

SUMMER

UP!

T O M L E I H B A C H E R

I also owe a debt of gratitude to my fun and talented friend, Meg Schutte who once again applied her great editing skills to the manuscript for this book.

A word of thanks also to Leah Bramson at Yellowbird Communications who is a totally delightful person to work with—and who created my Facebook, Amazon, and Goodreads pages...and to Vance Klein at Crosscheck Designs who created the www.tomleibbacher.com homepage and who adds new meaning to the phrase “rapid responder” whenever there’s a need.

One last word of thanks to Darcie Rowan who is a wonderful publicist and a great person to work with.

I hope you enjoy this second installment in the Briarcliff Series—and that it might lead you on a fun trip down the memory lane of your own childhood summers.

The high school sequel is coming soon (working title: *Victory Lap*.) Please look for updates on my website. While there, feel free to leave a message or raise a question if you’d like. I’ll do my best to get right back to you.

Thanks—and warm regards to all.

—Tom

PROLOGUE

I tell you, there is joy before the angels of
God over one sinner who repents.

—Luke 15:10

Way back when, nothing stirred excitement and anticipation like the approach of the last day of school.

Summer break came with the promise of two and a half months of fun-filled adventure that would unfold one sun-drenched day after another. There were summer camps, summer trips, summer sports, summer foods, and summer nights to look forward to. Of course, there also was the teenage art of sleeping in.

The promise of new experiences, new discoveries, and new life lessons thrived in the less structured nature of those summer days. Each hour was full to the brim with all kinds of fun pursuits and activities.

Total exhaustion usually set in shortly after dark. But even heading off to bed had its own special appeal as evening soundscapes came alive. The tones and timbres of katydids, brush crickets, and cicadas kept a percussive rhythm beneath the dulcet trills and warbles of meadowlarks, nightingales, and the occasional barn owl. Moreover, the sweet, humid night air passing through always wide-open bedroom windows had its own lulling affect.

On most evenings, kids dozed off with the persistent scent of chlorine from the blue waters of the town pool at Law Park, which was the locus of family and community activity from Memorial Day through Labor Day.

The pool was an Olympic-sized concrete rectangle. The shallow end, perfect for families and young children, was a safe spot to splash around with kickboards and other flotation devices. The deep end held a magnetic appeal to middle school kids and a few upperclassmen. It was home to endless games of Marco Polo, jump or dive, and boys attempting to show off on the diving boards in front of onlooking girls.

Adjacent to the pool on one side was the varsity baseball field which was also used for all-purpose events. On the other side was Gooseneck Pond, which enhanced the bucolic setting. Catty-corner from the shallow end of the pool was the venerable Briarcliff Middle School building. Beyond that was a section of undeveloped land known as the Pine Forest.

Next to the pool and pond complex were four tennis courts, three of which were surfaced with red clay. One court in particular made for a perfect whiffle ball stadium. The fourth had a hard surface and basketball hoops on either end. By midafternoon, the tennis nets came down and it filled up with high schoolers playing round-robin, five-on-five, full-court games.

On days when the weather didn't cooperate, the Briarcliff Public Library on the other side of Law Park offered a welcome change of pace. Although no one wanted to spend time reading on summer break, everyone loved the air-conditioning and the musky scent of books and periodicals. Plus, the Library had all the popular magazines like *Sports Illustrated*, *MAD*, *Sport* and *Boys Life*.

In the center of Law Park, surrounded by a thick patch of sturdy rhododendrons, was the war memorial. It bore the names of every person born and raised in Briarcliff who gave their life serving our country in the armed services. A soaring, one-hundred-foot flagpole fortified the sacred spot.

Walking uptown for a roast beef wedge and a Coke at Joe Weldon's Deli was a daily thing. In those days, everyone ambled along barefoot, which always resulted in contests to see who could go the farthest on the hot pavement. Along the way, no one could resist popping any tar bubbles in their path.

Each afternoon around 3:00 p.m., the Good Humor man would arrive, jingling the bells attached to the roof of his refrigerated truck. It took him at least a half hour to serve everyone who came running, opening the freezer door time and again as frosty air blew out. All the kids were fascinated by the change dispenser he wore on his belt.

And so it was on summer days in Briarcliff Manor in the early 1970s...

But not every day was all fun and games for Charlie Riverton and his buddies. They were teenagers now and there were a lot of question marks, new responsibilities, conflicting situations, and tough decisions to be made. After all, a big part of summer break was meant for personal development, especially during the pivotal time between middle school and high school. Sometimes life evolved organically and gradually in a comfortable way. Other times, it came with knotty, unexpected situations that could only be dealt with in the heat of the moment.

During the summer of '75, Charlie, DMarks, George, and BB faced a protracted battle for turf rights in their own backyard. It wasn't easy, and they took their lumps along the way. But with a little help from Skylar Northbridge, Charlie's heavenly friend from two Christmases ago, they stuck together and stood up for themselves. By the end of that memorable summer, their shoulders had grown a little broader and an unforgettable new chapter in their young lives was in the books.

I

CHAPTER

SUMMER SQUAD

Love one another with brotherly affection.

—Romans 12:10

The last day of school had finally arrived. With summer break just a few hours away, students, teachers and staff at the Briarcliff Middle School were fit to burst with excitement and anticipation.

Everyone dressed down for the final half-day of classes. Some wore T-shirts and gym shorts, others wore halter tops and jeans. Some even wore bathing suits underneath their street clothes so that they could go straight to the town pool after the early dismissal. Even the principal showed up in Levi's and penny loafers.

The weather outside was typical for a mid-June day in suburban New York. Golden sunshine and clear blue skies melded with comfortable temperatures in the mid-seventies. Matching conditions prevailed inside the cherished old school building, with cheerful, breezy vibes flowing throughout the student body.

Oversized, heavy-pane classroom windows were opened wide, allowing wholesome summer air to flow freely in. Flowing right back out were waves of happy chatter and joyful noise.

Nicknamed the “Alamo” because of its Spanish-style brick-and-stucco facade, the middle school building was erected in 1909 by Walter Law, the founder of Briarcliff Manor. His son added an entire wing in 1928 to accommodate the growing village. For all its high ceilings and echoing hallways, the rambling structure had a cozy, lived-in ambiance.

To their credit, most of the teachers shifted gears for that day. Rather than trying to fit in one last lesson, they opted to reflect on what had been taught throughout the semester. Some even played fun, competitive quiz games based on the content they had covered. Others took the easy route and just asked the kids to clean out their desks, gum stuck underneath included, and return any unused ditto sheets.

The 1974–1975 school year had been a blast for Charlie Riverton and his buddies. As eighth graders, they’d enjoyed a lot of cool new experiences like independent study, free periods, and playing organized sports against other schools. They were big men on campus, and they made the most of their status.

Still, summer recess was close enough to taste and they were happy to have turned in their textbooks. As the minutes ticked toward the noon dismissal, time itself seemed to slow down to a point where it was almost touchable.

As they took it all in, Charlie, DMarks, George, and BB daydreamed about sleeping late, swimming at the town pool, playing sports, going out at night, and working on their secret tree house and network of pathways throughout the swampy woodlands behind Jackson Road Park.

Everyone kept an eye on the large Seth Thomas clocks which hung above the chalkboards in each classroom. At 11:55 a.m., the school-wide intercom crackled to life and the voice of the principal began to wish everyone a fun, happy and safe summer break. After a few brief remarks, he wrapped things up with a paraphrased quote from Abraham Lincoln: *“Whatever you choose to do this summer, do it well!”*

A moment later, the school bell rang, and students erupted in spontaneous cheer. Rushing headlong from every direction to their

lockers, they slapped fives and gave out hugs, smiling ear to ear. In the midst of the mayhem, Charlie and the guys gathered in the hallway outside the main office. Once all together, they jumped down the steps, hooting and hollering, racing through the south doors of the building.

The sun shining down directly over their heads felt like good medicine and the turquoise blue skies confirmed that summer had indeed arrived.

“So long, Briarcliff Middle School. It was nice knowing you,” declared Charlie as he walked backward looking at the building and giving a deferential salute.

“No more teachers, no more books,” cheered George, ditching his sneakers to walk barefoot.

“Just think, DMarks, you’ve had your last visit to the principal’s office here at the Alamo,” chided BB.

“Ha! They’re going to miss me.”

“Well, you were one of their frequent flyers,” tossed in George.

“Yeah, well, as far as I’m concerned, it was real and it was fun, but it wasn’t really fun. High school’s going to be so much better.”

“We just completed middle school five minutes ago and you’re already talking about high school? How’s about we focus on what we’ve got here and now. We’re on summer break my man,” urged Charlie.

They walked along the sidewalk, through the grove of evergreen trees and out around the tennis courts in the adjacent Law Park. All four of them were on cloud nine, on a cloudless day. Wholesome summer air filled their lungs as the warmth of the sun raised goosebumps on their backs and shoulders.

They had made that walk a thousand times, but as they reached the south end of the park, they noticed something very different. A strong scent of stale motor oil, engine grime, and heavy machinery was in the air. Then, a few steps later, they saw why.

As they hugged the turn around the last tennis court, they stopped in their tracks with eyebrows raised. Parked alongside the tennis-basketball court was a huge steam shovel and a heavy-duty paving apparatus.

KEEP OUT signs were posted all around and the gate to the court was chain-locked. There had been a lot of talk around town about the need to overhaul the aging court. By all indications, work was about to begin.

“Call me crazy, but I’d say we’re getting a new basketball court,” surmised George. “That’s some heavy artillery they’ve got there.”

“Man, I sure hope this project won’t take all summer,” added Charlie.

“Time out! What genius decided to take this court out of commission at the start of summer break?” objected DMarks, rattling the gate to be sure it was locked.

“They probably had to wait for the temperature to reach a certain point before they could tear things up and resurface the court.” Leave it to George to come up with the most logical explanation.

“I don’t know what you’re getting so worked up about. There’s a perfectly good basketball court right in our backyards at Jackson Road Park,” Charlie pointed out.

“You know that, and I know that, Charles, but hardly anyone else around town does. And I for one would like to keep it that way.”

“I don’t get it. Why does this get you so riled up?” asked BB.

DMarks rolled his eyes exhaling with a dramatic touch as he turned to address the group.

“Listen up, you bunch of corn nuts. If the basketball court here in Law Park can’t be used this summer, people are going to look for another option. Then, before you know it, they’ll be showing up on our turf and messing everything up for us. Catch my drift?”

“So you’re against sharing the court at Jackson Road Park? Whaddya you think you own it or something?” teased Charlie.

“Raised by wolves,” said BB. “I’m telling ya, the guy was raised by wolves.”

“Oh, go eat bees,” DMarks teased as he dive-tackled BB, which resulted in all four rolling around, wrestling in the grass.

For the guys, Jackson Road Park was their home away from home since kindergarten. It was a small gem neatly tucked into the west side of the Tree Streets neighborhood. There was a basketball court, a handball court a playground and a lazy brook. It was also

bordered by Woyden’s Swamp which offered a whole host of Tom Sawyer-esque possibilities.

Although they didn’t want to admit it, DMarks had a point. An influx of kids from other parts of town could be tricky. The thought of it loitered in their minds as they continued their walk home.

A few minutes later, they reached the Pleasantville Road crosswalk where Mrs. Messina was on duty as the school crossing guard. To the boys, she was one of the coolest moms in town and they enjoyed seeing her each day.

“See you in September!” she called out, giving them all a fun-loving smile as she flipped her blond, waist-length braid over her shoulder. “Try to stay out of trouble this summer,” she kidded.

The guys all chimed in with a happy response as they got back to discussing their plans for that afternoon. After a quick trip home to grab a bite to eat, they’d ride bikes back to the town pool in Law Park for an afternoon of fun in the sun.

One by one, they each peeled off to their own homes as they got to the heart of the Tree Streets.

“See you guys in front of my house in one hour,” instructed Charlie.

“And, everyone, be on time. We don’t want to waste a single minute of our freedom,” ordered DMarks.

No sooner had Charlie arrived home when his mom pulled into their driveway in her VW Bug. It was the last day of school for her as well, and the car was packed with curriculum materials she had used with her first graders over at Todd School.

“Hi, Mom. Beautiful day,” said Charlie, rushing to lend a hand. Loaded up with books, rolled-up maps, posters, and an oversized globe, they managed to knee the front door open while backing in with their arms full.

“Well, you sound extra happy. I wonder why? Something special happen at school today?” she teased.

“Yeah, they suspended us for the rest of the summer.”

“Son, I’m going to have to have a talk with your father about this.”

"I think he'll understand," Charlie responded. "By the way, can I have a grilled cheese for lunch?"

"Sure, buddy. Coming right up. In fact, I'll join you." Charlie smiled to himself. *I'm so blessed with the parents I have.*

"Okay, if me and the guys head to the pool after lunch?" he asked.

"The. Guys. And. I," corrected his mom.

"You coming too?" he teased.

"If you keep speaking like that, they might make you repeat the eighth grade," she warned as she skimmed a slab of butter into a hot frying pan.

A few minutes later, Mrs. Riverton put Charlie's sandwich on a plate and brought it to the kitchen table, along with a glass of milk and a bowl of Jell-O fruit salad from the night before.

"Thanks, Mom. You're the best." Mrs. Riverton just smiled back, reflecting on how quickly her only child was growing up. *How blessed we are to have a son like him.*

The two chatted for a while about the high points of the school year that was. They also talked about the things they looked forward to that summer.

After wolfing down his lunch, Charlie dashed upstairs and changed into his Adidas shorts, which also served as his bathing suit. Grabbing a pool towel from the hall closet, he bounded down the stairs and out the front door.

George and BB were just arriving on their bikes out in front of his house, but DMarks was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is that pudding pop?" fumed BB as the guys began to grow impatient.

"Yeah, he tells us not to be late then ends up being the guy who keeps us waiting," added George.

Charlie was just about to chime in when they spotted their friend in the distance, pedaling up the road. Squinting their eyes as he drew closer, their mouths dropped wide open in disbelief and envy.

"How the heck?" George wondered aloud.

"Am I seeing things?" asked Charlie, rubbing his eyes.

"What gives?" added BB.

There, before their eyes was DMarks, cruising up the street on a brand-new Orange Krate Stingray. Every kid in town wanted a bike like that. Nothing was cooler than those chopper-style handlebars, banana seat, and five-speed gear shift on the cross bar. This one even had shocks on the front wheel.

DMarks circled them a few times with a "yeah, that's right" look, then jammed his brakes and fishtailed to a skidding stop.

"What are you ladies looking at? You've never seen a Schwinn before?"

"How in the heck did you get one of those?" challenged BB.

"Oh, so you like my new set of wheels? It's called a reward for a job well done."

"Tell us," said Charlie, muttering to the others. "This should be good."

"It was pretty simple actually. I told my parents that if I brought home straight As, I wanted a new bike in return for the effort. They agreed. I got the grades, and we all took a little ride over to Jack's Bicycle Shop in Ossining."

"Who goes to their parents and gives them a demand about things like grades?" asked BB, shaking his head. "Don't answer that. You. Only you would try something like that."

"In case you ding-dongs forgot, we're living in what they call the *me* generation. You don't ask, you don't get. Simple as that."

The guys all rolled their eyes, wondering how he got away with stuff like this.

"Go ahead. Keep rolling your eyes. Maybe one of you will get lucky and find some brains back there."

BB reached out to land a dead arm, but DMarks managed to doge it.

"C'mon, guys, the pool's calling our names," urged Charlie with the brush of his hand in DMarks's general direction. Off they went in squadron-like formation.

Just down the road, in an attempt to be extra cool, DMarks popped a wheelie. Unused to his new bike, he lost control and veered off the road, plowing up a row of petunias in Mrs. Lividini's

flowerbed. She happened to be sitting on her front porch and saw everything.

“That’s going to cost you, Derrick Marks!” she called out good-naturedly.

“Sorry, Mrs. Lividini! Charlie will pop those right back up the next time he cuts your grass,” DMarks replied, sweet as pie.

As they rolled along, they cut each other off and found ways to get airborne wherever they could. A few minutes later, they arrived at the pool and cable-locked their bikes to the chain link fence.

“Ahh, nothing like an afternoon swim,” crowed DMarks stretching his arms up over his head. “God bless America, it’s pool time.”

The guys draped their pool towels over their shoulders and walked around to the entrance feeling carefree as could be. Then, just as they got inside the pool area, their backs went rigid. There, standing at ease in front of them, twirling his whistle around his index finger was James Dennis, one of the senior lifeguards.

Recently home from college, he was once again working the summer at the pool. Short, overweight, and always with a five o’clock shadow, he didn’t seem to get along with anyone. He also was a stickler for rules and liked to brandish his petty authority over the kids who came to swim.

“Well, well, well,” he carped. “The Four Musketeers are back for another summer of fun and games. Tell ya what, fellas, why don’t you just turn around and leave right now. It’ll save me the trouble of kicking you out later.”

Most of the lifeguards were really nice. If you broke a rule like running on the pool deck, wrestling in the pool or jumping sideways off one of the diving boards, they’d kick you out for fifteen minutes. But for James Dennis, the minimum penalty was an hour.

DMarks wasn’t in the mood for his early-on taunting. In fact, he was more than a little annoyed. Glaring back with grit teeth, he paused, locked in and came out with a daring response.

“What’s up, Dennis?” he asked, raising his voice so that others nearby could hear.

The guys’ heads snapped around, shooting concerned looks at their friend. Nobody referred to an authority figure by just their last name.

“Uh, I think you meant Mr. Dennis,” Charlie whispered in a minor panic, elbowing him in the ribs. But it was too late. DMarks was going in for the kill.

“Tell ya what, I appreciate your suggestion, but we’re kind of busy right now. Mind if we ignore you another time?”

The boys froze in place, eyebrows raised, eyes darting side to side.

“Major burn,” gasped BB under his breath.

“We are so dead,” squeaked George.

Talking that way to an adult was an audacious thing to do, but DMarks knew James Dennis was just a bully. Tough on the outside, weak on the inside. If someone stood up to him, he’d back down. And that’s exactly what happened as the senior lifeguard just stood there gnawing on his whistle with barely controlled anger.

It was only a brief exchange, but in that moment, DMarks set the tone for that whole summer, at the pool and beyond.

“C’mon, guys, let’s snag our regular spot near the diving boards,” DMarks suggested.

As they walked away, Charlie hip-checked him.

“What did you have for lunch? Are you crazy talking to him like that?”

“Yeah, he looked like he wanted to slap you into last week,” added BB.

“That was bananas,” said George as they crowded in on their daring friend.

Even DMarks wasn’t sure where it came from but acting on his gut instinct felt good. It also felt right standing up for himself. Even so, he shrugged it off with his typical self-confidence.

“That fat washout needs to mind his p’s and q’s. That’ll teach him.”

“Dude, you just put a giant bull’s-eye on our backs for the rest of the summer,” warned Charlie.

“Oh, chill out already. He thinks he’s the man, but you can’t just let people step all over you.”

“I got to hand it to ya. You shut him up pretty good,” said BB, jostling his shoulder.

“Yeah, I thought he was going to swallow his whistle.” George laughed.

“Hey, it’s like when Hank Aaron hit number 715 a couple months ago. When you get in a live situation, you swing for the fences.” DMarks mimed hitting one out of the park with his sun-screen bottle.

“Just watch your step, man,” added Charlie. “We’ve got a long summer ahead of us.”

They found a spot near the diving boards, flapped their towels open, and spread them on the ground as placeholders.

“Who’s up for a game of jump or dive?” asked George.

“Excellent idea, but no late calls,” said BB as he, George and Charlie all spun and cast a stern glare at DMarks.

“Oh, give me a break, would ya? You act like we’re playing for milk money or something.”

They lined up at the diving board as the next guy in line called jump or dive once each player was in midair. The result was a steady display of belly flops, face plants, and awkward free falls with arms flailing. Each time someone smacked the water too hard the others would wince as though it had happened to them. On resurfacing, there was always a string of PG-rated curse words shouted into the bubbles.

A half hour later, they swam to the middle part of the pool for chicken fights. But just as they were getting started, Michelle and several other girls came strolling through the pool entrance. They waived to the guys and kept walking toward the diving boards. The guys were enjoying themselves, but the girls had hooked their attention, especially Michelle in her white bikini.

“Whoever invented bikinis...thank you!” whooped DMarks as he flopped below the water.

“I’m a Speedo kind of guy myself,” said George, mock fainting.

“I’m fine with either!” declared BB as he peeled his eyes on their female classmates.

The summer tease had begun. Within minutes, the guys swam back to the deep end near where the girls had laid out their towels. Hoisting themselves out of the water, they whirled their heads around to fling the water off their hair.

“Summer up, girls! Let’s make it one to remember,” said DMarks. “Here, let me show you how to jam out with your tans out.”

The girls all looked on with amused smiles as the guys crossed their arms wondering where their friend was going with this.

“First, it’s important to position your towel properly so that you’re directly facing the sun, like a sundial. Then, once comfortable, be sure to rotate your position every fifteen minutes to avoid sunburn.”

“Since when are you an authority on sun tanning?” Charlie asked.

“Yeah, you usually look kind of medium-rare,” chirped BB.

DMarks turned his nose up at his friends. “Funny, I don’t recall asking for a cup of your opinion.”

George was almost as amused as the girls. “Don’t worry, maestro, no charge for those opinions. Please continue.”

DMarks turned his attention back to the girls. “Now where was I? Oh, the most important part,” he said, grabbing a tube of sun-screen from Andrea’s bag. “Always apply plenty of lotion.”

The girls looked on as he unscrewed the cap, wondering just how far he was planning to take this.

“Now, when applying lotion, it’s critical to make sure it’s evenly distributed. Who can I help here?” he asked, squeezing an overly generous amount into the palm of his hand.

Before anyone could respond, a younger kid came running by, plowing into the back of DMarks’s elbow. The impact rocketed his arm up toward his face, slamming the handful of lotion right into his eye. Blinded by the lotion, which also stung like crazy, he spat out all kinds of bad words.

“Did he just curse in Italian?” asked BB.

“Sounded like it. I think he picked that up at the barbershop,” confirmed Charlie.

“Adds new meaning to the phrase in your face,” commented George.

DMarks grabbed his towel and tried to wipe his eye, but it only made things worse.

“Which kid was that? He’s in for it! Wait till I get my sight back. I’m gonna—”

“Whoa, Kemosabe,” said Charlie. “It was an accident. Besides, I think that was Will Morris’s little brother. You lay a hand on him and you’ll pay big time.”

DMarks was steamed. He didn’t know what was worse: the discomfort in his eye or the embarrassment he felt.

Always levelheaded, Charlie stepped in.

“We’ll see you later, girls. I think we need to take this guy to the first-aid station.”

“The lifeguards will save you,” called out Meg.

“You’re my hero,” added Andrea, giggling.

“Maybe they can give you one of those eye patches like what pirates wear,” Laura yelled after them.

“These chicks are lame,” grumbled DMarks. “I try to do them a favor and I get sarcasm in return.”

“Seriously. I can’t believe they didn’t appreciate your offer to rub them down with lotion,” mocked Charlie.

“Who asked for your two cents?” DMarks complained as he stumbled over someone’s beach bag. “Look at me, I’m wounded over here.”

“Get a grip, would ya?” pleaded Charlie as he took DMarks’s arm and led him into the lifeguard shack. One of the really nice lifeguards named Sue was on duty. She reached for her first aid kit right away.

“Yikes, Derrick, looks like you kind of missed your mark with the sunscreen,” she said in jest.

DMarks was not amused.

Sue assessed the situation and asked the guys to bring him over to the sink. “We need to flush his eye with warm water.”

“Sure thing, Sue,” said Charlie, as they shuffled DMarks over.

“Great, now let’s turn him around so he’s facing away from the sink,” Sue said, putting her hands on his shoulders and turning him 180 degrees. “Okay, now arch your back, and lean your head toward the faucet so I can run the water over your eye.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s get on with this already,” DMarks replied impatiently. “I got things to do. Girls to check out.”

Sue ran the water over her fingers until it was warm as the guys held him in place. Then, she pulled the faucet over and began to run it directly on his eye.

Everything was fine until George sneezed, causing him to nudge DMarks’s face just enough so that his nose ended up under the faucet.

He instantly inhaled a major amount of water, heaving forward and coughing all over the place like a seal. The boys couldn’t help themselves as they broke into waist-bending laughter.

After a few minutes of DMarks coughing and gasping, he finally got control. Sue guided him to a metal folding chair and put a hunk of cotton over his eye, wrapping a roll of gauze around his head.

Charlie and the guys thanked Sue and walked their friend out and back over to where they had been sitting. The girls saw them coming and they were ready.

“Wow, did they have to do brain surgery too?” asked Andrea.

“Can I sign your head thing?” asked Meg.

“Hey, give me a hunk of that cotton. I need some so I can remove my nail polish,” added Laura as she reached over and tried to snatch a small swath.

“Very funny. I’ll have you know that the average man could not handle the amount of discomfort I’m in.”

“Oh, for crying out loud. It’s just a little lotion. You’ll be fine,” said George.

“Here, let us position your towel correctly for you. Like a sundial,” offered Michelle, tugging on the back of his towel.

“And can I rub some lotion on your back? I promise not to get any in your good eye,” Andrea chimed in.

“I hope you’re all having a good time because I’m not. Now someone get me a Coke before I die of thirst.”

The good-natured George figured it was the least he could do as he got up and headed to the soda machine.

Eventually, everyone settled down and began talking about final grades, summer jobs, and family vacation plans. The whole summer was in front of them, and it was the best feeling in the world.

Before they knew it, Michelle’s mom arrived in her Country Squire station wagon. She beeped the horn from the parking lot as Michelle gave her the high sign.

It was half past five and almost dinnertime. The boys said a quick goodbye, then picked up their towels, and headed for their bikes.

Charlie invited DMarks over for dinner thinking it might help him to feel better. “My mom’s making steak and rice, your favorite. After dinner, we can watch *Good Times* and *Hawaii Five-0*.”

“Thank you, Charles. Don’t mind if I do. A full stomach will help my eye feel better.”

They dialed their combination locks, unchained their bikes, and started home, wet towels draped around their necks. Summer was on.

Over on the far side of Law Park and completely unbeknownst to them, Skylar Northbridge sat casually on a bench. His six-foot-five, muscular frame was toned, tanned and relaxed in a white, untucked button-down shirt, faded Levi’s and leather sandals.

He looked on with a broad, warm, smile through his well-groomed beard. *It’s so good to see them again in person*, he thought.

For Sky, it had been a memorable Christmas in Briarcliff two years prior. Of his many assignments across the globe, getting to spend time with Charlie and the guys that Advent Season was his favorite. His heart filled with joy, seeing how they’d grown.

He watched as they rode over the hillside feeling a wistful kind of affection. Remaining in the moment, he ran his fingers through his thick, longish, sandy blond hair. Standing up, he took one last good look before the guys were out of sight.

He had intended to spend that summer in Briarcliff but a few unexpected circumstances resulted in a change of plans for him.

“If only I could be here full-time this summer,” he whispered to himself, heaving a sigh.