

The Hero of Ward 6

by Sandra McDonald

Driving home, Jack saw a crude sign written on cardboard and nailed to an oak tree near his house:

"Poison on gras! Harmful too dogs. BeWARE."

The thin triangle of land beneath the tree belonged to the city, leftover from when the first subdivisions moved into and carved up the old farms between the river and University Boulevard. The oak was a majestic old thing, at least a hundred years old, that had been left in place as the road was put down around it. Spanish moss hung from its huge branches. Scraggly winter grass covered the ground beneath it. Neighbors often let their dogs take dumps there, and a few scofflaws were known for not cleaning up the mess.

Jack pulled into his carport. His stomach growling with hunger, he carried his suitcase into the kitchen. Stan was straining hot pasta into a blue colander at the sink. His nose was pink and his glasses foggy. The heady aroma of garlic and tomatoes hung in the air.

"Who put up that sign about poison?" Jack asked.

Stan carried the colander back to a stainless steel pot on the stove. "Ward 6 Hero, last night. No welcome home kiss?"

"Hello." Jack kissed Stan's grizzled cheek. Fifty-five years old, the two of them, though most days Jack felt much older. He put his briefcase down and shrugged out of his jacket. "What poison?"

"Some kind of pesticide the city put down. It burned the paws of Janie Napolitano's German Shepard. You know—Butch?"

"Dutch." Jack pulled a beer from the steel-gray refrigerator. The kitchen was warm and clean and modern, with black counters and gray cabinets, and splashes of blue. All Stan's doing, of course. Jack wilted in home improvement stores. "Not Butch."

Stan lifted the lid from a pot of sauce. "And Mrs. Washington's little terrier, too. Emo?"

"Nemo," Jack corrected. His gaze focused out the window. "Ward Hero never was able to spell very well."

"Still, I love him." Stan tweaked Jack's nose. "Hungry?"

"Starving."

Go take your shoes off and relax. Dinner in ten."

Jack put his shoes and coat in the closet, swapped his teaching clothes for sweatpants and a comfortable Gators jersey, and settled in the den with the day's mail. Outside, another January evening settled over North Florida and a brisk wind pushed leaves into the St. John's River. He opened a thank you note from the Lewises over on Clemson Street, tossed a reminder for the monthly meeting over at Hero Hall, and pondered a letter from an address he didn't recognize.

The reigning cat of the house, Harrison, twined through Jack's legs and let out a plaintive meow.

"So ignored," Jack said, scratching one soft ragged ear. Harrison had seen his share of fights and danger in the neighborhood. Sometimes he led Ward Hero to children who needed to be pulled out of wells (once) or lonely old men having heart attacks in front of their TVs (twice, with a seven year lapse in between). He raised the alarm if black widow spiders spun their way onto backyard swings (twice for the Harper family and three times to the Shahs) or if a carelessly discarded cigarette set the trash to fire (once, three years ago, to the family renting the house at the corner of Duke and Fordham).

Jack knew none of this firsthand, of course. His body did the work under Ward 6 Hero's persona while his mind slept on, blissfully ignorant. He only had the Chronicles for testimony. Twenty years of leather-bound journals sat neatly on the shelves by the window, each one labeled in the neat handwriting of Ward 6 Hero's official companion, The Sidekick Kid. When the district began requiring electronic reports, The Sidekick Kid had switched to the Mac computer on the desk. Jack preferred the old-fashioned way, ink on a page, over submission forms, text boxes, and computerized spell-check.

That was progress for you. Damn progress, all around.

"Dinner's on!" Stan called.

"Coming," Jack said. He opened and read the letter from the stranger, a Mrs. Alice Waters of Elm Street. Afterward he put the letter aside. Her lamentable situation was no job for Ward 6 Hero.

She had her own Hero, wherever he was.

* * *

The one o'clock class at the community college left Jack feeling strangely exhausted. For years he'd taught literature in a fancy classroom at the university, but those classes eventually grew too painful. Few students read anything these days that didn't arrive on a flashing screen accompanied by explosions, loud music and headache-inducing special effects. Composition was easier for him to teach and easier for them to pass, as long as they turned in some semblance of work on time and attended seventy-five percent of their classes.

Today's topic had been dangling modifiers, one of his favorite pet peeves, but the blank looks on his students' faces had told him they didn't understand a word he said.

And he was tired of trying to communicate. So very tired.

As the class was letting out, a middle-aged brunette in a bright yellow sweater and brown purse sidled through the door.

"Professor MacKenzie?" she asked.

"Yes, that's me." At first he thought she was one of the college faculty or staff, but there was a hospital badge poking out of her purse. He feared that something had happened to Stan. Wouldn't the emergency room have called him, not sent a doctor or nurse?

"I'm Alice Waters. I wrote to you?"

Jack let out a worried breath and snapped his briefcase shut. The classroom was empty but for two students lingering in the back. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Waters. As I told you on the phone, I can't help you. Your ward has its own Hero."

She nodded, her eyes wide and mouth frowning. "Yes, I know. Michael Beamer. But he hasn't put on his tights in months, Professor! He doesn't do anything. And the situation's getting worse."

Jack moved past her to the door. He couldn't quite remember the names of his students—Shaniqua and Sharonda, perhaps. "Come along, ladies. Time to lock up."

The girls dutifully exited. Jack followed them to the cement sidewalk that connected all the classrooms on campus. Mrs. Waters, close behind him, said, "Your Ward 6 and my Ward 4 are only one street apart, Professor MacKenzie. One street. But yours is well-kept, and mine is going to seed."

"It's not up to me," he said as he coded the lock. "I wish it was. But everything is handled by Hero Central. You can complain to them."

"I have! Believe you me, Professor. But Mr. Beamer's uncle is very well-connected, from what I understand. They've known about the problem for weeks and haven't done anything."

Mike Beamer's uncle wasn't just politically connected. He was second in command at Hero Central, and had been responsible for Jack's demotion all those years ago.

"Mrs. Waters, really -- "

"I know there's all this bureaucracy," Mrs. Waters said. "I know that you're not allowed to cross ward lines under ordinary circumstances. But if you know there's a problem and you don't do anything about it, isn't that as bad as the people who cause the problems? That's what I teach my children, Professor. And I don't know what to tell them when they ask me why our neighborhood hero isn't doing his job."

Jack was silent. The sky was gray and overcast behind the palm trees. January was a cold dreary month, even in Florida. Mrs. Waters appeared to be the exact kind of upstanding, responsible citizen that heroes were supposed to help.

"I'll talk to Mike Beamer," he finally offered.

Mrs. Waters shook his hand. "Thank you! Thank you very much."

He regretted the promise almost immediately, of course. Regretted it during a two-hour faculty meeting in which Ph.D. holders were instructed on how to order pens, and regretted it on the drive home through heavy, wet traffic. Stan, who was working on a new freelance project for a bank, looked up from his coding when Jack told him.

"I'm glad you agreed to help her," he said. "I've heard stories about what's going on over on Elm."

"What stories?"

"You know. The same things she's talking about. High-volume drive-by traffic. Different cars parked outside every night. Beer cans on the lawn. There's a pit bull in the yard that worries the neighbors."

"You never told me."

Stan's fingers rested lightly on the keyboard, the coding forgotten. Carefully he said, "Ward 6 Hero knows. But he won't cross official lines, just like you."

Jack made a non-committal noise and went off to fix himself some hot tea. It was his turn to cook dinner, which meant they'd been eating pizza brought by the nice man from Pizza King. First he looked up Mike and Kate Beamer's number in his Hero Directory.

The phone rang and rang with no answer and no voicemail.

Later, after he'd graded eleven essays and flunked three of them, after Stan was done with his freelance work and the house was quiet around them, Jack opened the bedroom closet. His and Stan's uniforms hung side-by-side on white hangers. Dark pants, waterproof jackets, comfortable shoes. When Jack had first started, tights and a cape had been mandatory. The dress code had changed years ago, thank goodness. Jack had never felt comfortable in green velvet slippers.

"We patrolling tonight?" Stan asked, yawning, as he hugged Jack from behind.

"No." Jack closed the closet door. "Not tonight."

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When he woke the next morning, two of the uniforms were dirty and Stan had a bruise on his chin.

"What happened?" Jack demanded, cupping Stan's face.

"Mr. and Mrs. Slater were at it again. The Sidekick Hero didn't duck in time."

"I don't like it." Jack got ice from the fridge, fetched aspirin from the bathroom and made a note to start looking again for property in the countryside. Decades of selflessly sacrificing for the neighborhood, and some angry drunk husband dared to throw a punch at Jack's partner?

Stan took the aspirin and ice and kissed Jack's fingers. "Stop looking like that. Slater's just a guy with his own problems, and I'm sure he's feeling bad about it this morning."

"Not bad enough," Jack said.

It didn't help things that he couldn't reach Mike Beamer by phone, and when he walked over to the Beamers' house no one answered the door. He crossed more streets to Mrs. Waters' house on Elm. The houses there were like Jack's, concrete tract homes with gardens and square lawns, but many had gone neglected of late. The windows all had drawn shades and junk littered several carports. At mid-day on a Saturday, even given the drizzle, there were few signs of life.

The house at the corner of Elm and Pine, the subject of Mrs. Waters' concern, was an obvious eyesore. The roof sagged and the lawn was nothing but dirt and dead grass. Two barrels of garbage gave off a rancid smell in the empty driveway. The pit bull chained in the side yard was a dark, scrawny dog with jagged teeth and a fierce bark that made Jack cringe. An open sore was weeping pus on its back left haunch.

He used his cell phone to dial Animal Control, casually mentioned his hero status, and waited a half hour in the rain for the officers to arrive. They took one look at the dog, rang the doorbell without response for ten minutes, and then cut through the fence to confiscate the animal. The dog was anything but happy about being rescued, and snarled and snapped under a muzzle as they wrestled it into a cage.

The ruckus raised by the dog brought a teenager with long-hair to the front door. He had the

glassy-eyed stare of someone who either hadn't slept in days or was under the influence of illegal drugs, or maybe both. Jack didn't eavesdrop on his conversation with the animal welfare officers, but from the way the door slammed a moment later, he guessed it hadn't gone well.

"Thanks for calling this in," one of the officers said to Jack. "Hate to see a dog suffer, even the vicious ones."

"What will happen to him?"

"They'll try to rehab him. Otherwise, he'll get destroyed."

Jack trudged off in the rain. The next day he got a call from Mark Cho, the Precinct 3 Hero.

"Mike Beamer is complaining that you crossed wards," Cho said without preamble. "You had a dog confiscated from one of his residents?"

"Jack MacKenzie did, as a regular citizen." Jack was alone at home, folding laundry still warm from the dryer. "Ward 6 Hero didn't have anything to do with it."

"You used your hero code when you called it in."

He rolled two socks together. "No, I didn't. There's no code on the report. And even if there was a code, it wouldn't be a case of crossing wards, because every hero is honor-bound to report animal abuse regardless of jurisdiction. Regulation 12.1.4, paragraph a."

A pause on the other end of the line. Then Cho sighed. "Jack, what's going on? You've got a beef with Beamer?"

"I don't have a beef with anybody who does his or her job."

"Do me a favor. Come to the meeting tomorrow. It's been a long time, Jack. People will be glad to see you."

The doorbell rang, saving Jack from having to make a commitment. When he peered through the spyglass he saw the long-haired kid from Elm Street standing in the weak sunlight poking through rain clouds. The kid's T-shirt was plastered to his skin and had his arms folded over his chest.

"You're the guy who had my dog taken away," the kid said when Jack opened the door.

Jack replied, "I reported an abused animal to the city. They took him away."

The kid's gaze was fierce. "I was going to buy his medicine! I got my paycheck today."

"You can apply to get him back."

"If I pay for his license! And get his rabies shot." The kid wiped his nose with the back of his hand but didn't break eye contact. "And for the medical care they're giving him at the shelter. You know how much that costs? I don't make that much."

"If you paid all that money and got him home, would you really take care of him?" Jack asked curiously. "It's cheaper to just get another dog."

"He's all I have left from my—" the kid said, and then looked away.

The boy's name was Ronald. Stan had brought up the property and rental records, and

cross-referenced them with the last city census. Ronald was sixteen-years-old, his mother Jennifer was thirty-seven, and there was no listed father. If Ronald was working for a legitimate paycheck it was probably at a grocery store or fast-food restaurant, where teenage laborers were in high demand.

Jack said, "You have two weeks to claim a lost pet from the city shelter. If you can convince me in the next two weeks that you're a responsible pet owner and can be trusted with the life of an animal, I'll settle your balance."

Ronald squinted at him. "Screw you, mister. I'm not doing shit for you."

Jack waited until the kid was at the end of the driveway and then he called out, "Two weeks!"

No answer. But then again, he didn't expect one.

* * *

That night, Ward 6 Hero and The Sidekick Kid conducted their regular rounds. They rescued a cat from a tree on Colgate, doused a casserole fire on Mercer Circle, and took out the garbage for ninety-year-old Mrs. Dee on Suwannee. If Ward 6 Hero stood ruefully on the edge of the ward looking eastward toward Elm and Pine, it wasn't in the morning report.

Jack dragged himself through classes that day, tired as usual after a night of alter-ego heroics. Just because he had no conscious awareness of the nighttime activity didn't mean he avoided the price. He drank an extra protein shake and wondered how many more years he had in him.

"You have as many as you want," Stan said that night, after dinner, as they watched TV and cuddled on the sofa. "We both do."

"Doesn't seem like it." Jack checked the clock, then returned his attention to the TV.

"Meeting's tonight, isn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You haven't taken me out on the town in awhile." Stan poked him in the ribs. "I could do with a drink or two with my handsome hero."

Hero Hall was a two story brick building by the river. By the time they showered, dressed and drove over, the parking lot was jammed full and a spillover crowd was lingering in the misty chill of the Riverwalk. Jack almost turned around right then and there, but Stan persuaded him to at least get one beer. They waded through the raucous main hall, where heroes and sidekicks sat drinking out of steins while a polka band played loudly in the corner. Bobby Barajas, in charge of the downtown Latino district, was dancing with his wife in the middle of the dance floor. Zhang Wen, from Chinatown, had his hand on the stage microphone as if about to launch into a round of karaoke.

"There he is," Stan said.

Mike Beamer was drinking alone at a table. The years hadn't been good to him. His nose was red, his hair nearly gone, and he had a two-fisted grip on his beer that made it seem like the most precious thing in the world.

"I'm going to talk to him," Jack said, but a hand snagged his elbow.

Mark Cho, his face as wide and scarred as an antique frying pan, waved a cigar in the air. "Jack! Glad you hauled yourself over. Time for that beer, you and me."

Jack glanced apologetically at Stan.

Stan said, "Go on. I'll keep myself amused."

Jack followed Cho past the main bar to a windowless conference room lined with black-and-white pictures of fallen heroes. Sitting at the table, working his way through a plate of fish and chips, was Richie Vito. He wasn't the Superintendent Hero of Northeast Florida, but he was darn close to it.

"Jack, glad to see you." Vito rose halfway out of his seat to offer a greasy handshake, and then sat down again to tackle his meal. "I'm surprised lightning didn't strike the minute you walked into the place. Been a damn long time, hasn't it?"

Jack accepted a tall glass of beer from Cho. "Maybe not long enough."

"Nonsense. You're always welcome around here, you've always been, and it doesn't matter what a few narrow-minded bastards thought a few years back. Right, Mark?"

"You betcha."

Jack didn't point out that Vito had been one of the bastards. That Vito had said, "No buggery, not if you want to be in charge of a precinct, not if you want to be in charge of a district some day." And the whispers and back-stabbing and double-crossing had reached the point where Jack just didn't care about promotions. He had Stan, which was more than enough.

"The thing is," Cho said, speaking carefully, "Beamer's not doing his job. We know he's not doing it. Anyone who drives down his street knows it. We want you to take on Ward 4. Take it over."

Jack asked, "You're giving it to me officially? In written orders?"

"Well, we can't do that." Vito poured more catsup on his food. "You know his uncle. It's sensitive. But if you clean up that problem on Elm and Pine, the neighbors will see there can be a positive change, and we can use that. As leverage. What do you say?"

"I can't make him cross the ward lines," Jack said.

Vito gave him a squinty look. "I hear you don't even talk to your hero anymore, Jack. What's that about? I mean, sure, lots of guys give up riding. But you don't even leave the guy a note once in awhile? How's that make him feel?"

"I'm not worried about he feels," Jack said. "We done here?"

"Think about it, Jack," Vito said. "Clean up ward 4, earn some good karma points, who knows what could happen?"

Jack left his untouched beer in the room on his way out.

He searched the hall for several minutes, passing old heroes and new ones, catching snatches of stories and gossip that meant nothing to him. Dread built up in him as he wondered where Stan could be. Finally he found his partner in the parking lot, with an angry Mike Beamer looming over him.

"It's okay," Stan said, though he look relieved to see Jack. "We're just talking."

"Take two steps back," Jack said to Mike.

"Both of you stay out of my neighborhood," Mike said, his breath so boozy that Jack's eyes watered. "I don't need your help and don't want it. You hear me?"

Jack's hands fisted. "I said, back off. Or in a minute you're going to be floating in the river. Got it?"

"Stay away," Mike insisted, and lurched off toward his car.

"Stop that man from driving!" Stan called out, and someone from the South District intercepted Mike before he could drive.

On the way home, Jack was so angry that his hands shook on the steering wheel.

"Kate left him," Stan said quietly from the passenger seat. "Not just as his wife, but as his companion, too. Ran off with some other guy, they say. He's been broken up for months about it."

"That's no excuse," Jack said. The idea of Stan ever leaving him made bile rise in the back of his throat. He would never survive it; the days of his life, not just his hero career, would be over.

Stan changed the subject. "What did Cho want with you?"

Jack told him about the conversation with Richie Vito.

"I've never told anyone that you two don't talk," Stan said, when he was finished. "You're the one who won't fill out the official reports about how you and your hero relate."

Stubbornly Jack said, "We don't have anything to talk about. He does his job, and I do mine."

Stan reached over, squeezed his hand, and said nothing.

* * *

The kid, Ronald, knocked on Jack's door three rainy evenings later. He thrust an envelope forward.

"What's this?" Jack asked.

"You wanted me to convince you."

"Who's this?" Stan asked, appearing behind Jack. "Come on in. It's cold out there."

Jack was sure Ronald would say no, but the kid surprised him by stepping inside. While Stan rounded up some hot chocolate for them all, Jack spread a sheaf of papers across the table. Some were magazine clippings about caring for dogs. Others were articles on pit bulls from the city newspaper. A few pages appeared to have been ripped out of books.

"They said you were a college teacher," Ronald said as Jack eyed the papers. He stood in the corner, looking dirty and scrawny against the moss-green walls. "I do good in school."

"Have you talked to the shelter?" Jack asked.

"I visit every day. Victoria's getting better, but she wants to come home."

Stan asked, "Who's Victoria?"

Jack answered, "The pit bull."

Stan's expression shifted into something Jack rarely saw: judgment. "That's your dog?"

"She was my dad's." Ronald started to chew on a dirty thumbnail, then dropped his hand. "My mom, she used to help me take care of her. But now she only does what Hickey says. He's her boyfriend, and he moved in without them even asking me."

Jack gave Ronald a careful look. He wondered what bruises might be under the worn clothes, and how this man "Hickey" earned his living.

Ronald pointed to the papers. "So? Did I do it right?"

"All these magazine articles tell me what other people know," he said. "You haven't proven what you know, Ronald. Write an essay."

"An essay!"

"Nothing fancy. A few paragraphs."

Ronald stomped off in the rain looking disgruntled. That night, Jack left Ward 6 Hero a note:

"Visit Ward 4. Don't do anything. Just watch."

The next morning, he found a note in return:

"They nede another hero."

Stan gave him the report over breakfast. "Sixteen cars stopped for drug pick-ups at that house on Pine and Elm between eight p.m. and midnight. That kid Ronald was there, but he stayed in his bedroom. There's also a house on Maple with guys coming and going at all hours, and there are some squatters living in a foreclosed house on Maple. Ward 6 Hero wanted to step in, but I reminded him that you said just to watch."

Jack drank more of his coffee and looked out at the lawn. "It's not our responsibility."

"You can't have it both ways," Stan said. "You want to help, help. You want to stay out of it, stay out of it. But you're confusing everybody, including me."

"There's nothing to be confused about. We want to stay out of all the political crap."

"Since when did politics become more important than people to you?" Stan asked. "More important than a kid?"

Jack didn't answer.

That afternoon, the one o'clock class turned in first drafts of their analytical essays. Jack flunked two for plagiarism, faulted another three for using ridiculous fonts and margin sizes, and worked steadily, cheerlessly through the rest of the batch with a cup of cold coffee in the faculty lounge.

"I've got that client dinner tonight," Stan reminded him on the phone. "I won't be home until late."

"Are we okay?" Jack asked.

A pause. Then he swore he could hear Stan smile. "We're fine, Jack."

When he drove home the carport was empty, the house and sky dark, and the oak tree near his house had been uprooted in its little triangle park. It almost looked like it had toppled under its own weight, the torn roots thrust crazily toward the sky, but as Jack stood over the fallen giant he could see that Ward Hero's wet cardboard sign hadn't been crushed, but instead taken off the tree and propped against it.

He knew when he was being sent a message.

Jack went inside. He poured himself a few thimblefuls of whiskey and open his closet. After a long moment's consideration he donned his uniform and stretched out on his and Stan's king-sized bed.

He closed his eyes.

A voice stirred in his head.

Is that you?

No one else.

I've been alone.

You've had The Sidekick Kid.

He has Stan.

I'm sorry. I got tired. Let's go for a walk.

And for the first time in a shamefully long time he felt Ward Hero lift his body from the bed and go out on neighborhood rounds. Down Mercer, up Colgate, around Clemson. All the streets in Ward 6 had been named after colleges. On Fordham he was greeted cheerfully by the Weavers, who were out walking their Chihuahuas. On Suwannee he got a hearty hello from Ed Carter, who was taking out the trash.

"If I've told the mayor once, I've told him a dozen times. Best ward hero I've ever had."

"Thanks, Ed," Ward 6 Hero said.

"Beer?"

"Not while I'm working—thanks!"

Ward 6 Hero was always working, of course. It was his job. The guy couldn't spell, but he didn't take vacations, either. He didn't sit around at night watching movies or playing computer games. He did the jobs no one else wanted, and he couldn't even get a beer out of it.

At the corner of Elm they crossed into Ward 4. A green Trans Am was idling in front of Ronald's house. A man emerged from the house and stuck his head in the open passenger window. Ward 6 Hero flexed his fists, and Jack sensed his impatience.

Take care of it, Jack told him.

But you said not to interfere.

That was then. This is now.

Ward 6 Hero strode toward the Trans Am. "Evening, gentlemen! It's come to my attention that you're engaging in illegal behavior that affects everyone in this neighborhood—"

The man from Ronald's house turned around and fled inside. The driver of the Trans Am gunned his ignition and tried to drive off. Ward 6 Hero blocked the road, stopped the car with his hands, and lifted it so that the front wheels spun uselessly and the back wheels burned rubber on the asphalt.

"Turn off your ignition, please," Ward 6 Hero said.

"Don't listen to him," another voice commanded.

Ward 6 Hero turned. There was Mike Beamer, in his own Hero costume, looking formidable and angry.

"You're in my territory now," Beamer said, in the deep billowing voice of Ward 4 Hero.

"You've been shirking your responsibilities, 4."

"Mind your own business, 6."

Ward 6 Hero carefully put the Trans Am down. The moment he did, Ward 4 Hero rushed him. The impact sent both of them smashing into the nearest utility pole, which toppled in a shower of sparks. The two heroes grappled, punched and kicked, and behind the persona of Ward 6 Hero, Jack was surprised at how good it felt to be out fighting evil again, grappling with real evil, instead of marking the hours by grading papers and correcting bad grammar.

His fistfight with evil was abruptly ended by hands that pulled the two of them apart.

"Stop it, you idiots!" The Sidekick Kid was saying, loudly and with much annoyance.

Beside Sidekick Kid stood a female companion in a pink jogging suit and ball cap. Ward 6 Hero said, "Kate?"

"Pink Sidekick," she corrected, from where she held Ward 4 Hero against a white picket fence. "What the hell do you two think you're doing? Fighting each other when you're supposed to be protecting your neighborhoods?"

Jack felt foolish. Ward 6 Hero mumbled, "He started it."

Ward 4 Hero said, "Not true!"

"You knocked down my tree!"

"You interfered in my ward!"

"Children!" Pink Sidekick turned to her hero. "This isn't like you. You're better than this."

"I was better," Ward 4 Hero said sheepishly. "Until you left me."

She sighed. "Kate left Mike. I would never leave you. All you had to do was call."

The Sidekick Kid, watching through Stan's kind eyes, tugged on Ward 6 Hero's sleeve.

"Come on. Let's go."

Ward 6 Hero glanced toward Ronald's house. "But there's work to be done."

"We'll do it," Ward 4 Hero said, straightening his shoulders.

"Together," Pink Sidekick said.

The Sidekick Kid said, "Let's go home, Jack."

* * *

"You're sure, Jack?"

Jack smiled as he put away the last of the clean dishes. It had taken a few games of telephone tag to get the chair of his old department on the phone. "Yes, I'm sure. No more composition classes for me. Sign me back up for literature."

As he hung up, Ronald walked the sidewalk with Victoria on a short leash beside him.

"Hey," Ronald said when Jack met him in the driveway. "Victoria wanted to come say hi. And thank you."

The pit bull gazed up at Jack with doleful brown eyes. She was a gorgeous dog, sleek and pretty in the February sunshine, but Jack kept his distance.

"You're welcome," Jack said. "But you're the one who did the work. It was a pretty good essay, aside from the spelling, grammar and punctuation."

"You can pet her. She's totally a baby, especially now that she feels better."

"Actually," Jack said, "dogs make me nervous."

That earned him a skeptical look. "But you're a hero!"

"Heroism comes in lots of different flavors."

Ronald scratched Victoria's ears. "Do you think I could be a hero someday?"

"You have to apply," Jack said. "And successfully complete the training. Not everyone goes through with it, or likes it once the hero persona moves into your mind. Most of the time the job is dull and routine."

"And some of it's not."

"Some of it's not," Jack agreed.

Ronald and Victoria were gone by the time Stan returned home, looking disgruntled after his afternoon meeting. Jack met him with a kiss and said, "We've got reservations at Monte Carlo's. Dinner, dancing, fine wine, chocolate desserts. I'm going to woo you until the wee hours of the morning"

"Chocolate's bad for your gout," Stan said.

"Vanilla desserts," Jack said. "Anything you want."

"What about the neighborhood? Mrs. DeSoto's pacemaker might stop working again. Or Mr. Garvey might go sleepwalking toward the river, like he did last week."

"I asked the district to send a substitute," Jack said. "I think Ward 6 Hero and The Sidekick Kid have earned a night off, don't you?"

Stan gave him a long hard kiss. "I love it when you talk like that."

* * *

dear Jack thanks for talking to me again.

Dear Hero, thanks for letting me.

About the Author:

Sandra McDonald is a military veteran who lives, writes and teaches in Northeast Florida. Her debut novel, *The Outback Stars*, is a finalist for the 2007 Compton Crook award. The sequel, *The Stars Down Under*, is available now. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, and she is unabashed fan of cheesy science fiction TV. Visit her webpage at www.sandramcdonald.com.