

JESSICA KOOSÉD ETTING AND
ALYSSA EMBREE SCHWARTZ



THE LOST CAUSES

*Misfits. Outcasts. And the only ones
who can find a killer.*

They're the last people you'd ask to help with anything, much less a murder investigation. The rich girl, the obsessive, the hypochondriac, the addict and the hot-tempered athlete — people think they're beyond help. Lost causes. But where the world sees losers, the FBI sees its only hope.

With the help of a dangerous serum, the FBI erases the teens' past problems and unlocks a psychic ability within each of them. In return, all they have to do is help find the killer who's turned their small town upside down.

But as they close in on a suspect, they expose a conspiracy that puts them directly in harm's way and makes them wonder who — if anyone — they can really trust.

If anything happens to them, will anyone even care?

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CAUSES**

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BY

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KCP Loft is an imprint of Kids Can Press

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Kids Can Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Ontario, through the Ontario Media Development Corporation.

Published in Canada and the U.S. by Kids Can Press Ltd.
25 Dockside Drive, Toronto, ON M5A 0B5

Kids Can Press is a Corus Entertainment Inc. company

www.kidscanpress.com
www.kcploft.com

The text is set in Minion Pro and Avenir Black

Edited by Kate Egan
Designed by Emma Dolan
Jacket photo courtesy of iStock.com/Pawel Gaul

Printed and bound in Altona, Manitoba, Canada in 6/2017 by Friesens Corp.

CM 17 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Etting, Jessica Koosed, author
The lost causes / written by Jessica Koosed Etting and
Alyssa Embree Schwartz.

ISBN 978-1-77138-844-3 (hardback)

I. Schwartz, Alyssa Embree, author II. Title.

PZ7.E86Los 2017

j813'.6

C2016-906545-6



*For Oliver, Sawyer, Archer, Theo and
Gemma, our brightest lights*

CHAPTER ONE

The Cedar Springs High campus looked Photoshopped that morning. Blue sky, zero clouds, birds strategically positioned on the lawn chirping their heads off. Even a few orange leaves drifted down from the treetops as if they were modeling for a fall advertising campaign.

“This weather sucks,” Z Chapman grumbled to her boyfriend, Jared, who was sprawled next to her on the soccer field behind the school. This was the kind of day that made people feel they should be active and cheerful, two things Z despised. She preferred the weather to match her mood, permanently cloudy, like a mental version of Seattle.

She reached her arm above her, shielding her eyes from the sun, and crossed her spindly legs. Thanks to a growth spurt she’d had at thirteen, she was long limbed and twiggy, though her chest hadn’t quite caught up. Not that she cared. A bra was just one less thing she had to put on under her daily wardrobe of a black camisole, black sweater, black pants and black combat boots. She liked that her pale skin looked almost translucent against the dark clothing and her raven hair, which at the moment was just barely visible with her short buzz cut.

“Have the cops come by your house again?” Jared asked as he downed the can of soda he always drank before first period.

“I don’t know,” Z answered indifferently. She closed her eyes, exhaustion pinning her body to the grass. Why couldn’t they have one of those silent mornings where she could doze off instead of facing the effort of conversation?

Especially on this subject.

Last month, a woman had been brutally killed in her cabin, and though Z understood why it was still the talk of the town — single woman, no eyewitnesses, no leads, a seemingly random act of pure violence — that didn’t mean she wanted to talk about it. Everywhere she went, people were murmuring about the Lily Carpenter murder, as if the killer was hiding in a stall in the girls’ bathroom scoping out the next victim. Sure, it was possible, but panicking wasn’t going to save anyone’s life.

And because Lily Carpenter was found dead on some land Z’s dad was trying to buy and develop, Jared brought up the murder constantly. As if that indirect link somehow made Z part of the story.

“I heard they still don’t have a clue who did it,” Jared said, absently ripping off threads from the bottom of his frayed cords. “No fingerprints, no motive, nothing.”

“Yeah.”

“I bet your dad’s pretty upset.”

“Yeah, he’s pissed.”

“I don’t blame him. There’s a murderer running around town and the cops have their heads up their asses.”

Z shook her head, her eyes still closed. “That’s not why he’s pissed. His construction site is still a crime scene, so they won’t let him build on it right now. Everything is being held up. And time is money, you know?”

Jared sat up, his voice rising with excitement. “I bet if your dad asks —”

“Can we please stop talking about the Lily Carpenter murder? It’s boring.”

“No it’s not. It’s crazy. Someone got killed,” he said with a little too much enthusiasm, considering the subject. “You haven’t lived here long enough. Stuff like this never happens in Cedar Springs.”

Z pushed herself up on her elbows and raised an eyebrow at him. “Really? You do realize thousands of Native Americans were massacred here in the 1800s?”

“Well, yeah, but that was forever ago.”

She flopped back down on the freshly cut grass, exposing the red star tattoo she’d gotten on her abdomen after reading *The Communist Manifesto* and trying not to dwell on the fact that Jared had the relative IQ of a couch. *He* might be shocked that something creepy happened here, but Z sure wasn’t. She knew there was no way this tiny town was as placid as it seemed. People might think they were safe, tucked away where Colorado met New Mexico, but Z had been around long enough to know that nothing was ever as peaceful as it seemed. The school bell rang in the distance and she groaned. What she would give to ditch and hang out at Jared’s house where it was empty and quiet, but Jared would never go for that. He was barely passing chem, and Z couldn’t muster up the energy it would take to persuade him.

They ambled across the soccer field until they caught sight of a couple hooking up under the bleachers.

Jared pushed his unkempt hair out of his eyes to get a better look. “Is that ...?”

Disgusted, Z narrowed her eyes at the couple. “He’s such a cliché.” Her twin brother, Scott, was too busy hooking up with Sabrina Ross to notice Z and Jared crossing the field.

Z gave them both a withering look as she passed. “Pathetic.”

* * *

Sabrina heard Z's comment loud and clear, but she ignored it. She just had to focus on the end goal right now. "You are so hot," Scott murmured into her neck. With a Japanese mother and African-American father, Sabrina had always turned people's heads. When she was younger, it was because people were curious about what she "was." Now, people just thought she was hot. Sabrina didn't see it herself, but it was like her secret superpower, and every once in a while (like now), she let it work for her.

Scott moved his hands under her shirt toward the clasp of her bra, and she didn't bother stopping him. They had hooked up for the first time at a house party the weekend before, mostly due to the extra tab of ecstasy Sabrina had popped as soon as she felt the first one wearing off.

"Scott!"

Sabrina jumped at the high-pitched shriek coming from behind them. They whirled around to find it belonged to Emily Price, her face flushed with anger. She looked equal parts horrified and hurt, which could only mean one thing.

Scott had a girlfriend.

Sabrina strained to remember if she knew this about him. But how was she supposed to keep track of all the fleeting couplings at their high school?

"It's not what it looks like —" Scott began.

Emily shook her head, her ponytail whipping around behind her. "You're kidding me, right? Your hand was up her shirt!"

Scott reached for Emily, but she swatted him away.

"You know, I didn't believe your sister when she told me you were out here with ... *her*." Emily spat out that last word as if it was burning her tongue. "It's so over."

As Emily huffed away, Sabrina briefly wondered if it was worth apologizing later. Hooking up with someone's boyfriend was a shady thing to do. But on the flip side, maybe this was the push Emily needed

to show herself that she could do better than Scott. Or maybe Sabrina was just rationalizing her guilt away.

“I’ve got to go talk to her,” Scott said, shaking his head. He sounded more annoyed than upset, which meant Sabrina still had a short window to get what she wanted.

She leaned casually against the bleachers. “Since you’re leaving me high and dry here, maybe you have something to take the edge off.”

If Scott realized he was being used, he didn’t show it. Too much pride, Sabrina guessed. Typical guy. “I’ve got a few Vicodin but other than that I’m tapped out.”

Sabrina’s head tingled at the sound of that word. “Vicodin works.”

Scott handed her three pills, two of which she swallowed dry as soon as he walked away. As she waited for her heart rate to slow down and that numb feeling to coat her skin, her thoughts wandered to Z, who had inexplicably caused this showdown. She tried to act so above it all with her buzz cut and “I don’t give a crap” attitude. It was a sad attempt to veil how immature she was. Why would any girl want to screw over her brother like that?

Ten minutes later, though, the Vicodin had worked its dependable magic, and Scott, Emily and Z disappeared into the back of her mind, joining the hundreds of other things Sabrina refused to think about.

* * *

Andrew Foreman slogged into his math classroom, his oversize sweatshirt swallowing his skinny frame up as if it was feasting on his bones. He was tall and gangly and might have been basketball material if he’d ever shown a shred of physical coordination. But even the faint breeze that drifted through the classroom’s open window almost toppled him over.

Head down, he told himself as he walked past the first row of desks,

trying to avoid eye contact with his teacher. But Mr. Greenly made this impossible.

“Mr. Foreman, nice of you to show up today,” Mr. Greenly said, pushing up his wire-rimmed glasses.

“I have a doctor’s note,” Andrew mumbled.

“Right,” said Mr. Greenly, his thin lips settling into a smirk. “You always do.”

A few students in the front row laughed, all in on the joke, and Andrew slunk to his seat in the back corner of the room.

As the clock struck 9:55, marking the beginning of third period, Mr. Greenly dimmed the lights and closed the blinds. He was one of those teachers who loved to teach by PowerPoint.

“Okay, today we’re going to review solving two systems of linear inequalities by graphing and then move on to solving them by elimination.”

He opened his first slide — a mess of letters and numbers that made Andrew realize just how far behind he was. He gripped his pencil tightly, jotting down everything Mr. Greenly said, though he didn’t have a clue what it meant. Then he dropped the pencil as a sharp jolt ran up his left leg as if he was being jabbed with a poison-tipped needle. He instinctively grabbed his thigh to keep from crying out, and the pain subsided at his touch. Andrew patted his leg tentatively. He’d noticed it was a bit puffy the previous night, but he’d tried to convince himself it was nothing. Clearly, that was a mistake.

Another stinging jolt shot up Andrew’s calf just as Mr. Greenly turned to him, eyes narrowed. “Mr. Foreman, at what point on the X-axis would the solution fall?”

A new throbbing sensation attacked Andrew in his chest.

“We’re waiting ...” Mr. Greenly said, tapping his pen on the desk.

The eyes of the entire class fell on Andrew. Usually that would’ve embarrassed the hell out of him, but he was in too much pain to care.

Chest pains like this were one of the major symptoms of a pulmonary embolism. Andrew's doctor swore he didn't have a blood clot when he'd seen her last week, complaining of poor circulation. She'd be sorry when she saw that not only did the clot exist, but it was already cutting off blood flow to his lungs.

"I'm sorry," Andrew sputtered, before jumping out of his seat and running from the room.

He rushed down the hall and made it down the stairwell, fighting through the bolts of pain in his leg as he reached the door to the nurse's office.

"I need an ambulance," Andrew said as he entered the small room, the antiseptic air burning his nose. "I have a blood clot in my left leg and it's causing a pulmonary embolism in my lungs."

Nurse Tammy looked blankly at him. "A pulmonary embolism? That's unusual," she commented, making no attempt to stand or help him.

Andrew was frantic. "I know! I may need emergency surgery! Why aren't you doing anything?"

"Because this is the sixth time you've requested an ambulance this month, Andrew," she replied.

He recoiled — he could've sworn it was only his third.

"After last time, your mother explicitly indicated that we not allow you to leave campus for incidents like this. You're costing her a fortune in ER bills."

Andrew bit his lip, upset but unsurprised.

His mother, along with everybody else, seemed convinced he'd been faking his illnesses for the last decade.

Nurse Tammy raised an eyebrow at him. "Well? Do you think you can make it back to class?"

* * *

Sabrina trudged down the hallway to get her books for her next-period class. The Vicodin she'd taken earlier that day was slowing her movements, forcing her out of sync with the rushing students all around her.

As she reached her locker, Sabrina's stomach tightened in annoyance. Peeking out of the top was the white cardstock she immediately recognized as the stationery of Dr. Pearl, the school psychologist. Sabrina scanned the note, which instructed her to skip her next class and meet in the Art Hall, room 113.

She got requests like this a few times every semester from Dr. Pearl, who'd flagged Sabrina as a student in need of psychological support back in ninth grade. Sabrina wasn't excited about sitting through another pointless session with the counselor, who would no doubt use passive therapy-speak to chastise her for whatever transgression had most recently been reported to the principal. (Dr. Pearl had stopped being sympathetic to Sabrina's family situation sometime around her third suspension for smoking marijuana on campus, which was also around the time Sabrina was told she'd need to repeat her junior year.) But anytime Dr. Pearl wanted to see you, it meant an excused absence from class, and it was worth hearing that woman's grating voice so she could skip the Spanish quiz she'd been too buzzed to study for the night before.

The Art Hall was an older, dilapidated building on the far end of campus, and the door creaked loudly as she opened it, the hallway dim and empty. Steven Chapman, Z and Scott's father, had successfully lobbied the school board to renovate this building into a cutting-edge technology, arts and media center, with the project breaking ground in the spring. In advance of the demolition, the school had moved the art classes to another area and stopped using the classrooms in this building altogether, something Sabrina had used to her benefit to get loaded a few weeks ago during lunch period. Could that be the purpose of this

meeting? It would be *so* like Dr. Pearl to want to meet with Sabrina at the scene of the crime.

The building was chilly, in the way of a place that's long been vacant, and Sabrina pulled her jean jacket over her shoulders as she made her way down to room 113. It was the very last one in the hall, located next to an emergency exit door that led to the woods on the edge of campus.

She swung open the door.

But instead of Dr. Pearl, she found four students inside, sitting at hard metal desks arranged in a circle, each with a name card and a glass of water on it. Sabrina immediately recognized one of the students as Justin Diaz, the star of the football team. Then she frowned when she saw who was sitting next to him. Z, with a bored smirk on her face.

"What's going on?" Sabrina asked. Dr. Pearl always made an exaggerated point of keeping their sessions confidential. Had the brain haze from the Vicodin made her read the note wrong?

"Like *we* know," Justin replied.

On the other side of him sat a delicate blond girl, her name card identifying her as Gabby. She was staring straight ahead, tapping her tan ankle boots on the floor in a distinctive pattern. Two right, one left. One right, two left. The consistency of it was oddly hypnotic.

"Did you get a note from Dr. Pearl, too?" the final student asked her. Andrew, his name card read. He was a lanky guy, holding his leg as if he were in pain, his skinny body curled up in a chair. Like the toe-tapper, he seemed younger. Sabrina thought he might be that sophomore who was carted away in an ambulance last spring after some kind of asthma attack.

His cheeks reddened as Sabrina met his gaze. "Yup. I got a note," she told him.

She walked to the desk next to him and hesitantly sat down, taking

off her jacket. Unlike the frosty hallway, the room was heated, its temperature almost too hot. Or maybe she was sweaty because she was coming off the Vicodin? Sabrina grabbed for the water on her desk, guzzling it down. “What do you think she wants us for?”

Z heaved a long sigh. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I don’t know,” Sabrina responded, her earlier irritation with Z flaring. “Do you think she wants to discuss your warped jealousy issues about your twin brother with all of us?”

“I doubt you could string enough words together to articulate an opinion on that,” Z snapped.

“What is your problem with me?” Sabrina asked. “You don’t even know me.”

“Forget it,” Z muttered.

Andrew cleared his throat. “Wait, what’s obvious?” he asked Z.

“That Dr. Pearl has expanded her limited skill set from conducting rudimentary, inaccurate individual assessments to conducting one in a group setting. Maybe she thinks it will save her time.”

Sabrina exhaled. Z was probably right about this being a group-therapy session. Sabrina didn’t know about Andrew or Gabby, but Z seemed to have an array of psychological problems, and Justin, well ... she’d known him since elementary school. Everyone knew about his temper. The room remained quiet until Andrew began to cough.

“Are you okay?” Sabrina asked when he didn’t stop.

Andrew took a swig of water and nodded.

“This room is dusty,” he mumbled. “Maybe it’s from the furnace. I bet they haven’t turned it on in months and sometimes dust particles —”

“Dude, who cares?” said Justin, and Andrew scooted his chair back a few inches.

Z sighed. “Maybe if we all shut up, Dr. Pearl will finally show up and tell us what the hell we’re doing here.”

THE LOST CAUSES

* * *

Ryan Nash sat in a nondescript white van, staring at a small television screen. He was absorbing every detail of the five students' interactions in real time, thanks to a tiny camera he'd embedded in the wall of the classroom.

He focused on Sabrina on the monitor, trying to ignore his nagging annoyance at being placed on this assignment. He observed the way Sabrina pretended not to see Z rolling her eyes at her, noting the underlying friction between them. He hadn't seen anything like that recorded in their files, but there were always nuances and quirks that emerged in person.

Patricia opened the side door of the van, slipping into the backseat. She wore a navy pantsuit that seemed too large for her narrow shoulders, though Nash couldn't tell if the jacket was the wrong size or if Patricia was simply the type of woman who didn't look right in a suit. He had yet to see one she appeared comfortable in.

"Everything is ready," she told him as she quickly scanned the screen. "Shall we?" Though she phrased it like a question, it wasn't. At fifty-five, she was over three decades older than Nash. She was the one with seniority, the one calling the shots. Despite her enthusiasm, Nash had a hard time believing this was going to work.

He nodded, but as he stepped outside the van, he couldn't help asking again. "You honestly think this is the best way?"

She paused, then said with absolute conviction, "I do. I know you're not a believer yet, but by the end of this, you will be."



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JESSICA KOOSÉD ETTING and
ALYSSA EMBREE SCHWARTZ

met on their first day of college and have informally shared a brain ever since. They've written for television and film for over a decade and made their debut as authors with their first book series, *Georgetown Academy*. Jessica lives in California with her husband, three children and neurotic shih tzu. Alyssa resides in Maryland with her husband, twins and smug rescue mutt.

Jacket design by Emma Dolan

Jacket photo courtesy of iStock.com/Pawel Gaul

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\$17.99 US / \$18.99 CDN

ISBN 978-1-77138-844-3

5 1 7 9 9



9 781771 388443