

Eddie, The Collegiate Junior

Chapter Four The Indoor Track Season

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On the first day of practice of the indoor track season, the team meets in the indoor arena. By now, the team fully knows what to expect of Mr. Frazier, and what Mr. Frazier expects of them. Eddie and the tribe are looking forward to their best season yet. Their only regret is that Kathy and Paula aren't running with the team this year. But, as is Darryl Stone, Kathy and Paula are training with the team every day. With the indoor track divisional meet coming up, the team is well prepared and confident.

The tribe gathers around the bleachers in their usual spot, getting there a little early today if only to catch up on what they did over Christmas break. While waiting for the rest of the coaching staff, Karen asks Kathy, "do you know anything about a teacher named Mr. O'Brien at the high school?" Kathy replies, "oh, yeah! He's one of the social studies teachers. He's pretty much a jerk. How are you asking?" Karen replies, "he failed two guys on the track team last semester, so they can't run indoor track. The four-way meet is next weekend, and Barbara and Mr. Zunde are really ticked off. Oh, and he also failed one of the school's star basketball players." Kathy explains, "oh really? So, Mr. O'Brien is back to failing athletes again. What a loser!"

Kathy yells out, "hey, Eddie! Come over here!" Eddie gets off the bleachers and, joining Kathy and Karen, asks, "what's up?" Kathy tells Eddie, "that piece of shit, Mr. O'Brien, is failing athletes again. Barbara has two guys who can't run indoor because he failed them. And, he also failed a basketball player." Eddie replies, "wow! He must really be ticked off because his gambling income has gone down the tubes. We should call Richard and let him know what's going on." Kathy replies, "yeah, we really should. We need to do that."

Karen suggests, "maybe he's failing the athletes because Barbara cut Mr. O'Brien's son, Matt, from the team last Fall." Eddie laughs, and

replies, “not another O’Brien! You’ve got to be kidding me.” Karen explains, “he’s a freshman. And, he wasn’t too good at anything. Actually, he kind of sucked.” Kathy replies, “genetics. It must be.”

Karen also tells Kathy, “Barbara heard, for sure, that Brad Evans is the new Centerville coach. Do you know anything about him?” Barbara has heard rumors to that effect, which apparently have been confirmed. Kathy replies, “when we were in high school, he used to come and spy on our workouts. Mr. Frazier caught him a few times, and kicked him out.” Eddie tells Kathy and Karen, “hold on.”

Eddie then yells out, “yo, Braden! Come here for a second!” Braden walks over and asks, “what’s going on?” Kathy brings Braden up to speed on the recent developments of what is transpiring at the high school.

Now that Braden understands what is going on, Eddie explains to the group, “Richard came by the station in December. He told me that, when McCrutchin and McCrutchin got busted, there was a phone number in one of their pockets, which turned out to be Brad Evans’ phone number.” Braden mentions, “I remember that! One of them had a piece of paper with a phone number, and the other one had a list of what to steal.” Kathy exclaims, “so, McCrutchin was stealing our records for Brad Evans!” Karen asks, “why would Brad Evans care about the University’s records? He’s coaching high school.” Eddie confidently replies, “because someone is gambling again. And, Evans must be involved.” Kathy reiterates what Eddie said earlier, insisting, “yeah. We definitely need to call Richard.”

Mr. Frazier, Dr. Bonamo, and Provost Leighton walk in, and anyone standing around heads to the bleachers to take a seat. Mr. Frazier opens by stating, “good morning, and welcome back! I hope all of you had a great Christmas and New Year holiday. Hopefully, you’ve all gotten some training in and didn’t eat too much. In a week, we are going to have our opening divisional meet. We have the ability to take all the gold medals once again!” The team cheers, knowing that, this time, they have the ability to deliver what Mr. Frazier envisions.

Already knowing that the team is fired up and ready to attack this year’s season, Mr. Frazier then announces, “today, we’ll be running the interval training drill for the first hour. For the second hour, we will be running the relay drill. And, some of you will be on the clock. The Timekeepers will be evaluating your performance! Let’s hit the track and get going!” Mr. Frazier hands each Timekeeper a clipboard containing a list of runners who he wants timed. The team hits the track, preparing for the upcoming meet.

While the drill is underway, Mr. Frazier tells Provost Leighton, “it looks like we’re a little closer to simply telling them to put one foot in front of

the other faster than the other person.” Provost Leighton suggests, “we could, sometime, orchestrate an internal track meet, and let them compete among themselves.” Mr. Frazier replies, “that’s a great idea, Athena! Let’s go ahead and do that tomorrow. Then, we’ll know where everyone stands.” Athena also suggests, “we can make Kathy and Paula the coaches of the two teams, and let them pick the team members, like we all did when we were in high school.” Mr. Frazier smiles and replies, “I like the sound of that. And, I think I’ll take it easy tomorrow, and play the part of a meet official.” Glad that Mr. Frazier likes her idea, Provost Leighton replies, “I think I’ll join you.”

The day of practice comes to an end, and the team hits the locker rooms. Eddie, Kathy, Braden, and Karen stay behind, and inform Mr. Frazier and Provost Leighton about the situation involving Brad Evans and Mr. O’Brien. Not liking what he hears, Mr. Frazier tells Braden to relay the information to Officer Hayes, and tells Eddie to give any information he has to Officer Hayes the next time he comes into the service station.

Wednesday afternoon, Mark arrives at Kathy and Eddie’s house with a flatbed truck equipped with a crane. Eddie comes out to meet Mark, glad to see his merchandise has arrived. Mark asks Eddie, “did you get all the site prep done?” Eddie tells Mark, “yeah. Pull the truck around the corner, and we’ll put it behind the Jasmine wall.” Mark replies, “got it,” and drives the truck around the corner. Eddie walks around the back, meeting Mark behind the Jasmine wall.

Mark backs the truck up onto the grass, and up a slight incline so he can unload Eddie’s custom made marble slab. Eddie asks Mark, “did you try it out?” Mark replies, “yeah. Paula said it works like a charm. And, when you go to the future, the marble slab goes with you. So, when you walk back onto the slab, you end up back home.” Eddie exclaims, “awesome, bro!”

Eddie and Mark strap the triangular marble slab onto the crane, ready to move Eddie and Kathy’s personal home portal into position. Mark lifts the 1,800-pound marble slab, and positions it over Eddie’s pre-prepared area. Lowering the slab, Mark asks Eddie, “is this about where you want it?” Eddie replies, “yeah. But, let’s try to get the edge parallel with the Jasmine wall.” Eddie and Mark get the slab into position, and Mark lowers it to the ground.

Once the marble slab is in place, Eddie stands in the center, and tells Mark, “this is perfect. With the portal behind the wall, we can go to a parallel universe, and head out to the road. And, if we come to our universe, we’ll be a lot closer to home. I can even borrow my car from myself if I wanted to, and head to the store and buy something, and bring it home.” Mark replies, “wow! I never thought about that.”

Eddie and Kathy's personal home portal, which needs the yellow, blue, or red stones to work, is cleverly hidden behind the Jasmine wall at the far end of their pool. With a path to the portal behind the pool fence, Eddie and Kathy have easy access to the portal at any time. And, a hidden path to the road gives them easy access off the property should they decide to travel to a parallel universe.

Early on Saturday morning, the track team heads over to the coliseum for the indoor track divisional meet. The tribe, getting there a bit early, hangs around the team bench area, waiting for the meet to begin. Pointing to Todd McCutchen a few benches over, Mark tells Paula, "look who decided to show up." Paula laughs, and replies, "so, that's where the little pain in the ass goes now. That team hasn't won anything in years." Trying to make out the name of McCutchen's university, Mark tells Paula, "it looks like he goes to Dogpatch University now." Paula laughs, telling Mark, "that's not the name of the school!" Mark replies, "it is now. That's what I'm calling it." Paula laughs, and tells Mark, "good! That's what I'm calling it too!"

Mark thinks for a moment, and tells Paula, "I think Dogpatch University is somewhere over near the city." Paula exclaims, "you're right!" Paula then yells out, "hey, Eddie and Braden! Come over here for a minute!" Eddie and Braden walk over, and Eddie asks, "what's up?" Paula informs Eddie and Braden, "McCutchen now goes to Dogpatch University." Eddie interrupts, and asks, "Dogpatch University?" Mark, pointing over to the Dogpatch University bench, interjects, "yeah. That's what I'm calling that school now."

Paula continues, "so, Dogpatch University is right outside the city." Paula then asks Braden and Eddie, "didn't one of you tell us once that Brad Evans lives right outside the city?" Braden replies, "yeah. Eddie told me all about that!" Eddie replies, "Richard came by the station and mentioned that to me once. Richard found out that Evans lives in a boarding house right outside the city. That boarding house is right near that university." Braden asks, "what brings all this up?" Paula points to the Dogpatch University bench, telling Eddie and Braden, "take a look!" Eddie and Braden take another look over at the Dogpatch University bench, seeing Todd McCutchen and Brad Evans among the athletes.

Having their own conversation, Karen mentions to Kathy, "my parents decided to come to the meet today! But, I kind of think that my dad dragged my mom here." Kathy replies, "awesome! I'm sure they'll be impressed seeing you today!" Karen asks, "does anyone else's parents come to the meets?" Kathy explains, "yeah. A lot of them come when they can. My dad was always at the meets when I ran. And, when you were in high school and went to State, my dad was the Meet Director." Karen replies, "wow! I didn't know that."

Right at nine o'clock, the call for the first event is made, which is the men's 60-meter dash preliminaries. Mr. Frazier tells Eddie, Mark, and Hoffer, "you guys should sweep this, but don't let your guard down." All of the contestants in this event head to the starting line, and are lined up according to their heat. Included among the sprinters this year is Todd McCutchen, who finally gets to participate in a meet.

Arriving at the starting line, Mark whispers to Eddie and Hoffer, "hey. Check it out. It looks like Nachlobrocklin has two bodyguards." Eddie whispers, "yeah. To keep him in line." The Starter and Lane Judges all seem to have their eyes on Nachlobrocklin, not leaving Mark any opportunity to mess with him. But, this year, Hoffer should be able to beat Nachlobrocklin with no problem. Mark hears one of Nachlobrocklin's handlers telling Nachlobrocklin, "just remain calm. Focus on your race, and don't let anyone distract you." On his best behavior today, Mark does not want to be seen as the instigator of any potential clash.

With the first heat ready, the Starter announces, "on your marks," followed by, "set." The buzzer sounds, announcing the start of the meet and the first heat of the 60-meter dash. Right out of the blocks, Eddie claims the lead. Mark, however, is giving him a run for his money. In third place is Hoffer, with a significant lead over the fourth place Nachlobrocklin. At the finish line, Eddie crosses first, winning this heat. Eddie is followed by Mark and Hoffer. Nachlobrocklin, taking fourth place in this heat, is promptly greeted by two more handlers who escort him back to his team's bench.

On the way back to the bench, Mark tells Eddie and Hoffer, "well, I guess I don't have to mess with Nachlobrocklin this year. He's losing all by himself." Hoffer asks, "and, what's up with all his bodyguards?" Mark replies, "apparently, he's still psycho. They must have a hard time keeping him under control." Eddie adds, "there's something seriously wrong with that guy."

Nachlobrocklin's handlers were appointed by his coach to keep him from starting an altercation with the other athletes. As it turns out, Nachlobrocklin's altercation with Mark last year is only a drop in the bucket compared with what the officials had to put up with during the season. The meet officials are well aware that Nachlobrocklin presents a potentially serious problem. All of the officials will have their eye on him during the entire meet.

After the men are finished with their preliminary heats, the women are up in the 60-meter dash. Up for the University is Erika, Tessa, and Karen. The Starter announces, "on your marks," followed by, "set," and the runners get into the "set" position. The buzzer sounds, and three primal screams announce that the three-way girl fight is underway. Surprising

everyone, twenty meters into the race, Karen takes the lead, with Erika and Tessa tied for second place. Halfway, Karen slightly widens her lead, as Erika pulls slightly ahead of Tessa. Karen crosses the finish line first, with Erika finishing second, and Tessa finishing third. But, this is a preliminary heat. Nothing has been won yet, other than the right to participate in the final.

At the University's team bench, Mr. Frazier stands with his arms crossed, and tells Provost Leighton, "if this is any indication of the rest of the day, the other teams are in real trouble." Provost Leighton replies, "I'd say. No one in the women's heat even came close to our three women. And, the crazy guy in the men's heat looks like he doesn't stand a chance this year." Mr. Frazier replies, "yeah. That Nachlobrocklin guy. Did you notice that guy had a few bodyguards?" Provost Leighton laughs, and tells Mr. Frazier, "at least they finally recognize the danger he poses."

About to run the 400-meter dash, Braden is at the starting blocks exclaiming how he is going to kick everyone's ass. With a well-choreographed chant, Braden exclaims, "

We're here for the showdown,
Your never-ending letdown.
Your ass is gonna slow down,
And you'll have a meltdown.
Gonna hit you with a crackdown,
Then comes your knockdown.
Once I got you put down,
Then you're gonna breakdown.
Now I got you locked down,
And your ass is going down."

Johnson and Davida dance to Braden's chants, leaving the opposing teams wondering what in the world is going on. Worse yet, Braden is pointing at some of his competition, eroding their confidence before the race even begins. Quite amused are the race officials, who have come to enjoy Braden's pre-race entertainment.

The first heat heads toward the blocks. Braden waves to the crowd, receiving applause and further eroding the confidence of his opponents. Worse yet for the opposition, Braden, repeatedly raising his arms, is causing the fans to cheer more. It's no secret that the spectators will have their eyes on Braden during this race. The runners get behind the blocks, the gun is fired, and the race gets underway.

While Braden is tearing up the track, Karen searches the stands, looking for her parents. Finding her parents, Karen is happy that they made it to the meet. Karen tells Kathy, "my parent's made it! And, my

aunt came too!” Kathy replies, “good! You’ll run faster now. Oh! And, when the officials get their lunch break, you can go up to the stands and say ‘hi’ to them.” Karen tells Kathy, “I might just do that.”

Mark is also looking through the stands, as he usually does during a meet, to see whom he might find. Pointing out a well-dressed man in the stands to Eddie, Mark asks, “isn’t that the mayor?” Eddie asks, “where?” Mark replies, “the eighth row up, near the Section 107 sign, on the aisle.” Eddie tells Mark, “yeah. That’s the guy. I wonder what he’s doing here.” Mark suggests, “maybe he’s got a kid in the meet.” Eddie replies, “that could be. He seemed to know that we all ran track. But, if he has a kid in the meet, he never wins anything.” Mark asks, “how do you know?” Eddie replies, “because we win everything, bro!” Mark laughs, telling Eddie, “I walked right into that one.”

The end of the 400-meter dash brings no surprises. Crossing the finish line with a time of 44.32 seconds, Braden receives a standing ovation from the crowd. Taking a victory lap, Braden is cheered on by everyone he passes. At the team bench, seeing how close Braden is to the world record, Mr. Frazier is ecstatic. Returning to the team bench, Braden receives high-fives from all those around.

After congratulating Braden, spotting someone else of interest in the stands, Mark tells Eddie, “there’s a hammer in the stands.” Wondering what Mark is talking about, Eddie asks, “what?” Mark explains, “in section 109, across the aisle from the mayor, there’s a hammer.” Eddie looks through the spectators in section 109, seeing Scott McCutchen, Sr., the father of Todd McCutchen, who is running in the meet today. Eddie laughs and asks, “what’s he doing here? Making sure he’s betting on the right runners?” Mark replies, “he came to watch McCutchen get his ass kicked.”

After a few more events, the call is made for the 60-meter dash final. Eddie, Mark, and Hoffer, who are expected to sweep the event, head to the starting line. Looking over the other five contestants, Eddie comments, “it looks like McCutchen didn’t make the final.” No one really expected that McCutchen would make the final. Hoffer replies, “and that guy, whatever his name is, has his two bodyguards next to him again.” Nachlobrocklin, overhearing Hoffer’s remark, becomes a little unhinged, and starts talking to himself as he nervously paces back and forth. Nachlobrocklin’s handlers, not hearing Hoffer’s comment, persuade Nachlobrocklin to remain calm and focused.

Mark, however, knows Nachlobrocklin is about to self destruct. So do the meet officials. They all have a close watch on Nachlobrocklin, who appears more nervous and agitated than usual. Mr. Frazier and Provost Leighton also have a close eye on Nachlobrocklin, remembering that, last

year, he struck Mark in the head. And, Nachlobrocklin's coach, Mr. Crumpler, is watching his star runner closely.

Just for fun, Mark asks Eddie and Hoffer, "whose turn is it to win?" Eddie replies, "mine. You guys can fight it out for the silver and bronze." Nachlobrocklin's agitation level hits a new high hearing Mark and Eddie's exchange. The Starter, however, laughs at Eddie's and Mark's comments, then tells the finalists, "this is the final for the 60-meter dash. Good luck to all of you. On your marks." The finalists get into the blocks, ready to fight it out for the title of the division's fastest sprinter. The Starter announces, "set," and the runners get focused, waiting for the signal. The buzzer sounds, and the eight finalists are all off to a strong start.

Ten meters into the race, Eddie and Mark break away from the pack. In another ten meters, Hoffer begins to break from the pack. Halfway through, at 30 meters, it is clearly a three-man race. At the finish line, as expected, Eddie takes first place, Mark takes second place, and Hoffer takes third place. Looking up at the scoreboard, Eddie exclaims, "yes," as he sees that he has run one of the better races of his life.

Jogging off their runs, Eddie, Mark and Hoffer exchange high-fives. As Eddie gives Mark a high-five, Nachlobrocklin runs up from behind Hoffer, tackles Hoffer to the ground, taking him down hard. Hoffer and Nachlobrocklin quickly get into a fierce wrestling match. Knowing that Nachlobrocklin is absolutely no match for Hoffer, Eddie and Mark do not intervene. One of Nachlobrocklin's handlers grabs Hoffer by the neck, prompting Eddie to grab the handler and pull him away. Eddie tosses the handler aside like a rag doll, hurling him twenty feet away.

In no time, Hoffer has Nachlobrocklin face down on the ground, having him locked in a half Nelson. Raising Nachlobrocklin's arm to the vertical position, Hoffer blocks Nachlobrocklin's arm with his shoulder. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, Hoffer yells out, "somebody, get this guy out of here!" The meet officials rush over, many of them yelling, "break it up!" Hoffer, however, knows that, if he releases Nachlobrocklin, he will only attack again.

One of the Lane Judges, who also officiates Greco-Roman wrestling, quickly approaches the confrontation. Realizing what is about to happen, the Lane Judge exclaims, "everybody, get back!" Violating the Lane Judge's command, Nachlobrocklin's other handler forcefully grabs Hoffer's arm. Now having another attacker, Hoffer forcefully pushes off with his legs, flipping over 180 degrees, taking Nachlobrocklin's arm with him. A loud crack is heard, as Nachlobrocklin screams out in severe pain. Hoffer stands up, walks away, screaming out at the officials, "that guy is demon possessed!"

Mr. Frazier and Provost Leighton arrive at the scene, seeing no sign of Hoffer. Mr. Frazier asks Eddie, "what exactly happened here?" Eddie explains, "that Nachlobrocklin guy tackled Hoffer after the race. Hoffer put him into a half Nelson. One of Nachlobrocklin's bodyguards grabbed Hoffer's neck, so I tossed him aside. The other bodyguard grabbed Hoffer's arm. That's when Hoffer finished the Nelson." Mr. Frazier asks, "where's Hoffer now?" Eddie replies, "I don't know. He walked away. He sounded pretty ticked off to me." Mark adds, "yeah. Hoffer was pretty mad."

The Meet Director arrives, getting the details of what transpired from the other officials. Interrupting the officials is Nachlobrocklin's coach, Mr. Crumpler, exclaiming, "I demand to know what happened here!" Fortunately, for the officials, Mr. Crumpler is pulled aside by Nachlobrocklin's handlers, who will give Nachlobrocklin's coach a highly biased viewpoint of what happened.

Once the dust has settled, the Meet Director pulls Mr. Frazier, Provost Leighton, and Mr. Crumpler aside. The Meet Director asks Mr. Frazier, "where is James Hoffer now?" Mr. Frazier yells out to Eddie and Mark, "go find Hoffer!"

Hearing Mr. Frazier, Hoffer returns to the scene. Hoffer, not appreciative of being attacked, walks up to the Meet Director and sarcastically asks, "is there a problem?" Mr. Crumpler starts yelling and screaming, "of course there's a problem! You injured my runner! Look at him!" Mr. Crumpler quickly calms down when the Meet Director tells him, "I'm conducting this inquiry. Shut up, or I'll eject your whole team from the meet."

The Meet Director explains, "we have a serious problem here." Mr. Crumpler interrupts, saying, "yeah. I'd say." The Meet Director sternly asks Mr. Crumpler, "what did I just tell you?" Mr. Crumpler quiets down, as the Meet Director continues, "as I was saying, we have a serious problem. Every meet, this one particular runner starts an altercation with one of the other athletes. So, as of today, I am disqualifying Major Nachlobrocklin for the rest of the indoor track season. Now, if there is any further altercation involving Mr. Nachlobrocklin this year, I will permanently ban him from divisional competition." Quite disgusted with the whole situation, Hoffer comments, "good! That guy is demon possessed anyway. Someone should lock him away in a metal cage."

Turning to Mr. Crumpler, the Meet Director asks, "am I understood?" Pointing to Nachlobrocklin, who is lying on the ground being attended to by paramedics, Mr. Crumpler exclaims, "look at what he did to my runner! They can't even move him without him screaming in pain!" The Lane Judge, who is also a wrestling referee replies, "that's because his shoulder

is dislocated, his biceps tendon has been ruptured, and his rotator cuff is torn. And, that's just to start. It will require surgery to fix. Either way, he's likely out for the rest of the year, not just the indoor season."

Mr. Crumpler angrily asks the Lane Judge, "how do you know it will require surgery?" The Lane Judge explains, "because, sir, I also referee Greco-Roman wrestling. What I saw was the back to back execution of two banned wrestling moves. And, what happened to your guy is exactly why those moves are banned." Mr. Crumpler exclaims, "I can't believe this!" The Lane Judge tells Mr. Crumpler, "let me explain something to you. Your guy's bodyguard, or whatever his role is, grabbed the runner standing here after I told everyone to get back. If he had left him alone, your guy might still be in one piece. I could have talked them down. And, unlike your bodyguards, or whatever they are, I could have safely restrained your runner."

Mr. Crumpler turns to Hoffer, yelling, "so, you knew exactly what you were doing to him?" Perceiving that he is off the hook, Hoffer replies, "yeah. I knew exactly what I was doing. And, I'll do the same thing to the next guy who tackles me after a race." Mr. Crumpler tells Hoffer, "I have half a mind to report you!" Hoffer replies, "and, what's the other half of your mind going to do?" Hearing Hoffer's remark, Mr. Crumpler's blood begins to boil.

Perceiving that Hoffer is a bit of a smart ass, Mr. Crumpler grabs Hoffer by the arm. Hoffer quickly breaks free, placing Mr. Crumpler in an arm lock. Hoffer asks the Lane Judge, "what do you want me to do with him?" The Lane Judge tells Mr. Crumpler, "sir, please control yourself! I am going to instruct him to let you go. If you touch him again, I will eject you from the meet! Am I clear?" Mr. Crumpler replies, "yeah, yeah! Okay!" The Lane Judge tells Hoffer, "you can let him go now." Hoffer releases Mr. Crumpler, giving him a brisk shove as he lets him go. Mr. Crumpler exclaims, "I can't believe this! Did you see that?" The Lane Judge replies, "yes, I did. And, I suggest, in the future, you keep your hands off the athletes."

Provost Leighton interrupts the heated exchange, eloquently stating, "when a runner gets onto the track, they have a reasonable expectation of safety from physical attacks, including the ones we all just witnessed. Track is a non-contact sport. Anyone venturing to repeatedly turn track into a wrestling match, like what we saw here earlier today, is unfit for competition, potentially mentally ill, and is clearly in need of psychiatric evaluation. With that said, let me conclude by saying that, when the reasonable expectation of safety is violated, anyone being attacked would be prudent to protect themselves using any means at their disposal." The Meet Director responds by saying, "I can clearly see your point, and I

totally agree. I couldn't have said it better myself. Hopefully, the rest of the day will go a lot better."

The meeting breaks up, and the coaches head back to their team's bench. The officials go back to their duties, hoping for no future altercations during today's meet. The women, as they are getting ready to run the 60-meter dash final, are wondering how Karen is so fast this year. And, Nachlobrocklin, who is now a senior, takes a trip in an ambulance to the hospital, where they will begin putting his shoulder back together again.

Once the men's 60-meter dash final and extracurricular activities are over, the call is made for the women's 60-meter dash final. Karen, Erika, and Tessa will be battling it out for the gold medal. Having the best qualifying time of the day, Karen is all fired up. And, knowing that her parents are up in the stands watching, Karen has something she wants them to see. Arriving at the starting line, Erika sees no one who has beaten her in the past except for, perhaps, Karen and Tessa. The three women know that this is going to be a tough final.

The finalists get behind the blocks. The Starter announces, "on your marks," shortly followed by, "set." The buzzer sounds, and the women take off, fighting it out for the gold medal. Right out of the blocks, having an excellent start, Erika is in the lead by a half of a step. At ten meters, Karen takes the lead, as Tessa is catching up to Erika. Halfway through the race, Karen clearly has the lead. Behind the three frontrunners, the pack is beginning to spread out. At the finish line, Karen finishes first, followed by Erika and Tessa. Karen, Erika, and Tessa exchange high-fives, have a group hug, and head toward their bench.

Looking up in the stands where her parents and aunt are seated, Karen waves to them, hoping that they saw her run. When Karen waves, cheers can be heard from the stands. Karen sees her father wave back to her and her aunt wildly clapping. Karen smiles, knowing that all the work she put in over the last year was definitely worth it.

After a few more events, the call is made for the 1,500-meter run. Up for the University are Mitchell, Akinmola, and Davidson. This year, Mitchell and Akinmola will be fighting it out for the gold medal. While Mitchell is today's favorite, Akinmola has been training hard, and Mitchell knows it. Stone, watching from the stands today, wants to know how good Mitchell and Akinmola really are. Not to be underestimated, Davidson, in his first collegiate meet, is more fired up than ever.

The buzzer sounds and the 1,500-meter run begins. As expected, Mitchell allows Akinmola to take the lead, at least for now. Mitchell drops in closely behind Akinmola, gaining the benefit of drafting. Perfectly

synced to Akinmola's stride, Mitchell gives the impression that this is a synchronized running event. Davidson closely follows Mitchell, not wanting to give up too much ground that he will have to make up later.

After 400 meters, the field spreads out, which is to be expected. Mitchell, in second place, has not yet made a move, which worries Akinmola since he is doing all the work. At 700 meters, Mitchell passes Akinmola. Akinmola tries to draft off of Mitchell, but Mitchell's faster than expected pace concerns Akinmola. Once Mitchell gains a comfortable lead, he slows his pace to something more reasonable.

In the final 400 meters, Mitchell goes all out, as does Akinmola. Gaining on Mitchell, Akinmola thinks he still has a chance to win this. With 200 meters left to go, Mitchell and Akinmola both step up their pace. As Mitchell approaches the finish line, he gives it all he has. Crossing first is Mitchell, who gave it his absolute best, wanting to know how competitive he really is at 1,500 meters. Akinmola crosses second, followed by Davidson.

Mitchell, Akinmola, and Davidson return to the bench, receiving high-fives, and congratulations from the coaches and their fellow team members. The scoreboard reveals that Mitchell's time was 3:37.42, Akinmola's time was 3:38.19, and Davidson's time was 3:44.82. Mr. Frazier exclaims, "these guys were clocking! All our guys are clocking today!" Mr. Frazier has great reason to be excited. Thus far, in the meet, the University has taken all the gold medals, and a significant portion of the silver and bronze medals.

With a short break in the action, Karen heads up to the stands to find her parents. Kathy comes with her, just to say hello again. Walking through the stands, Karen mentions to Kathy, "I'm so glad my parents were able to come today. My dad came to the invitational meets when I was in high school. But, my mom hasn't seen me run since I was a sophomore in high school." Kathy reassures Karen, "so far today, you've done great!"

Finding her parents and her aunt, Karen runs up, and asks, "did you see me run?" Karen's father stands up, and gives her a big hug, telling her, "yes! You did wonderful! I'm so proud of you!" Karen tells her father, "I have two more events to go, but one of them is at the end of the meet." Karen's Aunt Jeannie tells her, "you did awesome! You should be really proud of yourself!" Sending a different message, Karen's mother asks, "how much longer do we have?" Karen replies, "maybe three or four hours."

Karen's father asks, "how has school been going?" Karen replies, "great! And, I got a job as an intern, working with the Northside High

School track team!" Karen's father asks, "really? What do you do on your job?" Karen explains, "I help coach the team. Barbara, the coach, used to run for the University. She's really awesome. And, I've learned a lot from Mr. Zunde, the field events coach." Karen's father smiles, and tells her, "it seems like you're having a great time!"

Karen's mother tells Karen, "you shouldn't be working when you're in college. You really need to pay more attention to your classes." Karen explains, "I get class credit for working." Karen's mother raises her voice, telling Karen, "they're taking advantage of you!" Karen answers the charge, telling her mother, "no, they're not! It's not only class credit. I get paid for being an assistant coach too." Karen's mother asks, "so, what do they pay you over there? Minimum wage?" Now getting a bit ticked off, Karen replies, "no. I get paid 45 dollars an hour, for twelve hours a week." Karen's father exclaims, "wow! That's wonderful! That's a really good salary! I don't even make that an hour!"

Karen's mother tells her husband, "she really should be focusing more on her school work. This track stuff isn't going to get her anywhere in life." Karen's father replies, "for crying out loud, Phyllis, it sounds like she's having a great time. Her grades are good. She has a job, and, she's making really good money. So, just let her do what she's doing." Karen's mother is apparently having a problem with Karen running track, but no one seems to know why. Perhaps Karen's mother's real problem is that Karen is happy, and she is clearly not.

Now in a tizzy, Karen's mother then turns to Kathy, accusing her, saying, "so, are you the one responsible for ruining my daughter?" Kathy, as is Karen, is shocked by Karen's mother's rude comment. Kathy bluntly tells Karen's mother, "yeah, I suppose that would be me. So, let me guess. You have no idea who your daughter is, do you?" Karen's mother brashly replies, telling Kathy, "I certainly know who my daughter is!"

Kathy explains, "then, I'm sure you know that Karen is running qualifying times for the Olympics, and she's training with me, Paula, and Erika for the Olympic 4 by 400-meter relay. We stand a really good chance of winning this. And, I'm sure you know that, out of the twelve universities here today, Karen is the fastest woman in this arena. In case you haven't noticed, so far, Karen has won the gold medal in the 60-meter dash and in the 400-meter dash. I'm just sorry that you'll have to stay an extra thirty minutes after the meet to see Karen stand on the first place tier when they drape all the gold medals she's earned around her neck. I could be wrong, but that's usually considered something to be proud of." Kathy turns to Karen, and tells her, "I'm sorry. I'll catch you later." Kathy walks away, and heads back to the team bench.

With Kathy now gone, Karen tells her mother, “that’s okay. You can go home now, if you want. Maybe there’s something in the kitchen that needs to be cleaned or some laundry that needs to be folded.” Karen’s father firmly insists, “no. We’ll be staying for the entire meet.” Karen’s mother is beside herself, wanting to say something, but just doesn’t have any experience in admitting that she possibly could have been inconsiderate. Karen gives her father a hug, and tells him, “if you’re still around after the awards, you can come down to the track and meet the rest of my team and my coaches.” Now upset, Karen heads back to the team bench, wishing that her encounter with her mother went a little better.

Karen’s aunt catches up with Karen and walks with her, telling Karen, “I’m so sorry your mother has such a bad attitude. You did awesome out there today! You should be really proud of yourself!” Karen replies, “thank you for understanding. You’d think my mom would have maybe just one word of encouragement. But, no. Anything she has to say is always so negative. She must have been born that way.” Karen’s aunt surprisingly tells her, “just ignore your mother. She doesn’t even know you. I don’t know what her problem is, but don’t let her make her problems be your problems.” Karen smiles, and tells her aunt, “yeah! She can keep her problems!”

Karen’s aunt asks Karen, “what are your other events?” Karen replies, “I’m in the 200-meter dash, and the 4 by 400-meter relay. Our 4 by 400 relay team is really good. Provost Leighton says we’re going to win by a lot. Oh, and, if me, Kathy, Paula, and Erika were running in the 4 by 400, we’d be really close to the world record.” Karen’s aunt exclaims, “awesome! So, that’s what Kathy was talking about?” Karen replies, “yeah. Our last run was about ten seconds off the record, but that was a while ago.” Karen’s aunt exclaims, “dang, girl! That’s great! I’ll be watching you! Show me what you can do!” Karen gives her aunt a hug, and heads back to join her team.

Karen returns to the team’s bench, where Kathy is sitting alone as Eddie, Mark, and Hoffer prepare to run the 200-meter dash. Karen takes a seat next to Kathy. Kathy tells Karen, “I’m sorry. I was probably a bit too harsh on your mom.” Karen replies, “don’t be sorry. She wasn’t acting any different today than she ever has. But, anyway, my dad said they’re staying for the awards.” Kathy tells Karen, “I’m sorry you had to put up with her crap for your whole life.” Karen explains, “I look at the bright side of it. If she wasn’t such a jerk, I wouldn’t have been out riding my bicycle years ago. Then, I wouldn’t even be here today.” Kathy replies, “yeah. I can see that. But, you never know. You could have been out riding your bicycle anyway.”

Provost Leighton walks over and tells Kathy and Karen, “the guys just took the gold medal, silver medal, and bronze medal in the 200-meter! All the heats haven’t finished yet, but I don’t think anyone is going to beat them.” Kathy and Karen give Provost Leighton a high-five, exclaiming, “awesome!” Kathy asks, “who won?” Provost Leighton tells Kathy, “this time, Eddie won. Mark took the silver, and Hoffer took the bronze. So far, in the meet, we’ve won all the gold medals.” Provost Leighton tells Karen, “that means you’re up next.” Karen replies, “awesome! I’d better warm up.” Karen joins Erika and Tessa, as they warm up for the 200-meter dash.

Provost Leighton tells Kathy, “in all my life, I’ve never seen such a group of outstanding athletes on one team! It looks like we’ll be taking all the gold medals again.” Kathy tells Provost Leighton, “Mr. Frazier doesn’t like to lose. He’ll do everything he can to help the team win.” Provost Leighton replies, “over the last year, the team has seen that over and over again.”

Hoping that Kathy will have some additional information than what was already disclosed, Provost Leighton asks, “would you, by any chance, know exactly how Karen improved so much over last year?” Kathy explains, “yeah. The same way Eddie did. When Karen stayed with me and Eddie over the Summer, all she did was work and train. She got my old job at the Summer day camp and, when the weather was nice, she rode her bicycle to work. Then, when she got home, the three of us would go over to the University, and train on the sand track. When we were done on the sand track, then we would run a few laps. And, at night, Karen would swim laps in our pool a lot. And, she’d hit the weights a lot too.” Provost Leighton observes, “it sounds like Karen really went all out this Summer.” Kathy replies, “she had to. She had no choice.”

Wondering what Kathy meant by her comment, Provost Leighton asks, “what do you mean, ‘she had no choice’?” Kathy explains, “Karen can’t afford to lose her scholarship. If she does, she’ll have to drop out. Karen has seen the level of the competition at the University. And, her mother is really being a pain in the ass.” Provost Leighton replies, “a pain in the ass? Really? How so? With Karen’s performance on the track, you’d think she’d be proud of her daughter.” Kathy explains, “me and Karen went up into the stands to say ‘hi’ to her parents at lunchtime. All her mother did was complain, and tell her that she shouldn’t be working when she’s in school, and she should be paying more attention to her classes.” Provost Leighton tells Kathy, “occasionally, we get a parent with that attitude. I’d like to meet her mother after the meet if she comes down after the awards.” Kathy tells Provost Leighton, “if I see her, I’ll let you know.” Kathy is thinking that, perhaps, Provost Leighton can set Karen’s mother straight.

Karen returns to the team's bench, winning the 200-meter dash. Erika took second place in the event, and Tessa took third place. Dr. Bonamo also returns to the bench, letting everyone know that Bobby B. and the shot-put team again swept the shot-put event. And, the icing on the cake is that Akinmola took the gold medal in the high jump and Sepulveda took the silver. Mr. Frazier can be heard exclaiming to everyone that, thus far, the team as won all the gold medals.

After a few more events, the call is made for the final event of the day, the 4 by 400-meter relay. The women will run first, followed by the men. Provost Leighton tells Karen, Erika, Tessa, and Amanda, "okay, women! This is your show! You can win this! And, don't let anything stop you!" Provost Leighton has put a lot of work into the women's relay teams, and the 4 by 400-meter relay team is expected to take first place by a wide margin. The women warm up, and head to the starting line.

In the stands, Karen's Aunt Jeannie tells Karen's parents, "there's Karen! Karen told me that her coach says they are expected to win this event." Karen's mother, Phyllis, asks, "how would she know? They haven't run yet." Jeannie replies, "they know by prior statistics. Believe me. All of these teams know ahead of time exactly who is going to win. Nothing really comes as a surprise to any of the coaches." Karen's mother mumbles to herself, "I still don't see how they can know."

Holding the baton, Tessa gets onto the track. Jeannie moves to the edge of her seat, paying close attention. The buzzer sounds and, a few seconds later, Jeannie exclaims, "go, go, go!" Karen's father mentions, "it looks like they're in the lead." On the track, during the first lap of her two-lap leg, Tessa takes a clear lead. On her second lap, Tessa widens her team's lead. Approaching the transition zone, Tessa hands off to Amanda.

Not quite understanding a relay race, Phyllis asks, "did Karen win?" Jeannie replies, "no. It's a relay race. They're only on their second leg. Karen hasn't run yet." Not yet understanding the nature of a relay race, Phyllis apparently has not been paying one bit of attention to the meet. On the track, Amanda approaches the transition zone, where Karen is ready to receive the baton. When Karen receives the baton, Jeannie stands up, yelling, "go, Karen!" For some reason, Jeannie's excitement seems to annoy Phyllis.

Karen, running the third leg, is doing so because she is slightly more proficient handing off and receiving the baton with her left hand since she is left-handed. Provost Leighton noticed this last year when Karen was a freshman. Jeannie exclaims, "Karen is really fast! She's really widening the lead!" Phyllis asks, "which one is she?" Jeannie replies, "she's the one out in front!" Karen approaches the transition zone, where Erika is

impatiently waiting. Karen delivers the baton, and Jeannie yells out, “way to go, Karen!”

Erika takes off, and Jeannie counts the seconds until the second-place team transfers the baton. Counting ten seconds, Jeannie exclaims, “they won! They did it!” Phyllis asks, “they’re still running. How could they have won already?” Jeannie replies, “Karen’s team is running 400 meters in the lower 50-second range. The team that’s in second place will have to break the men’s 400-meter world record in order to win.” Phyllis replies, “oh,” clearly not understanding what is going on down on the track. Erika approaches the finish line, with the team delivering a composite time of 3:27.7.

The relay team heads back to the team bench, receiving high-fives from their teammates. Provost Leighton tells the relay team, “you guys did really great out there! I am so proud of all of you. And, Erika, if I am not mistaken, that was your best 400-meters yet.” Tessa asks, “do we still have all the gold medals?” Provost Leighton replies, “as far as I know, so far we do. There’s still the guys in the 4 by 400. They’re up after the women.” Tessa, who wants the team to win all the gold medals as much as Mr. Frazier, smiles, knowing that the men will win their event.

The call is made for the men’s 4 by 400-meter relay. Today, for the men, Mark will lead off, followed by Johnson, Eddie, and then Braden. On the way to the starting line, the team displays a lot of energy. Braden is ranting, “everybody’s going down! Ain’t no one stopping us today! We’re taking home all the gold!” Eddie starts imitating Nachlobrocklin, telling Mark, “you messing up my name! You’re messing up my race! You messing me all up!” Arriving at the starting line, the acclaimed 4 by 440 relay team is ready to run their first 4 by 400-meter relay in competition.

With the first heat in the blocks and ready to go, the Starter announces, “on your marks.” Braden whispers to himself, “everybody, get your asses on your marks. Let’s get this ass kicking over with.” The Starter announces, “set.” Braden whispers to himself, “yeah. We’re ready and set to win. Hit that buzzer already.” The Starter hits the buzzer, and Mark takes off. Braden, who will be running the anchor leg, is clearly fired up and ready to win this.

While the 4 by 400-meter relay is underway, Mr. Frazier and Provost Leighton see Kathy, Paula, Erika, and Karen off to the side, not paying one bit of attention to the race. Normally, Paula would be watching carefully as Mark runs his leg. And, Kathy would be cheering wildly for Eddie, who is about to receive the baton. Today, it appears that they are verbally trying to solve a math problem.

Mr. Frazier asks the women, “what are you guys up to?” Kathy explains, “we’re trying to figure out what our time would have been if me, Paula, Erika, and Karen were on the track today in the 4 by 400.” Mr. Frazier asks, “what did you come up with?” Kathy asks the group, “what did we come up with again?” Paula replies, “three minutes and twenty-four seconds or so.” Mr. Frazier exclaims, “that’s about five seconds off the world record!” Paula smiles, informing Mr. Frazier, “our Timekeepers said that Karen and Erika ran their fastest leg ever today. So, we used mine and Kathy’s best 400-meter runs, and that’s what we came up with.” Mr. Frazier gives the four women a high-five as, out on the track, Braden receives the baton.

Turning around, and focusing his attention on the track, Mr. Frazier exclaims, “it looks like we did it again!” Mr. Frazier, seeing Braden far in the lead, knows the team will again take all the gold medals. Braden, crossing the finish line, looks up at the electronic timer, which reads 2:58.86. The undefeated relay team has done it again, taking home yet another gold medal. With one more heat to be run, Mr. Frazier and Provost Leighton nevertheless exchange a high-five as, in their mind, the divisional meet comes to an end.

The end of the meet brings the awards ceremony. The Meet Announcer introduces today’s officials, and recognizes the coaches and athletes for their participation today. Moving on to the main event, the winners of each event are called up to receive their medals. Mr. Frazier and Provost Leighton stand behind the bench, watching as the team’s star athletes are called to the stage to receive their awards. With the team taking all of the gold medals, Mr. Frazier and Provost Leighton are on top of the world.

Shortly after the awards ceremony, Mark mentions to Eddie, “check out who’s over at the Dogpatch University bench.” Glancing over at the competitor’s bench, it doesn’t take Eddie long to see whom Mark is speaking of. Eddie yells out, “hey Kathy! Come check this out!” Kathy and Paula jog over, and Kathy asks, “what’s up?” Eddie tells her, “check out the Dogpatch bench.” Like Eddie, it doesn’t take Kathy long to see what’s going on. Kathy asks Eddie, “what’s our mayor doing over there talking with Brad Evans and McCrutchen?” Mark replies, “I don’t know. But, something’s definitely up with that.” Paula asks, “isn’t that where Evans went to college?” Kathy replies, “I’m not sure. Mr. Frazier might know.”

The group walks over to Mr. Frazier, and Kathy asks, “hey. Do you remember where Brad Evans went to college?” Now curious, Mr. Frazier asks, “why do you ask?” Kathy points over to the Dogpatch University bench, and tells Mr. Frazier, “he’s over there, talking with McCrutchen. And, the other guy they’re talking with is the mayor of our town. And

now, their coach, Dr. Nicholson, is right in the middle of the conversation.” Mr. Frazier, seeing the team congregating around their bench, replies, “if I’m not mistaken, that’s the college Evans went to. When Barbara and I caught him spying on the high school team years ago, Barbara pointed out that the name of his college was embossed on his notebook. I’m certain that was the college. When I was growing up, we lived in that area.”

Paula comments, “they’re definitely up to no good.” Mr. Frazier reminds Kathy and Paula, “of course they are! They’re the ones who tried to steal our team’s records!” Kathy suggests, “we’d all better keep an eye on them.” Everyone agrees with Kathy, and also agrees to keep a close watch on Jeff McCutchen, who still attends the University. But, what remains unknown is why Mayor Bradford Jamieson is over at the Dogpatch University bench.

Coming down from the stands are Karen’s parents and her aunt. Standing a comfortable distance away, Karen’s parents watch as Karen signs a few autographs on the meet program for a few future hopeful track stars. For one of her younger fans, Karen removes her entry number from her shirt, signs it, and gives it to the girl. The girl’s warm smile and appreciative attitude brings a small tear to Karen’s eye. Karen’s instant fan club today likely came from the four gold medals draped around her neck.

While Karen is talking with a few of the younger girls, Kathy points out to Provost Leighton Karen’s parents. Provost Leighton tells Kathy, “it’s really a shame that Karen’s mother doesn’t take at least a little interest in her daughter.” Kind of sick of Karen’s mother’s attitude by now, Kathy replies, “yeah, seriously. Who knows what her problem is.” Kathy knows from Karen exactly what Karen’s mother’s problem is but, since it is a private matter, Kathy is not at liberty to share it with Provost Leighton. But, what Kathy knows is probably the tip of the iceberg. During Kathy and Provost Leighton’s conversation, Karen walks over to greet her parents.

In a few minutes, Provost Leighton walks up to Karen as she is talking with her parents. Examining Karen’s medals, Provost Leighton tells her, “congratulations! You’ve really had an awesome day!” Karen tells Provost Leighton, “thank you! I want you to meet my parents.” Karen introduces her parents and Provost Leighton and, oddly enough, Karen’s mother is acting civil.

After a few minutes of superficial conversation, Provost Leighton tells Karen’s parents, “Karen has really been an asset to our University’s team. She’s only a sophomore, and she’s the fastest woman in the division. For the next two years, it looks as if she’ll be unbeatable in several events.”

Karen's father puts his arm around Karen's shoulders, and replies, "Karen did very well today. I'm really proud of her." Provost Leighton can certainly see that Karen's father supports his daughter 100 percent.

Provost Leighton then informs Karen's parents, "Karen, Kathy, Paula, and Erika have also been training in the 4 by 400-meter relay for the Olympics." Before Provost Leighton can finish, Karen's mother tells the provost, "please don't get her hopes up too high. The chances of them making the Olympics aren't very good at all." Putting a sudden damper on the situation, Karen's mother has displayed that she is back to being her bitchy self.

Quite shocked at Karen's mother's cold response, Provost Leighton confidently and eloquently explains, "when you watch a professional football game, every player on the field has been told at one time or another that they'll never make the NFL. The same holds true for basketball, baseball, or any sport for that matter. When you listen to music, every musician was incessantly told that they will never make it in that industry. Some athletes, musicians, or whatever, have chosen to ignore all the negative talk and, in some cases, endure negativity for years, and pursue their goals nevertheless. They are the ones who succeed. And, I might add, to not even try is to fail by default."

Karen is relieved to hear Provost Leighton attempting to set her mother straight. Karen's father asks, "how close are they to making it, anyway?" Recalling what Kathy calculated earlier, Provost Leighton replies, "the best estimate we have right now is that the relay team is six seconds off the world record. If they were competing here today in the 4 by 400 relay, they would have won." After years of being a bitch, Karen's mother finally relents. Looking at Karen, her mother tells her, "I had no idea!" Karen replies, "well, now you do."

Provost Leighton then explains to Karen's parents, "both Mr. Frazier and I have tried out for the Olympics. In fact, that's where we originally met each other. These four women are a whole lot faster than I ever was. They really do stand a good chance at making the Olympic team." Karen's father asks Provost Leighton, "you tried out for the Olympics?" Provost Leighton replies, "yes, sir. I was the first alternate in the 100-meter dash. Mr. Frazier's wife, Dawn, beat me by barely a tenth of a second. But, I gave it my best." Provost Leighton, by bringing up her's and Mr. Frazier's past track and field accomplishments, has put Karen's mother on notice that the team's coaches clearly know what they're talking about and are quite competent in the sport they coach.

With the meet now over, the team gets ready to head out. Karen thanks her parents and her aunt for coming out to the meet. And, for the first time in her life, Karen receives a hug from her mother, albeit a very

tiny one. Karen's father tells Karen that they will be at more of the meets this season. This time, Karen's mother does not return any lip. Karen's parents head out, and Karen rejoins the team's celebration. The next stop for the team will likely be the pizzeria, where Joe will get a look at all their medals.

A week after the divisional meet, Officer Richard Hayes drives into the service station, with some interesting news for Eddie. Seeing the officer, Eddie yells out, "hey! What's up?" Richard yells back, "what's up?" Eddie yells out, "I got some news for you!" Richard walks into the service area and, seeing Eddie working on his MGB, asks, "what are you working on?" Eddie replies, "I'm just doing some preventative maintenance, and replacing the fuel filters before I tune it up."

Richard asks, "have you seen this Charles Black character around recently?" Eddie replies, "no. I hadn't seen him at all. What did he do this time?" Richard explains, "he's gone missing. His mother filed a missing person report. She claims that he's coming after you and Mark." Eddie replies, "wow! The Chuckie is coming after me. I'd better find Erika to protect me." Richard laughs, and informs Eddie, "if you see him, give us a call. His psychiatrist wants him committed." Eddie replies, "I wonder what took them so long to decide that." Richard laughs, and comments, "yeah, seriously. That character is a real piece of work."

Richard then asks, "what kind of news do you got for me?" Eddie explains, "you're really going to like this. First, Mr. O'Brien, over at the high school is back to failing athletes again. Karen, one of the team assistants, told us that he failed two track athletes and a basketball player. The rumor is that he's failing athletes because Barbara cut his other son, Matt, from the track team." Richard asks, "who is this Karen?" Eddie replies, "she's on the University's track team, and she's now a team assistant at the high school. She's my replacement." Richard takes a few notes, wondering if Eddie's information is a piece to any puzzle.

Eddie then explains, "after the divisional meet, we saw Todd McCrutchin, Brad Evans, and Mayor Jamieson talking at the Dogpatch University bench. Mark calls it Dogpatch University. That's where McCrutchin goes now." Richard asks, "this Dogpatch University, as Mark calls it, is that the one over in the city?" Eddie replies, "yeah. And, when McCrutchin got busted for breaking into the arena, you traced the phone number in McCrutchin's pocket to Brad Evans. Obviously, those guys are up to something." Richard recalls, "that's right. This Brad Evans character lives over in a boarding house near that university. And, for the record, that place has a lot of shady characters living there." Eddie then mentions, "but, what we can't figure out is how the mayor fits in."

Richard tells Eddie, "let me tell you something about Mayor Jamieson. No one down at the station likes the guy. Traditionally, in any city, the mayor is over the police department. But, the town you live in doesn't have a police department. So, the county services your area. That clown thinks that, when we drive on his streets, as he calls them, he can tell us what to do." Eddie replies, "wow! He sounds a bit like Mr. Crum." Richard explains, "while you guys were dealing with Maurice Crum at the high school, the department is dealing with people like this Jamieson clown." Eddie concludes, "to me, it sounds like he's up to something." Richard replies, "I can't say that I disagree. But what? And, that would be the question of the day."

Changing the subject, Richard asks Eddie, "is it time to sell the gold yet? It's really going up, just like you said it would." Eddie replies, "in about two weeks, I would sell it, and reinvest it into the stock market. Gold is going to peak again later in the year. But, I'm not waiting." Richard replies, "in two weeks? Okay, I'm going to sell it. Do you have any stock tips?" Eddie replies, "yeah. Kathy has the new list typed up. I'll have it here tomorrow morning. Stop by sometime tomorrow or the next day, and I'll give it to you." Richard thanks Eddie, and gets back on the road, glad to see that Eddie's investment advice has panned out. Eddie gets back to work, wondering whether Chuckie will ever show up again.

As Richard heads out, he wonders what type of illegal activity Mayor Bradford Jamieson is involved in. Richard's first order of business is to find out where the mayor lives, and determine whether the value of his home is commensurate with his salary. Living in a home or driving a car far more expensive than a person's salary would generally accommodate is a definite red flag.

Kathy and Paula make another trip to the jewelry store, having the jeweler make matching necklaces to the ones Eddie and Kathy had made earlier. This time, however, the jeweler makes pendants housing the yellow and red stones. Now, with necklaces housing stones for each universe, the group of time travelers can go to any of the three parallel universes they've discovered.

Mark has been working closely with Louis Zaino at the high school. The forms have been set for the new metric standard track, and the rebar has been installed. Mark is waiting for a reasonably warm day to pour the concrete but, since it's been cold outside, that will have to wait. With the project more than 50 percent under budget, Mark and Zaino have agreed to split the additional profit.

Done with classes for the day, Kathy and Paula head to the parking lot, ready to go home. Kathy mentions to Paula, "it looks like the ice is starting to melt." Paula replies, "good. I'd rather have snow. This ice

storm has been a real pain in the ass.” Coming up to her Jeep, Paula exclaims, “uh oh! Why has my Jeep been pushed out of my parking place?” Kathy replies, “are you sure you didn’t park it like that?” Paula exclaims, “no! I mean, yeah! I didn’t park it like that!”

Looking around her Jeep, coming around to the rear, Paula exclaims, “oh, no!” Kathy walks around to the rear of the Jeep, and tells Paula, “oh, crap! I’m so sorry.” Because of the ice, Paula backed into a parking place this morning, making it easier to get out. While Paula was in class, someone hit Paula’s Jeep in the rear, damaging the bumper and rear door. Kathy tells Paula, “it looks like someone tried to park in the space behind you, and couldn’t stop.” Paula replies, “it obviously wasn’t the person parked behind me now.” Kathy predicts, “whoever it was, they probably made themselves scarce and parked on the other side of campus.”

Paula tells Kathy, “I’m headed to Vinnie’s. I’m sure he can fix it.” Kathy replies, “it doesn’t really look too bad. Don’t worry, girl. I’m sure that Vinnie can take care of it.” Paula tells Kathy, “yeah. You’re right. I’m headed over there right now.” Kathy tells Paula, “if you need me to pick you up, and drive you home, call me. I’ll be at home.” Kathy heads home, and Paula heads to Vinnie’s Body Shop, hoping for the best.

When Paula arrives at Vinnie’s, seeing Paula, Vinnie yells out, “hey! It’s the Jeep girl!” Paula replies, “yeah. That would be me. Help!” Vinnie asks, “what’s up?” Still all upset, Paula explains, “I was at the University, and I backed into a parking place. And, so it was icy. And then, someone hit my Jeep! The back is all messed up!” Seeing that Paula is very upset, Vinnie tells her, “okay. This is going to be okay. I promise. Calm down, and let’s go outside and take a look at it.”

Vinnie and Paula walk outside, where Paula shows Vinnie the damage to her Jeep. Assessing the damage, Vinnie tells Paula, “this doesn’t look too bad. They hit your spare tire, and the rear door got dented. We can replace the door. And, the bumper is slightly bent. We can replace that too. The skid plate has a slight dent in it, which is no problem. Don’t worry. I can take care of this.” Paula asks, “what do I do?” Vinnie explains, “the first thing you want to do is call your insurance company. Make an appointment with them to come out and take a look at it. But, make sure they meet us here. That way, I’ll make sure they won’t jerk you around.”

Paula tells Vinnie, “you make it sound so easy.” Vinnie replies, “hey. You’re the Jeep girl. Don’t worry. We’ll take care of this.” Paula asks, “is it okay to drive it?” Vinnie replies, “sure. No problem.” Paula gives Vinnie a hug, telling him, “thank you so much.” Vinnie gets back to work, and Paula drives home to call her insurance company.

A few days later, after lunch, Paula drives her Jeep to Vinnie's to meet the insurance adjustor. Arriving a bit early, Paula takes a seat in the office. Vinnie walks in, announcing, "hey! The Jeep girl is back! I just heard from your adjustor. He called for directions. He's on his way." Paula asks, "are you sure this is going to go okay?" Vinnie replies, "it's going to be okay. I promise. You have nothing to worry about." Paula is relieved knowing that Vinnie sounds so confident.

The insurance adjustor arrives, and walks into the office. Thinking that Paula works in the office, the adjustor tells Paula, "hi. My name is Carlton Grumby. I'm here to look at a Jeep CJ." Paula replies, "that would be my Jeep. Let me get Vinnie." Paula walks back to the shop, and informs Vinnie that the insurance adjustor has arrived. Eddie, who has already taken a look at Paula's Jeep, is just getting off work. Eddie sees Paula's Jeep across the street, and walks over to see what's going on before he heads home.

Paula walks back into the office with Vinnie and, after introductions, they walk outside with the insurance adjustor to take a look at Paula's Jeep CJ. Mr. Grumby, examining the damage, makes a few notes on his pad. While Mr. Grumby is assessing the damage, Vinnie, Eddie, and Paula stand aside and watch. Eddie, who has seen the damage before, tells Vinnie, "I looked at it earlier. It really doesn't look too bad." Vinnie replies, "it's not. It will take ten or fifteen hours of labor, at most."

Mr. Grumby walks over to Paula, Vinnie, and Eddie, announcing, "I've looked it over, and I have an estimate. What I found is that the rear door has been damaged, the bumper is bent, the skid plate is bent, and the panel under the rear door is bent. This is a salvaged vehicle. Based upon the vehicles previous salvaged value, this car is totaled." Hearing the news, Vinnie whispers to Eddie, "go inside, and get my guys." Also hearing the news, Paula's heart sinks in her chest.

Vinnie tells Mr. Grumby, "there must be some sort of mistake here. This Jeep is not totaled." Mr. Grumby informs Vinnie, "I can assure you, sir. This vehicle is totaled." Vinnie rebuts, telling Mr. Grumby, "you don't understand. This vehicle is not totaled." Maintaining his ground, Mr. Grumby tells Vinnie, "unfortunately, the damages exceed the salvage value, so the vehicle is technically totaled." Speaking a bit slower, Vinnie insists, "you're not listening to me. As I said, you don't understand. This is the Jeep girl's Jeep, and we're fixing it for her." During the discussion, Eddie walks out from the shop, accompanied by Anthony and Luigi.

Vinnie asks Anthony, "Anthony, does this Jeep look totaled to you?" Strategically slapping a lug wrench into his hand, Anthony replies, "no. We can definitely fix this Jeep." Vinnie asks Luigi, "Luigi, does this Jeep look totaled to you?" Looking at the Jeep, then staring Mr. Grumby in the

face, Luigi replies, “no. This Jeep is definitely not totaled. We’re fixing this Jeep.” Mr. Grumby, beginning to look a little worried, starts to sweat. Paula, standing off to the side, feels as if she is watching a scene from an action movie. Vinnie then asks Eddie, “Eddie, does this Jeep look totaled to you?” Catching on to the script, Eddie, checking out his biceps, replies, “this Jeep is not totaled. This Jeep can definitely be fixed.”

As Anthony and Luigi surround Mr. Grumby, Eddie joins them for effect. Vinnie tells the adjustor, “see? What did I tell you? I’m not so sure you understand me. So, let me explain this to you again and make it perfectly clear. We have four professional opinions by men in the business agreeing that the Jeep girl’s Jeep can be fixed. So, we’re fixing the Jeep girl’s Jeep. There is no discussion about the matter. So, I suggest you get out your checkbook, and write the check.”

Mr. Grumby, who has gone from being worried to extremely fearful, replies with a quiver in his voice, “I guess we can fix it.” Vinnie replies, “good. I’m glad you’re beginning to see it my way. Because, if you don’t, there’s something back in the shop I want you to see.” Hearing Vinnie’s tone of voice, Mr. Grumby knows for certain that he does not want to go back into the shop.

Mr. Grumby gets his checkbook, and Vinnie tells him how much to write the check for. Mr. Grumby disputes the amount, telling Vinnie, “that’s a few hundred more than my estimate.” Pointing to a late model vehicle in pristine condition, Vinnie asks Mr. Grumby, “is that your car over there?” Mr. Grumby replies, “yes, it is.” Vinnie tells Mr. Grumby, “that car looks like it needs some extensive body work.” Disputing Vinnie, Mr. Grumby replies, “there’s not a scratch on it!” Vinnie asks Anthony, “hey, Anthony. Take a good look at Mr. Grumby’s car. Tell me what you see.” Anthony tells Vinnie, “that car looks like it’s been in an accident to me, boss. It’s got a broken headlight, a dented fender, and the grille is all messed up. That car is going to take a lot of work to fix.” Vinnie asks Luigi, “Luigi, what do you see?” Before Luigi can reply, understanding Vinnie’s drift, Mr. Grumby tells Vinnie, “okay, okay. I get it. I’ll write your check.” Vinnie replies, “good. I knew you would eventually see things my way.” Mr. Grumby writes the check, realizing that he is perhaps getting off quite easy.

Mr. Grumby quickly leaves, realizing that he is lucky to get out of there in one piece. Paula walks over, and Vinnie tells her, “I got your check. I can start working on it whenever you want.” Paula asks, “how come he wanted to total my Jeep?” Vinnie explains, “he’s basing his estimate on the previous salvage value, not the retail value. He would have lost in court anyway. We just took care of things the easy way.”

Paula asks, “how much will it cost to fix?” Vinnie tells her, “we’re going to put on a new bumper, replace the skid plate, and replace your rear door. And, you’ll have enough money left over to put side rails on, so it will be easier to get in and out. And, I’ll get you some side rails to match your new rear bumper. It will look good.” Paula asks, “how come there’s that much money left over?” Vinnie replies, “the adjustor was very generous, if you know what I mean.”

Paula agrees to leave her Jeep with Vinnie, who will begin repairs tomorrow. To get to and from school, Paula figures she can hitch a ride with Mark in the morning, and a ride home with Kathy in the afternoon. But, for today, Eddie will give Paula a ride home. And, as Eddie drives Paula home, Vinnie heads to the bank to cash the check before the insurance adjustor has a chance to issue a stop payment.

Toward the end of the semester, while they are waiting for the coaches to walk in, Eddie and Mark discuss parallel universes before track practice. Mark asks Eddie, “if parallel universes exist, are they like in the same space?” Eddie asks, “do you mean like, here, on this Earth?” Mark replies, “yeah.” Eddie explains, “they could be. I wouldn’t think that a parallel universe is anywhere but here. If it wasn’t here, it wouldn’t be a parallel universe.” Mark replies, “oh, yeah. If it was somewhere else, it wouldn’t be a parallel universe. It would be a different place in the same universe.”

Walking by with Mitchell, Akinmola catches Eddie and Mark talking about parallel universes. Joining the conversation, Akinmola asks, “do you guys believe in parallel universes?” Eddie replies, “yeah. Do you?” Akinmola explains, “I sure do, my friend.” Mark asks, “how can you be so sure?” Akinmola, who still often answers questions with another question, asks, “if God created the Universe, then who created God? Mark replies, no one. God always existed.” Akinmola replies, “that’s right.” Knowing Akinmola, Eddie and Mark know some words of wisdom are coming next.

Akinmola explains, “listen to me. If God could be created, then He wouldn’t be God. God created the universe. Before God created this universe, there must have been some dimension where God existed before he created the universe. So, there are at least two universes. Do you understand me?” Mark replies, “yeah. That makes a lot of sense.”

Akinmola continues, “when the universe was created, so was time. Time, as we know it, exists in our universe. But, in the universe where God existed before he created this one, time may or may not exist. Or, time can exist in a different way than we know it.”

Adding to the conversation, Mitchell mentions, “time is the dimension that defines the change in the state of matter from one state to the next. When the universe came into existence, time came into existence. So, that implies that God must exist in the equivalent of at least two independent universes. Since God can exist on a different timeline, He has no beginning, no ending, and would be uncreated, just like the Bible says.” Akinmola replies, “exactly, my friend.”

Akinmola then adds, “when we die, we go to another universe. One universe is heaven, and the other is hell.” Mark asks, “how do you know that they’re separate universes?” Akinmola explains, “in the passage about the rich man and Lazarus, the Bible says, ‘and besides, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.’ That sounds like two universes to me. But, I could be wrong.”

Mr. Frazier and the rest of the coaching staff walks in, bringing an end to today’s conversation about parallel universes. Quite interested in the topic, Akinmola tells Eddie, Mark, and Mitchell, “we need to talk more about this later, my friends.” Eddie is particularly interested to hear what more Akinmola and Mitchell have to say.

As the semester comes to a close, the University’s track team has an undefeated season, taking the gold medal in every event at every meet. What this means is that no one on the eleven other teams in the division has won a gold medal all season when running against the University. Now dominating the division in track and field, the University now has another problem. Mr. Frazier has evidence that other colleges and universities are now attempting to recruit the University’s athletes. This comes as no news to Mr. Frazier, as recruitment of the competition is commonplace in collegiate athletics.