

# **HAROLD THE HERO**

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# 1

After a long, tiring day at the park, I was ready to go home when my five-year-old, sharp-fanged German shepherd barked and wagged his tail. He nodded his great, shaggy head toward a small bunch of bushes, and shook his body, spraying my friends and I with water from the puddle he had been splashing in before. Harold was a pretty smart dog, but I couldn't understand what he was trying to say this time. I hurried over to him and asked kindly, "Hey, boy, are you hungry, huh? Alright, then, we have to go home and Mom can get us some dinner. C'mon now, boy, let's go home and have something to eat." I tugged at his collar, but he didn't budge. He just stared at me, his watery-green eyes unblinking, fixed on my own brown ones. Something about his face told me he was worried.

I glanced back at my friends. They were all looking at me curiously, whispering to each other every once in a while. I knew they were all jealous about Harold, who I had gotten on my fifth birthday five years ago. We had always loved big, strong, snarling dogs, but we also liked kind, fluffy ones like Harold. They were waiting for something to happen. We had always thought a clever dog like Harold would be able to sniff mysteries, and they could, especially my dog.

Harold liked what we liked, which made him such a good dog. Spaghetti and meatballs, sugar cookies, and all those other things that most boys liked were Harold and my favorite things to eat. But he also hated what we hated. My enemy, James, who was a bully to everyone except his friends, was someone that we all hated. Harold always sprang up just when we were cornered by James's gang and started to bite whatever parts of their body he could reach. So James was always terrified of him, and never attacked us when Harold was around.

Yesterday I overheard James saying that he was going to the park today, which was the day I was going to the park with my friends. So I called them up, told them the bully was coming, and said I would bring Harold. They had agreed, and that was how I turned up at Summer Park with my dog. We had had a great time, James-free and protected, because of none other than my brilliant dog Harold.

“What’s wrong with him? Does he sense danger?” Colin, a member of my gang, called out worriedly. He was a young boy who loved dogs the most in the whole gang, including me. He was the type of person who cared for everything, even giant wasps and tarantulas.

“I think he senses danger. Everyone, don’t panic. Harold will save us, won’t you, buddy?” I said, and Harold nodded vigorously, trying to smile at me.

Colin and the others gulped. They whispered worriedly into each other’s ears and looked at Harold hopefully. “You won’t let us down, Harold, right?” they asked.

Harold gave a small shake of his head, flapping his ears, and still smiling. He barked happily as I spoke to him. “Is it James and his gang in the bushes, ready to ambush us?” I asked, smiling warily at him.

Harold nodded, as if to say, “Yes, they’re going to ambush you and your mates, Master. I will save you, though, so don’t you worry.” Then he pulled back his lips and smiled—or at least did something of the sort—and then put his paws on my shoulders, panting.

Harold meant so much to me. He was so protective of me and never let me down. He was like a superhero with a great, hairy body. He was like the watch dog at my house, and at the same time he was a comfortable dog who took care of me.

“Thanks, Harold,” I said, and I hugged him. He licked my face, as though he was saying, “You’re welcome, Master. I’ll do anything to help you get away from that stinker, James.”

Just as we pulled apart, James and his gang jumped out of the bushes and roared at us like angry lions. Harold spun around and barked. Then he charged at them, faster than a galloping horse, and butted James right in the stomach. Harold started to rip his clothes with his razor-sharp teeth, while my friends and I fought one of James’s gang members each. I managed to punch my opponent in the mouth, knocking out one of his teeth, just as Harold knocked James onto the ground, snarling. James, wasn’t really hurt, but it was bad enough to teach him to never bully or hurt anyone, especially us, *ever* again.

“Guys, break apart from the opponent you’re fighting with!” I yelled as I gave my opponent one last kick that sent him tearing away from me into the bushes. “How *do* you do that, Harold? You knocked James out, and he is taller than you!” I added to Harold, who just grinned, as though saying, “You’re only a fourth grader, Master. How could you have beaten that boy? He’s in fifth grade!”

“I know,” I replied as my friends finished James’s gang off. “But you’re a dog, and there’s no way a five-year-old dog could have done that. Alright, guys, have you all broken apart? Oh, wonderful job, Colin, you scared the living daylights out of him.”

Everyone in my group smiled at me. Though I was only in fourth grade, and they were in fifth grade, like James and his gang were, they were all still my friends. Colin, Avery, Donald, Henry, me, and now Harold—we were all a team, one hard-working, smart crew. I reached forward and carefully pinned a badge that said, “Harold Jones, a German shepherd” onto Harold’s collar. My badge said, “Justin Jones, Harold’s master.” I smiled at all my friends’ badges. Colin’s one said, “Colin Finns, the brother of Kelly Finns.” All the badges’ gold letters shimmered in the sun. We never took them off, except when we were sleeping. It told everyone that we were part of my special gang, because no one else had a badge like ours.

“Well, I’d better go home now,” I said as I watched James wake up and stare around wildly. And with that, I attached the leash onto Harold’s collar and bounded off.

## 2

I woke the next Saturday morning and got out of bed, yawning. I hurried down the staircase, skipping the last four steps, and found Harold waiting in the kitchen. He looked at me mournfully when I approached, and whimpered. “What’s wrong, boy?” I asked, petting his head affectionately. Harold held up his hind leg. It was bleeding badly. Someone or something had bitten him.

“Harold!” I gasped. “Who did it?”

“R-r-ruff!” Harold replied, nodding out the window.

I got up and opened the door. James and his gang were out there. They were crowded around something. It was a giant pit bull.

I gasped. I liked every type of dog, except the pit bull. When I first saw one I thought I would like to pet it, so I came up to it after asking the owner and patted it. It growled and started wriggling around, snapping at me. I moved my hand just as its mouth closed with a snap. And from then on, my worst fear was no longer big green hairy monsters, but pit bulls.

James's dog was white with black spots. Its teeth were even sharper than Harold's ones! It had beady, black eyes and ears that were floppy, but not cute. Harold was golden-brown with a big black spot right in the middle of his body. He couldn't have been anymore different than the pit bull across the road.

Horrified, I closed the door with a bang, and then instantly noticed something that made matters worse. The kitchen window had a big hole in the glass, and bits of it lay on the floor. James's pit bull had obviously broken into the house through the kitchen window and hurt Harold, who had chosen to sleep in front of the fireplace yesterday night. I glanced out the window and saw that the pit bull had not been hurt at all by Harold.

"Harold, why didn't you fight?" I asked. "You did such a good job with James."

"Woof, woof!" Harold barked, and scurried over to the fireplace. He lay down, pretending he was asleep, and then jumped up and started snapping. And he hurried over to the window, leapt up onto the cooking stove, and put his front paws out of the window.

I was slightly puzzled, so I asked a question. "So you were sleeping at the fireplace and then the pit bull came in and then he bit you and he ran out of the window before you could do anything?"

Harold nodded, with his sparkling eyes still fixed on mine, and whimpered. His leg hurt from all that fighting, I thought. "All right, I need to tell Mom about this. Then we'll go to the vet so she can make you better. And then we'll tell on James. Does that sound okay?" I asked Harold, who nodded.

"Let's go tell Mom, quick," I said. "It's okay, Harold, it's not too bad is it? The pit bull didn't sink his fangs into you too badly, did he?"

Harold shook his head as we hurried up the stairs.

# 3

“Mom, wake up! Wake up, Mom, wake up! Harold’s hurt!” I shouted as I skidded into my mother’s room. She blinked tiredly and slowly sat up, putting on her glasses. “Harold’s hurt!” I said. “And so is the kitchen window!”

“Harold’s hurt?” Mom asked, cocking her head to one side. “How can a kitchen window be hurt, too?”

Harold held up his hind leg, that was still bleeding a little. Mom gasped.

“Harold, you poor dog, who did it?” she said.

“Guess,” I said with a sigh. “Just guess.”

“James?” Mom asked faintly.

Harold and I nodded sadly.

“But how could *James* bite Harold? Our dog is so strong!”

“No, not James, James’s new *pit bull*,” I said miserably.

Dad sat bolt upright next to Mom. “*What?* Pit bull?” he gasped.

I nodded a little. “I forgot yesterday was James’s birthday. And now he’s got a dog.”

“Let’s talk about this downstairs,” Dad said, who shaking like a leaf clinging onto a branch in the winter.

Downstairs, at the dining table, I told the whole story to Mom and Dad. The whole time they stared at me with their mouths hanging open.

“—and the pit bull broke through the window to get Harold. James must have sent him,” I finished.

“No way,” Dad muttered. He shook so much he knocked over his tea. It spilled all over the table. Harold limped over to the kitchen counter, grabbed a cloth, and brought it back to Dad. He thanked him, and hugged him.

“Yes way,” I replied. “See for yourself.” I pointed to the kitchen window.

“That’s where my pie was sitting! It’s *showered* with glass!” Mom said, suddenly angry. “I’m going to complain. Justin, take Harold to the vet across the street.” And she stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind her so hard it shook the house.

“I—am—going—to—*kill*—that—stupid—dog,” Dad said, shaking with fury. “Go, Justin, take Harold to the vet.”

“Okay,” I said. You would never argue with Dad when he was angry like this. After all, he *had* bought this dog for me, and it had cost five hundred dollars. He didn’t want Harold to die after he had paid all that money, and he also loved dogs. But at least Harold hadn’t been hurt too badly.

“C’mon, Harold, boy,” I said helpfully, “I’ll take you to the vet.” Harold loved the vet. Mrs. Tinkles, the veterinarian, loved Harold the most out of all her furry little patients. And, even better, Mrs. Tinkles would treat Harold, so he would be alright!

He bounded out of the house with me, barking happily, even though his leg was hurt. “Mrs. Tinkles will help me,” was what his barks sounded like. “And I’ll be a-a-a-all better!”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said to Harold. “But she’ll need to bandage you a little, so it could hurt.”

Harold did something that looked like a shrug as we entered the vet’s office.

“Harold! Justin! Welcome back! What happened to our little pooch here?” the lady at the front desk asked.

“Hmm, it looks like Harold has been hurt a little by—what did you say—the pit bull,” Mrs. Tinkles observed, examining a perfectly still Harold sitting on a small table with a magnifying glass. “We’ll need to bandage him up.”

Five minutes ago, Harold and I had come in and told them everything that happened to my dog. Mrs. Tinkles had nodded and said, “I heard that brat James got a pit bull yesterday. He named it Meaty.” I thought it was a hilarious name, but managed to stop myself from laughing. “He likes to eat meat—just meat,” Mrs. Tinkles explained with a slight giggle.

Mrs. Tinkles grabbed a small roll of bandages, pulled one out, and cut it with a pair of scissors. “Has Harold ever been hurt like this?” she asked as she wrapped the bandage around my dog’s hind leg.

“No, so I’m really not familiar with handling him like this,” I replied, watching Harold let out a yelp of happiness as the vet finished bandaging him and licked Mrs. Tinkles on the cheek.

“Okay, then, I will need to tell you what to do. Every day you’ll need to change Harold’s bandage either in the morning or in the night ’til he becomes better, which will be in about a week from now, since it’s only a small bite. But I thought Harold was a really good fighter!”

“He is, but the pit bull—Meaty—is just stronger than him! Harold couldn’t fight because Meaty ran out of the house too quick!” I said.

“How did Meaty get *in*?” Mrs. Tinkles asked.

“Smashed right through the kitchen window!” I replied.

Mrs. Tinkles gave a gasp.

“It’s true,” I said. “May I go now?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Tinkles said shakily.

And we hurried out of the place, but we didn’t go home. We couldn’t have. I was pulled into the alleyway by a giant, spotted pit bull.



# 5

“Harold!” I screamed. “Save me!”

But what I said completely backfired. At the sight of Harold, Meaty turned around and cornered the poor German shepherd.

“NO!” I shrieked, jumping up and attacking the pit bull. “Don’t—you—hurt—my—dog!” I banged my fist on his head.

Five seconds later, I knew I shouldn’t have. The pit bull started dancing around, howling angrily. I was thrown off, crashed against a trashcan, and found myself lying sprawled on the ground.

Harold looked horrified. “My dear Master is hurt!” was what his face plainly said. Then he flew over to Meaty and snapped at him. Harold’s leg did not seem to hurt anymore. He gritted his teeth and snarled loudly, threateningly. His green eyes flashed and his black nose flared. He pawed the ground with his sharp claws and twitched his tail, showing he was ready for a fight. This would have scared James away, but Meaty only stepped back a bit and snarled at Harold.

I snapped my eyes shut. Maybe this was the last time I would see my dog! Harold growled as Meaty tossed his head, and they ran at each other, barking like mad. I opened my eyes ever so slightly. One second, Meaty had Harold’s ear in his mouth. Next moment, Harold was on top of Meaty, biting his tail. Blood was everywhere! Even though I hated Meaty, I didn’t want him to die, so I yelled, “Don’t hurt him too much, please, Harold!”

As I felt myself recovering a little, I got up and hid behind a trashcan, peeking out from behind it at the scene. So far, it looked like Harold was winning, but he was still hurt badly. But Meaty was even more hurt. I couldn't stand seeing a dog like this, so I called out to Harold. "Okay, boy, now run to me!" And Harold was off, skidding over to me.

Meaty's looked so angry, I thought he might explode. He howled with rage and charged at us, faster than a cheetah. I screamed, and, without thinking, dived inside the trashcan in front of Harold and me. Then a warm furry body plopped down next to me. It was Harold. I shut the top of the trashcan and found myself in complete darkness.

"Harold?" I whispered, looking around.

"Roof, roof!" Harold replied softly. Then a gnawing sound reached my ears. Harold was chewing on a chicken bone.

"Harold!" I said. "It has germs!" Then a banana peel fell on the top of my head as Harold dug for more bones.

Outside, it sounded like Meaty was confused. He barked and snarled and pawed the ground, but we didn't come out. Then I heard James's rough voice say, "Did cha get 'em, boy? Where are they? You worthless rat, you let them get away!" *I would never scold my dog like that!* I thought.

After a while, I didn't hear any more noises, so I patted on Harold and whispered, "It's time to get out now, boy." Harold obeyed me, as usual, and, still holding the chicken bone in his mouth, gently pushed off the top of the trashcan, which fell off onto the floor. A stream of light burst into our hiding place.

We got out with apple cores balanced on our heads and rotten egg shell bits clinging to our face. Harold was still gnawing his bone. "Harold!" I said in a warning tone. "That thing is covered with germs! You can get sick! How about this: When we get home, I'll give you a whole new chicken bone that's fresh and everything, okay?" With these words, Harold dropped the chicken bone reluctantly and followed me as we climbed out of the trashcan.

And, happily, we marched home.

# 6

“Where *were* you, Justin?” Mom asked as I opened the door and stepped inside the house.

“Were you fighting with James again?”

“Well, one thing’s for sure: James isn’t nice to his dog. He *yells* at him,” I said, sitting down on the couch as Harold snuggled inside his large basket. “Anyway, I think Harold should sleep with me now, in case Meaty attacks us again.”

“Who is *Meaty*?” Dad asked, laughing a little.

“Oh, he’s James’s pit bull. You don’t know his name,” I replied, picking up a newspaper and lazily flipping through it.

“Hey, what happened to Harold’s ear? It’s bleeding!” Mom said as she pulled bits of glass off her apple pie.

“Oh, see, when we were coming home from the vet Meaty pulled us into that really, really dirty alleyway and Harold and him were fighting and—”

“No *wonder* why you smell like rotten eggs and, in Harold’s case, chicken bones!” Dad interrupted. “Everyone just throws their garbage into that alley!”

“—and, um, we jumped into the trashcan to save ourselves from getting eaten,” I finished, ignoring Dad.

“Tsk, tsk,” Mom said, shaking her head. “That Meaty—Harold must defeat him before he hurts you two.”

“Uh-huh,” Dad agreed as he got up and pulled out a plate of leftovers for Harold to eat. Setting it on the floor, he added, “And now you need to have a bath, both of you.”

Harold barked irritably and I groaned as we were dragged upstairs.

# 7

On Sunday, Harold and I decided to spy on James to see what he was up to. So we marched over to his house and peered through the kitchen window, which was open.

James was throwing a fit on the floor.

“It’s not fair! That bummer Justin Jones gets to eat candies and I don’t! No fair! No fair!” he screamed, kicking his feet into the air angrily.

“Why don’t you go to the park, sweetie?” his mother suggested with a warm smile. I knew she loved her son a lot, even though he was the biggest bully in town.

“No! No! No! I want a candy! I WANT A CANDY!” James shrieked, sending his pit bull scurrying out of the room.

“Honey—oh, alright,” his mother gave up, and instantly James calmed down, grinning proudly at Meaty, who had come back into the room.

“Here, you greedy beast, you can have this toffee,” his mother said crossly, and I knew she was very angry.

“Now, I’m going to go to the park with Meat-Meat,” James said briskly. “I hope that bratty Justin Jones will be there.”

I sniggered. “Oh, I will,” I muttered with a sneaky smile. “And I’ll go with Harold.” With a sneer, I skipped off with Harold at my heels.

# 8

When I arrived at the park, I waited with Harold on the bench where an elderly woman was sitting next to me, looking admiringly at my dog. “Your German shepherd is cute. May I pet him?” she asked in a voice that sounded like she must have once been a firm teacher at a school.

“Oh, of course, he’s very tame,” I replied, smiling, and the lady pet Harold, who pulled back his lips and grinned, showing yellow teeth.

“Thank you. What is his name?” the lady asked me.

“Harold,” I replied. “Harold T. Jones.”

“What does the ‘T’ stand for?” the lady questioned.

“Tristan,” I said, and then spotted James. “Well, I need to go, bye!” And I hurried off.

James was standing with his gang and Meaty. Behind him arrived my gang. I hadn’t asked them to come so I wondered why they were here. Maybe they thought I was going to be here—and I was. Harold snarled and barked, twitching his tail as though reminding the pit bull what had happened at their last fight and who had won.

“Justin!” Colin said. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, just now I spied James and he said he was going to the park, so that’s why I came. Let’s start a fight with him. I just wish we could defeat that horrible pit bull!” I replied.

“Alright, then let’s—” Donald started, and then he screamed. A member of James’s gang had attacked him from behind.

We wrestled—James with me, Meaty with Harold, and all the others with members of James’s gang. So far, we were losing—except Harold. He was fighting Meaty like a knight in shining armor. He must have gained strength over time because the first time they met Meaty had beaten him. Finally, with one last bite on the neck, Meaty ran away, too terrified

to fight anymore. Then Harold skidded over to James and scared him away with a single snarl.

“Good job, buddy.” I grinned broadly at Harold. “Why don’t you and I go help the others? You can scare away a pit bull—” Barking, Harold was off. He growled ferociously and James’s gang members screamed and ran off.

“That dog of Justin’s—wow—even if the strongest man in the world growled like that, he wouldn’t be able to scare them off like Harold can,” remarked Colin.

“Yeah,” agreed Avery. “You said I—” But he was cut off by a familiar voice—a sharp, stern voice that could only have belonged to the lady I had sat with on the bench before. I turned around and there she was, carrying a huge dog cage.

“There,” she said, once she had come over to us and set the cage down, sounding satisfied. “I am quite old, dears, but still quite strong.”

## 9

For some reason, James and Meaty backed away nervously. The old woman eyed Meaty angrily. I didn't know what was going on, and I think my friends didn't either. We were all puzzled and confused.

"This boy," the woman began, pointing at James. Her words came out in a growl. "This boy," she repeated, "caught that pit bull and kept him. The pit bull had escaped from the pound and there were signs everywhere, saying he was deadly and if anyone saw him to bring him to the dog pound. But James didn't. He kept the pit bull and told everyone that his mother bought him the dog for his birthday. But, then my keen little eyes saw him walking with the pit bull. And now my colleagues and I have been trying to get James to take away his pit bull. So now, I've found him, and, James, hand over that pit bull."

James glared up at the old woman. "No," he said. "I don't want to hand him over and I won't. Go away." He was breathing fast. He was angry. Steaming mad. I had never seen James like that before.

"*What did you say to me?*" snarled the woman.

"I said go away. I said I won't hand Meaty over. I said . . . no," whispered James, his voice dangerously low.

"Give that dog to me!" cried the woman, and she lunged forward, grabbed Meaty, and threw him inside the cage, locking the door. Then, acting as if James' boiling angry face didn't exist, she stumbled off with the cage. I watched her as she walked over to a truck with "City Dog Catcher" printed in big letters on it and put the cage inside the back. She climbed into the truck and started the engine. I heard the pit bull's startled and anguished barks as she drove off.

I turned around and looked at my gang. They were silent for a moment, until Avery broke the silence with a shout of joy. Then my whole gang started cheering.

James and his gang looked angry. They ran away, roaring with rage and kicking whatever they saw out of their way.

From that day on, the old woman became my friend. Her name, she told me, was Mrs. Smith. Sometimes I help out finding dogs that have escaped from the pound, or dogs that get lost, and Harold is my helper. At school, James never bullies anymore. He's too downhearted that he has lost his faithful old dog. And as for Harold, well, Avery and some other members of my gang have thought up a great nickname for him—Harold the Hero. It fits him perfectly.

To me, no other dog is braver or stronger than Harold, and no other person has a better friend than I do.