



The Adventures of the  
Krusaders and the Legend of  
Wilde Island

By

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## Dedication

The Adventures of the Crusaders and the Legend of Wilde Island is dedicated to my two wonderful sons, Alexander and Kyle. Their enthusiasm and imagination encouraged me to tell them adventure stories when they were young. I would characterize them in our local setting, with other personalities to make the story seem realistic. Using subtle attempts to mentor them, moral and biblical lessons were creatively incorporated into these fictitious stories. This is one of those stories on paper, mixed with dream building, leadership and success principles. May this be a legacy for them to learn from and enjoy. God Bless you both, Kyle and Alexander.

Forever Love,  
Dad



## Acknowledgements

First, I thank my darling wife, Cynthia, for her encouragement throughout the writing of this book. Her creative input was a key supporting factor that brought it to reality. I greatly appreciate the time and effort of my editor and friend, Kristi Slette, whose countless hours of editing and recommendations transformed this novel into a well-balanced, enjoyable story. With the assistance of avid book reader, Christina Betty, as my proof reader, I was ensured smooth transitions in the story line. The great illustration talents of Heather Hayward significantly contribute to this story coming to life visually for the reader. I acknowledge numerous people of influence in my life—too many to list individually. However, my parents, Konrád Sr. and Katie Kocsis, consistently, since I was a young child, instilled and modeled the values of hard work, integrity and family. Thank you! Growing up with my sister, Christine, was an adventure in itself, and inspired some of the situations in this story and has she been a wonderful supporter and promoter of this book. My mentors, Kelly and Rod, encouraged and believed in me unconditionally. My Catholic faith and other conservative voices have helped define my core beliefs and values. Finally, and most important, is my faith in my Lord Jesus Christ, who is always there for me in prayer and times of uncertainty. It was my desire to create a fun adventure book, for youths and adults, based on leadership and success principles that honor and elevate God.



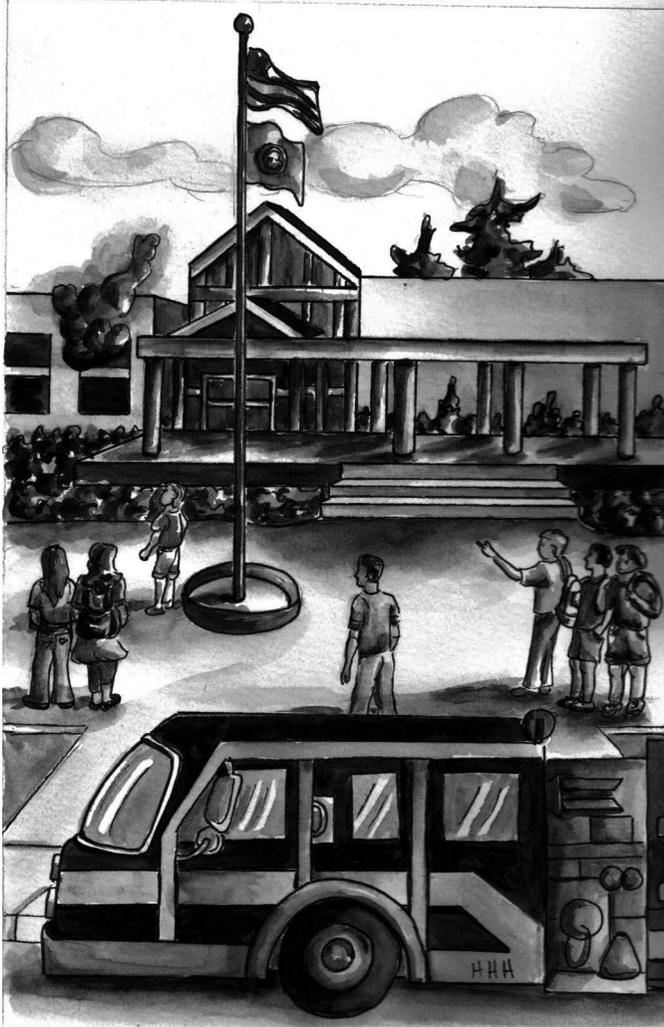
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## Introduction

Armed with driving motivation, endless wit, supportive, loyal family and friends, and faith in God, the Krusaders risk it all for an odd stranger, a community vision and the bonds of friendship. They set sail on a summertime mystery-adventure, off the beautiful coast of northwest Washington State. “The Adventures of the Krusaders and the Legend of Wilde Island” follows the adventures of a group of friends who run a local youth center. The Krusaders pursue a common goal with their own unique personalities and abilities to accomplish a quest for truth and justice. They get caught up in a local investigation and stumble upon a legend of a mysterious island nestled somewhere amongst the San Juan and Gulf Islands of the Pacific Northwest. These youths learn success principles that guide and help them overcome challenges. Inspired by discoveries and true meanings of friendship, loyalty, perseverance and leadership they traverse wild adventures and humorous situations. The Krusaders embark on a journey gathering clues to find a missing friend and identify a villain. The glossary of terms, at the end of the book, is a quick reference for words readers will discover in bold text throughout the adventure. Additionally, readers will find questions to research and discuss. This mystery adventure challenges teenagers to develop leadership abilities and offers intrigue and dream building to be enjoyed by all the young at heart.



## School's Out!

Within seconds of the alarm clock sounding, sixteen-year-old Keith Kovacs' feet hit the floor. Stretching in warm sunshine, his blonde, uncombed hair spikes in all directions as Keith searches his top drawer for matching socks. Normally he'd have rolled over, slapped the snooze button and effortlessly fallen back to sleep. Today was different. The radio roused Keith out of bed screaming, "School's Out for Summer"--lyrics from Alice Cooper's classic rock tune. It triumphantly confirmed for Keith that after one, final day of school—summer vacation would officially begin!

While tugging his faded jean shorts waist high on his muscular, six-foot tall frame, Keith scans his Memory Wall. There, tacked carelessly on the cork wall, are photos from his first hockey tournament in Langley B.C.; white-water rafting on the Deschutes River in Oregon with the Boy Scouts; and hiking the Swiss Alps with his cousin, Lazlo-- his favorite childhood memories.

One photo in particular made him laugh out loud. A picture of a much younger Keith riding his dirt bike, towing Rusty, his best friend, in a go-kart. A red cape, flowing behind Rusty, has the attention of a young bull chasing them. A hand-written caption under the photo reads, "Modern Day Matador."

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“What a goof!” Keith chuckles aloud.

As Keith throws on his favorite sports jersey, a voice on his two-way radio blurts, “Which shirt today?” It’s Russell, **a.k.a.** ‘Rusty’ nicknamed for his bright orange hair.

From their homes, directly across the street from one another, the two friends radio each morning to coordinate sport jerseys. The boys own identical sets of professional team jerseys, over a dozen, representing Vancouver Canucks hockey and all of Seattle’s major teams-- Seahawks, Mariners, Sounders and even the vintage Super Sonics basketball franchise. The two boys are often teased, as twins, for being such loyal, fanatical supporters.

Keith responds, “Way ahead of you bro- I’m already wearin’ my Sounders shirt – tis the season.”

“10-4. Copy that. Over and out, dude,” the radio barks.

Rusty, an electronics buff, dreams to design his own computer games and operate the biggest ‘**web-cade**’ in town. Keith and Rusty have been best pals since they met in second grade. One day during gym class, a bully was picking on Rusty by calling him a “carrot head” and pushing him around. Keith responded by grabbing sweaty shorts from a bench and wrapping them over the bully’s head. Both boys hid, expecting their lives were doomed. However, the entire gym class laughed hysterically, embarrassing the bully enough that he left them alone for the time being. The trio, however, continued a feuding rivalry, ever since.

A female voice from the hall calls out, “**Györsan**, if you wanna ride to the **iskola**.” It’s Keith’s older cousin, Ursula, a 17-year-old volleyball star and foreign exchange student from Hungary. Ursula is staying with Keith’s family for her junior high school year. She often combines Hungarian words with her broken English when she’s not sure of the proper translation.

By the time Keith comes down the stairs, the family is already seated at the Kovacs’ table for breakfast. Passing his lunch sack, Keith succumbed to the temptation to see what his mom packed for his last school lunch of the year. His wish comes true!

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His favorite lunch: a Hungarian salami sandwich with pickles, chocolate pudding and a banana protein bar.

“Yes!” Keith celebrates. He shines his mom a huge smile and gives her a high five as he takes his seat at the kitchen table.

The sun shines bright through the east windows onto a marble kitchen island prepared with continental breakfast delights of fresh fruit, three cheeses, fresh biscuits and bacon. Sara, Keith’s mom, reminds him, “Don’t eat the pickles and pudding at the same time or they’ll be calling you ‘Ralph’ again.”

Everyone in the room chuckles out loud. Keith’s Uncle Frank, visiting from Victoria, B.C. Canada sits next to Keith’s father, Paul. Paul opens the window blinds exposing Gods’ creative beauty. The sun rushes in splashing a full spectrum rainbow on the tabletop. Beyond the steamy waters of Lake Whatcom, the snowy peak of Mount Baker and a single cloud, in an otherwise clear sky, dominate the glorious landscape.

Frank asks Paul, “Where are we playing golf this morning?”

Paul smirks, “It’s the toughest one on the north side of the county; narrow fairways and more sand traps than the Egyptian desert.”

“Ouch! I guess I’ll need a camel to be my caddy,” Frank wisecracks back.

“We should be able to finish a round of golf before we head to the ‘Hangout’ to help set up,” Paul confidently announces.

Frank smiles in agreement as he washes down his breakfast with a sip of orange juice.

Moments later, Rusty and his little sister, Sammy, short for Samantha, walk into the kitchen. Rusty asks, “Can we catch a ride to school with you guys?”

“**Igen.** In my truck,” Ursula nods affirmatively.

Alek, Keith’s 14-year-old kid brother, runs into the kitchen and greets all with an enthusiastic “**Jó reggelt!**” This is ‘good morning’ in Hungarian.

Alek and Sammy are the same age and have been friends on and off since ‘cooties’ were not an issue. After he gobbles down

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a bowl of cereal, Alek approaches his father and asks, “Dad, can I talk to you for a minute? I need your advice.”

“Sure son. Let’s step into my office,” Paul invites.

Moments later, father and son slip into a well lit room with cherry wood bookshelves filled with classic novels and picture books from all over the world. Paul opens the curtains and the warmth of the morning sun calms the atmosphere and sets the stage for a serious conversation. Alek closes the door behind them and hesitantly begins sharing his concern. “I got an F on my final English report,” Alek confesses.

“That doesn’t sound like you. What’s the problem? I read your last essay about your dream career as a scientist on the space station finding a cure for cancer. I thought it was a fantastic piece of writing,” his father genuinely compliments.

Alek begins to speak with more passion, “I thought so, too, Dad. But my teacher says that there’s a one in a million chance to get a job like that and my science grades aren’t good enough. He suggests I pursue something more realistic, like being a plumber or something. He said, if I re-wrote the essay on a realistic future career--one that’s more achievable, he would reconsider the final grade on the report. So, I re-wrote my essay on my other interest of being a sports reporter, but I’m not sure if I should turn it in. What should I do?”

Paul reflects and ponders Alek’s feelings for a moment and kneels down to his level to advise his youngest son, “You know, Alek, I’m sure your teacher means well. He just doesn’t want you to get disappointed, if you fail. I’m not going to tell you what to do, but your decision on which assignment you turn in may determine your destiny. Your mother and I will love and respect you whether you’re a sports reporter or a scientist. This world needs plumbers, too. I believe God has a great plan for you. I’m confident you’ll be wonderful at whatever career you pursue. Now hurry off to your last day of school, and I’ll see you tonight.”

Paul encourages as he hugs his youngest boy and leads him back into the hallway of their home.

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Sammy is in the hall waiting and quickly questions Alek, “So, what are you gonna do about your career report for English?”

As Alek walks Sammy out the door he tells her with conviction, “I talked with my dad about it, and he helped me see things more clearly. I’m gonna tell my teacher he can keep his F, cause I’m gonna keep my dream. I will get to that space station, one way or another, even if I have to be a billionaire and build my own rocket ship to do it!”

An impressed Sammy responds, “Way to go! Save me a seat. Can you give me a ride up there?”

“Maybe we could be lab partners,” Alek suggests as he climbs into the back seat of his cousin’s pickup truck.

The five teens arrive at their high school, in Ursula’s old, green Chevy 4X4 pickup truck, to find a large crowd of students gathering to watch smoke rise out of a second story window. Their friend, David, is standing by the fire truck in the front courtyard. David is the ‘jock’ of the group. Keith, Rusty and David make up the highest scoring forward line in their regional ice hockey league. The whole town believes that all three of them will be drafted into the pros, within a few years.

While David shakes hands with a fireman, Ursula approaches him and asks, “What’s all the excitement about? Why are you all wet?”

“Ernie was up to his experiments again,” David says as he shakes his head and splatters everyone with water from his long, wet, dark hair.

David explains, “Ernie, our resident science whiz, came to school early with his mom, Patty. I guess she’s been working in the school office since Christmas. Well, Ernie let himself into the chemistry lab to tutor some students for a final exam.”

“Mr. Wilde trusts Ernie with a key to the science lab?” Sammy scoffs.

David shrugs his shoulders, as he watches the remainder of the white smoke **dissipate** into the sky, “I guess so. Ernie was

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messin' with some **phosphorous**, and when one of the kids asked him a question he got distracted. I guess phosphorous **combusts** when it's exposed to oxygen too long. Mr. Wilde came in to read the newspaper at his desk right before it blew. He told Ernie to cover it up, but he was too busy playing 'brainiac' and soaking up all the attention from the younger kids."

"Good **pun**," Rusty interrupts.

David offers a blank stare, like he doesn't get it and continues, "After this, maybe Ernie will finally figure out that God gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Anyway, the phosphorus burst into flames and caught the projector on fire. I pulled the fire alarm. As we all scattered to escape, someone bumped a gas valve on a lab table, which ignited and shot a flame out over Mr. Wilde's desk. The whole room went up like a roman candle. Dude, get this! It torched Wilde's newspaper and his hair! Mr. Wilde ripped his hair off to stomp out the flames!"

Alek giggles, "I didn't know Mr. Wilde wears a toupée."

"Not anymore," Rusty laughs.

"What's a toupée?" Ursula inquisitively questions in her thick Hungarian accent.

"It's a fancy name for a wig," Keith explains.

David continues, "That's not all! The sprinkler system started to spray water, which fried Mr. Wilde's computer. All of us got soaked."

He pauses mid-stream and looks back at Rusty, "Ah, I get it now. Anyhow, when we got outside, the lab geeks dog piled Ernie. I barely saved him from the mob scene."

"I thought you took a swim in Lake Whatcom on your way to school or something," Sammy pipes up. Her wise crack alerts the other kids to laugh without restraint.

"Where's Ernie now?" Keith asks.

"He's in the vice principal's office waiting for his punishment. Boy, I wouldn't want to be in Ernie's shoes," David adds.

Just then, the fire alarm silences. An announcement over the speakers invites the students back into the school.

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Hundreds of students slowly file back to their classrooms, dragging out the interruption. Many walk in an almost trance or zombie like fashion with eyes focused downward, taking the opportunity to check their cell phones and text messages.

Halfway through **AP** U.S. History class, David shows up wearing an old faded football uniform.

A **heckler** from the class greets him, “Hey quarterback, you’re going the wrong way! The football field is OUTSIDE!”

“Nice costume! Halloween’s not for four more months,” another student offers.

“Shut your traps, wise guys, or I’ll thump ya. My clothes are drenched and the Vice won’t let me go home to change. This is all Ernie’s fault, anyway!” laments David.

The teacher resumes his class with an intriguing story about Gettysburg during the Civil War. This captures the attention of the students, just in case a pop quiz should conclude their final class.

Down the hall, Ernie slips into second period calculus class wearing a basketball jersey and shorts under a lab coat. The instructor pauses and glances at Ernie with a smirk, while the whole class applauds in unison. Many classmates curiously await Ernie’s announcement of his punishment.

“What could they do to you on the last day of school?” Keith whispers to comfort Ernie.

“I’ll have to wash beakers every week, all through summer school. Not bad, I guess--for all that damage,” Ernie shrugs.

At lunch, another smart-mouthed heckler takes a shot at Ernie, “Look, there’s our school tutor for **Pyromania 101**! Can you say, ‘flame on?’ Or should we just call you TORCH?”

With the whole cafeteria howling in laughter, Ernie sadly mutters to Alek, “How long is everyone going to keep bugging me?”

Alek, without a word, simply points to a picture on the cafeteria wall of Albert Einstein. Beneath it, a quote reads,

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“Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.”

Keith pats Ernie on his back and says, “Life isn’t fair, but God is. Don’t worry, it will all work out. My dad gave me some good advice once, ‘All the answers to life’s questions lie in the best seller of all times. The **acronym** for the BIBLE is Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth.’ Personally, I live by the **affirmation** from Philippians 4:16. Look it up.”

Just then, a tone on the school speaker interrupts their conversation. A voice announces, “This is Oliver Wilde. I interrupt lunch to publicly share responsibility for this morning’s incident and declare it an unfortunate sequence of events. Furthermore, David Johnston is being commended as a hero by Fire Marshall Thomas, for triggering the fire alarm and helping evacuate all the students out of the school. Lastly, Ernie Sanducci, please come to my classroom—immediately.”

The whole cafeteria sighs a big and elongated, “ooooooooohhhhh!”

Ernie slowly rises from the lunch table and slithers out the cafeteria door up the stairs towards the science lab.

A hairless Mr. Wilde is waiting in his torched lab when Ernie walks in. “Ernie, have a seat. I know that you, Raven and your mom just moved here last summer. I just had a chat with your mom in the office. Your mom told me that you’ve moved around several times in the years since your father died. You haven’t seemed yourself all week. What’s bothering you, son? ”

Ernie ponders the question for a moment and answers, “Father’s Day is coming up and I didn’t really get a chance to get to know my father. I was so young when we lost him. What I remember most about my dad was playing catch and going to the zoo with him when I was little. Now that my mom works here late, I stay here and go home with her.”

Mr. Wilde puts his hand on Ernie’s shoulder to comfort the young lad and shares, “You know Ernie, I lost someone very

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special to me. My son Danny, a **Marine**, was killed in action in the Middle East. I know how hard it can be to lose someone you love, but my son and your dad wouldn't want us to carry that heavy burden. My son did his best to serve his country honorably. I'm sure your dad did his best for you, too. They are both in a better place now, watching over us. Your father would want you to have fun and enjoy your childhood."

"Yeah? Then what about my sister, Raven?" Ernie yells back. "She's a freakin' zombie-- coloring her hair blue, piercings all over her face." Ernie mellows to a whimper, "She won't even talk to me about him. Raven used to be the star of the volleyball and basketball teams at our old school. Raven isn't even her real name. Now she's just a bitter rebel and an **atheist**."

"Calm down, Ernie. Maybe that's just how she's chosen to deal with her situation," Mr. Wilde compassionately offers. "Don't judge her. Just give her time and space."

Coincidentally, just then, Raven calls out from near the door, "Hey, Squeaker. Get over here. Let's go."

'Raven the Rebel', as she was known, was being her usual self--wandering the halls and skipping class on the last day of school.

"I'll expect to see you bright and early tomorrow morning to help me clean this room," Mr. Wilde smiles and reaches his hand to mess up Ernie's perfectly combed hair.

"What was that all about?" Raven questions her little brother.

With a hint of attitude Ernie responds, "Nothin', just working out what I gotta do for the mess I made. Doesn't Mr. Wilde look funny with hair only below his ears?"

"Yeah, but he should just keep it off, now that we all know. I just wanted to see that you were okay after the fire and everything," comments Raven, caringly and out of character.

As the siblings bolt down the long corridor, Ursula's voice calls out, "Raven...wait up! I'm lookin' for you." Ursula and Raven have been like sisters since they both entered school together last fall.

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Raven mutters, "Go on, Squeeker. I'll catch up with you later." Turning, she asks, "What's up, Urs?"

Ursula asks, "How did you do in business classes this year?"

"Alright, I guess. Why do you wanna know?" Raven suspiciously answers.

"Come with me after school? I need your help," Ursula asks humbly.

"Where to?" Raven curiously questions.

"It's too much to explain now, I'll tell you then," Ursula mysteriously answers.

As his sister's conversation fades into the distance, Ernie goes down the stairs towards the gym and wood working shop. He doesn't realize someone is sneaking up behind him.

"Hey, Loser! Were you trying to burn the school down or are you too stupid to even get that right?" It was Ernie's worst nightmare, Butch--the self-appointed school bully.

Butch grabs Ernie from behind, puts him in a head-lock and continues his eloquent speech, "You've ruined my leather threads, Goofball."

"Yeah, now you're gonna pay," Butch's side kick, Ronnie, threatens.

"Let him go!" A bold voice looms. Keith Kovacs walks into the hall after having cleaned out his gym locker.

"Stay out this Bible-Boy!" Butch wisecracks.

"I said, let him go, Bernard!" Keith demands, with conviction, as he marches toward the wrestling duo.

"Don't call me Bernard or I'll kick you up-side the head!" Butch threatens.

"Listen here, BERNIE," Keith taunts. "For the last time--let go of my friend or I'll take you down!"

"You and what army?" Butch gibes.

At that moment, Keith grabs Butch's hand, bends it behind the bully's back, foot sweeps him to the ground and presses his knee into the back of Butch's neck. His face was licking the ground before he even knew what hit him.

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Ronnie abandons his leader and runs down the hall in haste.

“I warned you, you scumbag. If you ever pick on one of my friends again, I’ll find you and lay the pain on you. Got it?” Keith returns a threat and twists Butch’s arm higher up his back. A squeal, like a cat with a pinched tail, is the only response from the big bully sprawled on the floor.

Just then, Grace, a long time pursuit of both Butch’s and Keith’s affections, taps Keith on the leg with her shoe and says, “Let him up.”

Grace is a five-foot, four-inch, blue-eyed, blonde--a transplant from the Sierra Mountains of California. Her father was transferred to the area for work in the computer industry, many years earlier. Grace is not your typical, ditsy valley girl. She sports a 4.0 grade point average and holds the title of president of the school’s ‘Young Business Leaders of America’ club. Grace is down-to-earth and well-liked by many, though she still gets judged and stereotyped due to her participation as a high school cheerleader.

Keith reluctantly relinquishes his wrestling hold from his victim.

“Hi, Grace,” Keith responds, all love struck. “We were just messin’ around... right, Butch?”

Butch nods affirmatively, while rubbing his neck in response to the massage he just received.

“You guys have been at each other since second grade. Can’t you just give it a rest?” Grace scolds.

“Hey, Grace...Um...do you wanna come over to the Hangout after school?” Keith invites. “Our band is gonna rehearse for the ‘End of School Bash’? You could help us with the sound check.”

“Hmm...Do you have a name for your band yet?” Grace inquires.

“Ahhhhh, not yet, but we’ll figure it out soon. What do you say?” Keith begs anxiously.

Butch finally interrupts, “No, she doesn’t want to see your stupid band, Pimple-face. She’s goin’ out with me.”

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Startled, Keith could not conceive a classy girl, like Grace, ever going for a brute, like Butch. “What gives?” Keith asks.

“Butch has asked me to be his date to the ‘End of School Bash,’” Grace announces.

“Say it isn’t so,” Ernie jumps in. Ernie turns to Keith “Weren’t you gonna...”

To stop Ernie from finishing his sentence, Keith pulls a sweaty sock from his gym bag and stuffs it into Ernie’s mouth. His adversary grabs the hand of the girl of his dreams and begins to escort her down the hall.

Ernie spits out the sock and under his breath asks, “What gives? I thought you were supposed to be helping me? That Taekwondo training of yours sure comes in handy. Are you a black belt or something?”

“Almost. I hope to have it by Christmas after my final testing,” Keith shares.

Keith and his brother, Alek, have studied Taekwondo for four years to keep fit and develop self-discipline.

The next voice heard in the hallway was too deep to belong to a student. “Mr. Kovacs and Mr. Ramsey, please follow me into my office,” commanded Mr. Campbell, the vice principal. The tall, even-tempered, disciplinarian, with a dark complexion, stood in a classroom doorway. Had he watched the incident go down? Butch released Grace’s hand and turned back.

Once inside the vice principal’s office, Mr. Campbell closes the door and sits down behind his large, neat, mahogany desk. An awkward, long pause creates dramatic effect. The boys know they’ve been caught doing something wrong and are about to be punished.

Butch, feeling comfortable in the familiar surroundings of the vice principal’s office, turns and stares out the window dreaming of freedom from the bondage of school. Keith quickly glances around; this being only his second visit. Keith is impressed with all the awards, certificates and trophy’s neatly

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placed on a mantle behind the desk. He notices the lack of dust that one might expect in a space occupied by the same person for over a dozen years. Seemingly presiding over the meeting-to-come, is a framed portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. Beneath it, a quote, “We must build dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear.”

“Gentlemen, are you going to make me write you up on the last day of school? Quite frankly, I’m surprised to see you here Mr. Kovacs. As for you, Mr. Ramsey,” Mr. Campbell holds up the palm of his hand facing Butch to stop the excuses the young man was about to offer, “you have frequented my office too often this school year. That chair knows your rear end far too well. I expect less interaction with you next school year, as it is your senior year. Wait here while I pull your files,” Mr. Campbell lectures then exits the room.

“This sucks! Look at the trouble you’ve gotten me into, Bible-Boy,” Butch shakes his head in contempt.

Butch had long resented any kid who had attended private, Christian school—at least since he, himself, had been kicked out for misbehaving. The Kovacs boys fit that description.

“Me?! You started it--picking on someone half your size. Let’s settle this once and for all,” Keith says in disgust.

Butch gulps, as his confidence and coolness deflate. “How do ya mean?”

“Let’s have a game. Your team versus mine,” Keith blurts out, “Hockey!”

“Inline Hockey--at the Skateway in Lynden,” Butch clarifies. “When?”

“This Friday, 3:00 p.m.,” Keith confirms.

“You’re on,” Butch agrees.

“My Renegades against your Bible Thumpers. We’re gonna kick you’re ....” Butch stops mid-sentence as Mr. Campbell walks in.

“What were you about to say, Mr. Ramsey?” Mr. Campbell inquires.

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“Never mind, it’s nothin’,” Butch says as he flips his long, black, rock star hair out of his eyes.

“Well, gentlemen, this is your lucky day. Ms. Grace Penner and Ernesto Sanducci have collaborated on a story and told me that you were just horsing around and that no harm was done. I’ll let you go this time, but if I so much as hear a foul word from your mouths, you can bet that your parents will be picking you up today. So get out of my office and don’t screw up in the last couple hours of school. Have I made my point clear?”

Both boys reply in unison, “Yes, sir.”

Mr. Campbell scribbles something on a hall pass to each of the boys and hands them the slips of paper. Butch crushes his in his hand and stuffs it in his front pocket. Keith unfolds his and reads, “A strong man stands up for himself, a stronger man stands up for others.” Keith looks back to Mr. Campbell who gives him an all knowing wink.

As both boys head to their last class, Butch says aloud before pausing, “The losing team will...” Then he quietly mumbles the consequences to Keith before belching loudly.

Keith accepts the challenge, “You got it. Be ready to beg for mercy Friday.”

Keith’s frustration and anger settle into feelings of concern as he realizes what he has not only gotten himself into, but his friends as well. In complete silence, Keith stares at a school football team photo on the wall outside the school’s main office. In the photo, Butch and Ronnie have arms folded, biceps bulging and wear mean scowls that match their arrogant dispositions. Keith is caught unaware as Ernie runs over to him.

“Doesn’t it bug you when he calls you Bible-Boy?” Ernie asks in wonder.

“They’re just words. I’m comfortable in my faith and not ashamed of it. I don’t care what he calls me or thinks of me,” Keith says proudly as he takes the last few steps into their last class of the school year.

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Rusty leans over to Keith, as he and Ernie enter to fill their seats in geography class, “Where have you been?”

“The Vice’s office,” Keith responds casually.

Ernie interjects, “He saved me from Butch’s clutches and they both ended up in Campbell’s office.”

David, with a puzzled look, leans into the conversation, “So what happened?”

Keith looks anxiously at the teacher who hasn’t picked up on their chatter yet, and answers, “We wrestled a bit in the hall; but we’re finally gonna have it out Friday.”

“What?” David exclaims. “Butch has gotta outweigh you by at least 30 pounds!”

“Actually, it’s not just me. It’s us. You guys are gonna help me out,” Keith adds.

“What are you talkin’ about?” Alek jumps into the conversation from a crouched position behind his brother’s seat.

“Where did you come from? You’re not even in this class,” Keith reprimands.

“I heard that you got into a brawl with Butch. It’s all over school that Butch ripped Ernie’s ear off and you punched Butch’s lights out,” Alek shares the gossip with passion.

“None of that junk happened. I challenged him and his team to a hockey match,” Keith declares.

“You did what? Are you out of your freakin’ mind?” Rusty panics. “Butch’s Renegades Roller Hockey Team is a goon squad. They have more penalty minutes than our whole ice hockey league! My dad says that the Renegades remind him of the ‘**Broad Street Bullies**’ from the 70’s. You did say ice hockey and not street hockey right?” Rusty confirms.

“Actually, I thought we’d play inline hockey at the Skateway and embarrass him,” Keith smirks.

“Those guys are all seniors, each of ’em are like 200 pounds and over 6 feet tall--without their skates. Most of ’em were on the football team, too. We’re doomed. All doomed. There goes my \$3,000 braces and here come the false teeth,” Rusty worries aloud.

*The Adventures of the Crusaders*

“Calm down. Don’t be so dramatic. We just gotta out skate them,” David counters with confidence. “I’m with ya, bro!” David holds up his fist as he pumps himself up and then gives Keith a high-five.

Keith smiles with agreement and acknowledges, “That Butch needs to be kicked in the....”

“MR. KOVACS! Do you have something to share with the class?” Ms. Northrop, the geography teacher snaps sternly.

“No ma’am,” Keith responds instead of completing his previous conversation.

“It is bad enough that you interrupt my class by arriving late, but I will not tolerate disrespecting this learning environment with your inappropriate discussions. John C. Maxwell, a successful leadership author, said something to the effect of, ‘You will not learn anything today from what you say, only from what you listen to.’ Do we understand each other?” Ms. Northrop warns.

“Yes ma’am,” Keith humbly responds.

“And you, young Mr. Kovacs, are excused from my classroom. I’ll have you back here in a few short years.” Ms. Northrop peers over her glasses at Alek who is trying to hide on one knee behind his big brother.

Alek rushes out of the classroom and reports the news about the hockey challenge across the school’s gossip network.

Back in Ms. Northrop’s classroom, she questions Keith with a hint of amusement, “Now, Mr. Kovacs, since you are so eager to participate in the conversation, can you tell me at least three countries through which the Danube River flows?”

“Yes ma’am. Germany, Austria and Hungary,” Keith quickly and confidently responds.

Ms. Northrop’s facial expression is a combination of surprise and gratification. Keith, distracted and anxious to end the school day and year, normally pays great attention to his favorite subject and teacher. Ms. Northrop traveled extensively around the world, after earning her Master’s Degree in geography.

*The Legend of Wilde Island*

Her stories and experiences inspire and motivate Keith to pursue his dream of traveling the world.

Finally--the last bell rings and school is out for summer!

While the halls fill with teens cleaning out lockers, Scooter, Alek's pet dog, dashes down the hall to escort his best friend home. Alek quickly concludes, "Hey! Mom must be here to pick us up!"

Over the sounds of hundreds of excited kids running out of the school building, Keith hears Rusty's voice announcing on the school speakers, "No school for two months! See y'all at the Hangout Saturday for the 'End of School Bash'."

Even though it's the final day of school, some unknown force keeps students lingering. Many exchange and sign yearbooks. Some girls exchange hugs with friends, like a final farewell at an airport. The boys are not as dramatic. A few bounce and pass a basketball while planning pranks on the incoming freshman. As the last school bus departs from the lower parking lot, Keith and his group of friends stand atop the outdoor staircase and agree to continue their conversation at the "Hangout".

Alek turns back to the high school for one final look and waves, "Adios." The teens walk down the steps, high fiving each other and singing, "School's out for summer!"

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