

LINKED



GORDON KORMAN

SCHOLASTIC INC.

If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

Copyright © 2021 by Gordon Korman

This book was originally published in hardcover by Scholastic Press in 2021.

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-338-62913-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 24 25 26 27

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
This edition first printing, 2023

Book design by Yaffa Jaskoll

CHAPTER ONE

MICHAEL AMOROSA

My mother says I'd lose my head if it wasn't attached to my body.

Too bad my phone isn't also attached somewhere. I left it at school again. I know this because it butt-dialed our landline at home. I have no idea why. Ever since I dropped it in the toilet, it's been glitchy.

When I pick up, I hear a muffled motor in the background. I'm hoping that means the phone is in my locker and the noise is Mr. Kennedy, the custodian, using the big floor-polishing machine. Then the sound dies abruptly. That either means Mr. Kennedy finished polishing or my phone died. It's super old, so a battery charge lasts a millionth of a second.

I jump on my bike. Chokecherry is a pretty small town, but we live on the opposite side, so it's a long ride. I'm used to it, though. I always leave something at school, and nine times out of ten, I have to go back and get it. Mom and Dad would give me a lift, but then they'd *know*.

"I'm going out" is all the detail I provide.

Thanks to the new security, every single door to the school is locked. But I still go from entrance to entrance, banging and yelling, hoping that Mr. Kennedy is close enough to one of them to hear me over the roar of the polisher. To my surprise,

the door to the boys' locker room swings open when I kick it. I'm in.

I'm entering the school from the back corner that leads out to the football field, but my locker is in the main hall, not far from the principal's office. The floor polisher sounds far away, maybe upstairs.

I open my locker, and there it is, the world's oldest phone. I probably shouldn't have called it eleven times, because it's sitting on a tray of poster paints, and all that vibrating has made the blue and yellow leak out together, raining green blobs down on my geography textbook. I'm president of the art club, so I've always got supplies in my locker—and stains on my gym clothes, books, etc. Last year, I got charged a fifty-dollar cleaning fee to remove the melted pastel from my iPad screen. Like it's my fault the temperature went up to a hundred the weekend before the last day of school.

I check the phone. Dead. Just like I suspected. I shut my locker and turn to leave.

Only I don't leave. I freeze.

I blink and blink again, struggling to wrap my mind around what I'm seeing.

It's spray-painted in red on the blank expanse of wall above the staircase leading to the second story—that large X with each arm continued at a right angle.

I stare at it in horror and disbelief, hoping that my eyes are deceiving me and this ugly red symbol is something other than what I know it is.

A swastika.

“Michael?”

Mr. Kennedy’s voice startles me out of my state of shock. I drop my phone, which bounces on the floor. It’s probably cracked, possibly ruined, but I can’t tear my gaze from the symbol on the wall.

“What did you forget this time?” the custodian asks in exasperation.

All I can do is point up. When Mr. Kennedy sees it, a sharp gasp is torn from him.

He turns to me. “You didn’t—” he begins. “I mean, you wouldn’t—”

“Of course not!” I answer. Why would the only Dominican kid in the whole school be the one to draw a racist symbol? I almost add, “Nobody would.” But there’s the evidence right in front of us.

Somebody *did*.

I reach down to pick up my phone and almost drop it again. The screen is fractured. But even through the spiderweb of damage, I can see that awful thing on the wall reflected in the glass.

The custodian takes out his own phone. “I’m calling the police.”