a man, sitting alone, with a plate of unidentifiable somethings on it. He was looking directly at me.

"Syd! What are you staring at? Sit down!"

We had arrived at our table, along to the companion wall to the windows.

"Oh, yes... sitting down now. The costumes everyone is wearing... They are really well done! We should have dressed up as well, Ruthie. Why didn't you tell me? I would have taken out my..."

" '...fantastic Swedish Chef costume.' Yes I know. It's the *only* costume you ever wear, Syd."

"But it's a good one! Oh I suppose it is time to try something new..."

"Something to eat would be even better. Here's a menu." Ruthie's tone was very determined; it was definitely time to eat. I glanced up to where the windows were and saw the man, still there and still

staring in our direction. As our eyes met he looked away, for which I was glad. The eyes that had locked onto mine had felt very cold.

"To your health!" a cheer resounded from the table next to us where five people raised their glasses to one another.

"Ruthie, like I said, the costumes here are just so perfect." I lowered my voice. "Look at their teeth! That's not make-up," My nose pointed to a man appearing to be in his thirties sitting with the celebrating group beside us.

"Those are *actual holes* in his teeth, and the yellow ickiness, no way that's make-up! And the detailed seams on the dress the girl besides him is wearing. I been looking for years for a vest sewn like that!"

"Syd, I thought you were joking. What costumes? No one is dressed up here, except for some of the staff..." Ruthie put her glass of water back down on the table. "This is why I wanted to take you out of your cave tonight. Honestly, I worry about you Sydnée. You've got to start getting out again, not stay alone all the time. You did the right thing Syd, really you did! Stop ruminating on it now, you've done your grieving! Not that he was worth it, the idiot, but two weeks of doing nothing but work and patting the cat is quite enough..."

I was about to insist on what I saw, and perhaps mention she would make a very fine psychiatrist in disguise when a girl dressed like a waitress with big glasses came to our table. It turned out that she really was one.

"Have you girls decided yet what you'd like? No? Well maybe I can help!" The red-head pushed up her glasses enthusiastically. "Agh... I'll be glad when I can take these glasses off, they're way too big! Oh and my name's Britta, by the way! Anyways, to celebrate this this Eve of the Dead, we have several dishes we don't normally serve. I wouldn't suggest the Boar's Head since you are only two, because it's big! You might like to try the appetizers, we've got a great plate of chopped beef tongue on little toasts, cooked Wortes... No, no, it's not what you think, and..."

And the girl went on. Finally both Ruthie and I chose dishes we had a bit of knowledge on, like Nachos and two Chef's Salads, much to our waitress' disappointment. In an effort to appease her, we did decide to try a bit of wine mulled in honey and spices.

"So," Ruthie turned to me as Britta walked away. "What do you think of the place so far?" Her voice, eager for a delectable answer, brought a smile to my own face.

"So far it's a three out of six. People obviously like the place, and it is very friendly so far." My eyes strayed to the windowed wall. The man with the cold blue eyes was gone. "But it is rather crowded, not much space to move around. I'll hold my opinions for the food." Another roar of celebration went up a few tables over, where a group of large men in Robin Hood type costumes very loudly toasted a man with arms very nearly the size of two Sequoia trees.

Slung across the backs of two of the occupied chairs were what I could have sworn were swords. Not the dollar store variety that glint like a dog's cheap tin food bowl, but the kind that glint like those chef's knives you could never afford. The shine alone could slice through tomatoes.

I just had to have a look.

"Ruthie, there is something I want to see. Might help me have a better opinion of this place..."

"Sydnée Figge... just *where* do you think you are going?" came a question dripping with suspicion.

Ruthie would make a great mother one day. Much better than I.

\* \* \* \* \*

The next hour and a half was ordinary enough, the perky waitress - who could not refrain from telling us that her name was Britta - brought us our meals and we ate, undisturbed. More or less. As we ate, the Food Critic in me was very pleased. Our Nachos, normally a very humble dish indeed, were not just good but absolutely excellent, the salsa containing an ingredient that I had not tasted before, a pungent but not overwhelming flavor that tied all the vegetables together. And the vegetables were more than just fresh...

The variety of peppers were at once familiar and foreign, their shapes smaller and not quite what I had seen before.

Mentioning this to Ruthie got me the same quizzical look as with the costumes, so I just let it lie. A little voice in the back of my mind spoke up for the first time in many years, after having been firmly put away, telling me to, for once, be quiet.

It wasn't really all that necessary, for after I had gone to look at the swords hanging off the chairs of Robin Hood and his merry table of friends, two things had happened. First, the massive man disguised just like a Friar Tuck, sitting across the table from my position, looked at me touching one of the swords with an expression that did not make me feel very welcome. And, by the way, the crystal clear sound my finger nails made as they tapped the blade told me it was honest-to-goodness, hard-core metal.

Immediately removing my curious fingers from the tool that must have weighed more than my entire body, Friar Tuck bellowed like a bullhorn.

"Wench! Remove ye filthy 'ands!"

"What?" More than the sword, his words had me non-plussed. My hands were perfectly clean, thank you.

"Um... Your sword... *stunning* workmanship on it. So convincing for Halloween... Well done!"

The man to whom I thought the sword belonged to swivelled around from his Maid Marion to glower first at his loud friend, and then at me. Did I mention he was very, very muscular? And very dirty.

"Ach, what idiot maid is this, then? Ye *dare* to touch me sword...!" He also smelled really bad; someone went to great extremes for this costume.

Ruthie had come up at the same time another, older lady came up to me.

"I'm so sorry, I really shouldn't let her out of the house just yet, she's... she's in recovery." Ruthie was really good at her job after ten years as chief of personnel management.



The older lady said a few words to the large men at the table and they immediately calmed down.

"Why dinna you say so, m'lady? We weren't aware. We'd not have terrorized 'er so!" Robin turned my way again. "Bonny she is, though..." which caused him a cuff on the ears from Marion.

We had returned to our table, still with the lady, who chatted with us a moment.

"My name is Martha, I'm one of the owners of this establishment. And you are...?"

She held out her hand, looking very intently at me.

"Sydnée Figge. I'm sorry if I caused a fuss..." Something felt not right about all this.

"And I'm Ruthie Fensterwald." Feeling my hesitance, Ruthie held out her hand to the matron, who shook it absently.

"Oh, not to worry my dear," Martha's liquid voice was easily understood in the roomful of chatter. "It happens. Those particular clients are regulars - good-hearted they are, but are also used to reacting rather quickly to... certain situations."

"Well, those are the most convincing Halloween swords I have ever seen, someone could actually get hurt playing with them,"

As I said the words, I regretted it, feeling instantly both Martha and Ruthie looking at me, but each with different expressions.

Oh, how I wished for the company of my cat.

## **Chapter Two: Dance of Indecision**

That night I had the dream again. She was crying, begging me to help her. And I begged her to help me stop, as wave upon wave of cold and then heat swept over me. Her face was so familiar, so close... and then, as it did every single time, it would change like the images on a billboard, reforming into a different person. A younger person, and then younger still, and that awful sense of loss and heartbreak would overcome me again. I would always wake before the transformation of that face was complete, and I did so again that

morning to find that the cold and the heat were the result of the sun and the clouds doing the dance of indecision, leaving alternate traces of sunlight and shade spilling through the window beside my bed. A nice day or a gloomy day? What shall it be, they seemed to argue.

My emotions still in turmoil, I lay in my bed and watched them try to decide the fate of the day, as Spirou jumped up to let me know that more practical matters needed my attention. And he was right.

I was hungry.

Usually after having that dream - or nightmare would be a better description - my mood is rather on the unfriendly side. Once I had hit thirty-five though, I'd made a mental decision to change that habit. So in accordance with that choice, memories of the previous night's events were welcomed to the front part, or upper part, or whatever area of the brain is in charge of "things to think about now".

Why did Ruthie not see what I saw? Was I really losing my mind now? My life wasn't that bad, it was quite good actually. Boring as hell, to be honest, but was that bad? No, it could be worse. It had been worse.

Thoughts of the nightmare came back and I pushed them away again.

Coffee and a good blueberry bagel sounded quite good now, and I began to prepare my breakfast. As I toasted my bagel, Spirou put his front paws on my right leg, something he did only when he really wanted my attention. The white cat had learnt from experience that mommy does not like to have her legs scratched.

"Alright then, what have I not done for you this morning?" As I said it, it dawned on me that it was *his* tummy I was supposed to care for, not mine.

But of course. What was I thinking, I really should know better.

And that thought brought Martha to mind. Now there was a curious mystery, the way she looked at me after the small commotion at the table. I could not read her expression at all. It

wasn't like Martha who had looked at me as if I really did need some help now. No, Martha's face had more of a surprised look to it.

With Spirou happily chewing through his Fancy Feast now, I brought my breakfast over to the little chair by my apartment window facing the park. Sun and cloud still argued over what kind of day it would be.

Why would she be surprised? Then a thought occurred to me - what if I had eaten something that caused me to see what I saw? Oh, now that might not be so good. Perhaps she knew I wrote critiques and didn't want a bad review.

But I'd seen those costumes *before* we had eaten. And honestly, what is such a big deal about seeing costumes on Halloween? One is supposed to see that!

The coffee went down very well indeed and sloshed nicely around the bagel in my tummy. Considering a second cup, I felt the need to talk to Ruthie about this. Never mind that silly voice in my head, I wanted to know exactly what she had seen. I could trust Ruthie, surely she would listen to me. Martha had asked that we meet again two days from then, Sunday morning, when she had a free moment, and having a better idea what was going on might be comforting... She had asked very graciously, but her voice had had a firmness to it that made me think we were meeting on Sunday whether I wanted to or not.

Reaching for the phone as I set down my cup, it rang, making me jump. Ruthie, of course. Feeling smug as I picked it up - it wasn't the first time that happened to me - I answered with:

