

LINKED



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SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

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Library Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-62911-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 21 22 23 24 25

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, July 2021

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.”

CHAPTER TWO

LINCOLN ROWLEY

Let's get one thing straight: None of this would have happened if it wasn't for dinosaur poop.

I'm not making excuses for myself or anybody else. But way back in the Jurassic period, some Stegosaurus went to the bathroom in our mountains. And a hundred million years later, Jordie Duros, Clayton Pouncey, and I are teetering across a darkened parking lot, struggling under the weight of an eighty-pound bag.

"Are you sure this is the right stuff?" I pant as the bag passes under the glow of the streetlamp. "It says peat moss mix, not fertilizer."

"What if it doesn't stink?" Pouncey worries.

"Trust me, when we open the bag, we'll have more stink than we know what to do with," Jordie assures us. "My mom topped the cedar hedge with this stuff three weeks ago. I'm still sleeping with my windows closed."

It's a cool night, but carrying the heavy sack has us grunting and sweating like pigs.

The girls are waiting for us in front of the office.

"What took you so long?" Sophie Tavener complains. "We're freezing here!"

"Try carrying this," I groan. "It'll warm you right up."

The sign on the door reads:

WEXFORD-SMYTHE UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF PALEONTOLOGY

Why does a snooty college in Massachusetts have an office more than two thousand miles away, in Chokecherry, Colorado? That's where the dinosaur poop comes in. This is where they found it, all neatly fossilized. It looks like a rock, but don't you believe it. First they found the poop. Then they found a footprint in the poop. Dinosaurs weren't too picky where they stepped. So the college sent a crew to investigate. And when the first bone fragments popped up, that was it. They say the scientists will be here for years. A few of their kids even go to our school.

The digging is happening in the mountains, but the university opened up this little office in town so the PhDs can have a home base and also rub it in our faces how much smarter they are than us locals. The prank is my idea, inspired by a comment from Pouncey. Basically, if you get your jollies crawling on your hands and knees digging up fossilized poop, then you'll really love an office full of the real thing—smell included.

“Who brought the funnel?” Pouncey asks the girls.

“I did.” Pamela Byne holds up one of those plastic cooking funnels. The opening is maybe an eighth of an inch.

“Aw, Pam!” Jordie explodes. “There's no way we can get eighty pounds of fertilizer through that thing!”

Even in the gloom, I can see her face flame red. “You just said funnel! You didn't say *big* funnel—”

“It’s fine,” I interrupt. Once Pamela and Jordie start flirt-fighting, it can go on for hours. They’ve been like that since we were all seven—true love, I guess. It’s usually pretty entertaining, but not when you’re carrying an eighty-pound load.

Shifting the weight of the bag to my left hand, I tear a four-inch hole in the corner with my right. Instantly, the overpowering smell of manure reaches all our nostrils.

Pamela wrinkles her nose. “That stinks!”

“It’s poop, Pam, not roses,” Jordie snaps at her.

Sophie holds open the mail slot, and we insert our makeshift spout. Then we hold the bag high, tilt it, and begin shaking it until we feel the fertilizer starting to pour out.

Pamela produces a three-by-five card that reads *DINOSAUR POOP* and stuffs it in through the slot. “Just in case they don’t get the joke,” she supplies.

“They’re scientists,” Jordie says impatiently. “They’re smart. They’ll get it.”

“They just might not appreciate it,” I add with as much of a grin as I can manage under the circumstances.

“They’re not so smart,” Pouncey scoffs. “What’s a diploma? A fancy piece of paper. That’s what my dad says.” He talks about his father a lot, which is weird, since the two of them can barely stand each other.

“I brought this.” Sophie reaches into her jacket pocket and produces the wishbone from a medium-size chicken. “Wexford-Smythe didn’t get really excited until they found bones.” She stuffs the “fossil” in through the mail slot.

That makes us all laugh, even Pouncey, who isn't known for his sense of humor.

Since our eyes are adjusted to the darkness, when the car turns into the parking lot, the headlights are blinding. We pull the fertilizer bag out of the door, but there's no hiding it. We're caught in the act, lit up like performers on a stage.

Jordie bellows, "Run!"

"No—" I gasp.

I'm too late. They all take off, leaving me literally holding the bag. Maybe ten or fifteen pounds went in through the slot. The rest of it collapses on top of me. My head strikes the pavement, and I see a few stars that are not necessarily in the sky.

I hear a car door and running feet. By the time I manage to roll out from under the sack and make it up to my knees, a man is gazing down at me in concern.

"You okay, kid? What stinks?"

I try to say *I'm fine*, but the wind has been knocked out of me by at least sixty-five pounds of fertilizer.

"I told you the dry cleaner was closed," calls a woman's voice from the car. She pauses. "Hey, isn't that George Rowley's boy?"

Busted.



The problem with living in a one-horse town like Chokecherry is you can't get away with anything. Especially when your dad is George Rowley, owner of Chokecherry Real Estate, the

largest—and the only—real estate agency in Chokecherry and greater Shadbush County.

He loves this town. More, I think, than he loves his trouble-making son.

Which is why I became the mastermind behind Operation Dino-doo-doo.

Even though five of us pulled the prank at the strip mall, I was the one who didn't have the luxury of taking off—not after that lady recognized me. Everybody around here knows my father. He's kind of like the stealth mayor—although Mayor Radisson has nothing to worry about. Dad doesn't have time for local politics. He's too busy being Chokecherry's number one cheerleader because, as he puts it, “the town's success brings success to all of us.”

No wonder he's ticked off at me. Not only did I make fun of the town's pride and joy, but I was also a failure at doing it.

Story of my life.

“How do you think it feels, Link,” Dad demands once he has me in the SUV, “when I get a call from one of my own clients to tell me my son has been caught vandalizing an office?”

“Everybody around here is your client,” I point out. “So if you want the call to be from a stranger, I'll have to take the bus to Shadbush Crossing and mess up there.”

“*Link*,” my mother warns from the shotgun seat. I call her The Referee. “You're the one who's in the wrong. What were you thinking?”

“He obviously *wasn't* thinking,” my father puts in. “Or none of us would be here right now.”

“I guess we thought it would be funny,” I offer lamely. It's

the truth. There are no bigger jokers in Chokecherry than Jordie, Pouncey, and me—with the girls as backup. To be honest, considering the time we spend pranking and goofing, we don't spend that much time *laughing*. Getting caught doesn't help, I guess.

That's okay. For me, the real goal is getting the attention of people like Dad.

Mission accomplished—although maybe not the way I'd planned.

Thinking of the others, I quickly amend my answer to “I thought it would be funny.” I'm no snitch . . . even though my friends ran out on me.

Mom shoots me an exasperated look over her shoulder. “Don't even bother. We aren't stupid, you know. One kid can't drag an eighty-pound bag of fertilizer halfway across town. Who was with you?”

I don't answer, and Dad doesn't push it. Trust me, he isn't being cool, or respecting the code of the schoolyard. He really, truly doesn't care who else is involved. All he's worried about is how this looks. *Optics*. It's his favorite word—after *chokecherry*. Leave it to our town to be named after a wild berry sour enough to change your outlook on life, with a pit the size of a cannonball.

Dad wheels us onto Blossom Avenue. “I'm not as out of touch as you think I am. I was a kid once too. I know sometimes you have to cut loose. But why that office, huh? The one group that's working to put Chokecherry on the map?”

That's the real reason Dad's so steamed about this. His main ambition in life is to turn our dumpy little mountain

town into an A-list tourist destination. How's it going to happen? In a word: *dinosaurs*.

If the Wexford-Smythe paleontologists are right and our little dig turns into a major find, Dad wants to reinvent Chokecherry as the dinosaur capital of North America. First a museum full of towering skeletons surrounding a special glass case displaying the poop that started it all. Next a theme park—Dino-Disney or Six Flags Dino-land. Then hotels, restaurants, ski resorts, golf courses. Our town is destined for greatness, and the real estate in it is destined for greatness too. Guess who bought up most of it? And if Dino-land turns out to be a bust, guess who owns thirteen thousand acres of nothing?

“Chokecherry's already on the map,” I say. “Why do we need scientists to make us important? I go to school with their kids, and they're all snobs and dweebs. Whoever heard of their stupid university anyway?”

“You know what Orlando, Florida, was before Disney found it?” my father persists. “A swamp. Look at it now. Chokecherry could be the next Orlando!”

“Too much traffic,” Mom puts in.

Dad ignores her. “You have to think big picture, Link. The future of the town is the future of this family. And the future of this family is *your* future!”

I tune him out. If there's a word Dad likes almost as much as *optics*, it's *future*. In his mind, my entire life is this gigantic chess match, where every tiny move I make in the seventh grade has to be perfectly designed to bring about some glorious endgame decades later. When Jordie, Pouncey, and I spread lard across the Fourth

of July parade route, we were just trying to wipe out the marching band. How were we supposed to know that semi was going to skid into a telephone pole? And when Dad banned me from all school sports teams as punishment, it wasn't for plunging the whole town into darkness for three days. It was "to protect your future."

There was no point in describing to him how awesome it was going to be to watch the musicians floundering all over the intersection. My father has the sense of humor of a loaf of bread. There was even less point in explaining that taking me out of sports would be like pulling him off the Chokecherry Chamber of Commerce. I mean, I'm a pretty popular kid, but if you ask people around here about Link Rowley, the main answer you get will be "Athlete."

Dad thinks if he just keeps slamming me with punishment after punishment, I'll wise up. The truth is I've wised up already—to *him*.

Mom sighs her peacemaker sigh. "Let's not fight. The sooner we can get this bag of fertilizer out to the shed, the sooner we can hose out the trunk."

Dad grunts his assent and speeds up a little. We're stopped at a light when his phone rings. When he answers, we hear a lot of animated yelling on the other end of the line. Suddenly, he stomps on the gas and we blow the light, screech through an illegal U-turn, and then blow the light in the opposite direction as we roar off down the road.

"George!" Mom hangs on to the dashboard for dear life. "Where are you going?"

"That was Principal Brademas," he replies grimly, leaning on the gas pedal. "There's trouble at the school."