

"A twisty and emotional story about second chances and the pursuit of truth."
—ALEX FINLAY, author of *IF SOMETHING HAPPENS TO ME*

LOST TO DUNE ROAD



KARA THOMAS

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *OUT OF THE ASHES*

PRAISE FOR KARA THOMAS

Lost to Dune Road

“*Lost to Dune Road* is a triumph. A twisty and emotional story about second chances and the pursuit of truth. Kara Thomas takes us on a journey into the darkest corners of the world of privilege, then skillfully guides us toward the light. If you haven’t read Kara Thomas yet, what are you waiting for?”

—Alex Finlay, author of *If Something Happens to Me*

“I enjoyed *Lost to Dune Road* from the first page until the last. The voice is snappy, the plot deliciously twisted, the characters complex, and the ending deeply satisfying. Bonus? It has one of the best opening sentences in recent history.”

—Jess Lourey, Edgar-nominated author

Out of the Ashes

“This story simply engulfed me. I didn’t trust a single seedy character that Samantha Newsom came in contact with while on her quest to unearth, after twenty-two years, who was responsible for murdering her entire family and setting their Catskills farmhouse aflame. *Out of the Ashes* is gritty, raw, and chock-full of tension as suffocating as the tiny town of Carney itself.”

—Stacy Willingham, *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Flicker in the Dark*

“A masterful, smart, slow-burning suspense. *Out of the Ashes* drew me in with its sinister secrets and wouldn’t let me go until the very last page.”

—Elle Cosimano, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Finlay Donovan Is Killing It*

“Bold, unpredictable, and savagely beautiful, *Out of the Ashes* is that rare read that combines breakneck twists and turns with deeply woven themes of family, memory, and justice. You’ll read this with your heart in your throat,

desperate to know what happened that night—but afraid at how ugly the truth might be. A searing, shocking powerhouse of a debut.”

—Laurie Elizabeth Flynn, bestselling author of *The Girls Are All So Nice Here*

That Weekend

“Kara Thomas is ruthless. When you descend into *That Weekend*, prepare for darkness ahead, breakneck turns, and shivery secrets. I am still reeling.”

—Kit Frick, author of *I Killed Zoe Spanos*

“Deliciously twisted. Clear your schedule, because *That Weekend* is going to keep you up all night.”

—Karen M. McManus, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *One of Us Is Lying*

“A deliciously unsettling and grimly beautiful examination of the dark and twisted potential lurking within us all. *That Weekend* is a bold and expertly plotted page-turner from beginning to end, and it firmly cements Kara Thomas as a master of the craft—no one writes a thriller like her.”

—Courtney Summers, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Sadie*

“Kara Thomas deftly weaves a web of secrets, tangling you in a mystery so shocking you’ll never guess the ending. My jaw actually dropped.”

—Erin Craig, *New York Times* bestselling author of *House of Salt and Sorrows*

“A riveting, unputdownable thriller that made my palms sweat and my heart pound. I devoured this book in a single sleepless night; *That Weekend* is a brutal examination of what it means to survive.”

—Victoria Lee, author of *A Lesson in Vengeance* and *The Fever King*

“A mesmerizing, creepy, excellent thrill ride of a book.”

—Kathleen Glasgow, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Girl in Pieces*

“Thrilling, captivating, unpredictable (still reeling over those twists!) and will

consume your life until you finish! And then it will haunt you afterward.”

—Laurie Elizabeth Flynn, author of *The Girls Are All So Nice Here*

The Cheerleaders

“Sharp, brilliantly plotted, and totally engrossing.”

—Karen M. McManus, *New York Times* bestselling author of *One of Us Is Lying*

“A crafty, dark, and disturbing story.”

—Kathleen Glasgow, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Girl in Pieces*

“A little bit *Riverdale* and a little bit *Veronica Mars*.”

—Riley Sager, bestselling author of *Final Girls*

Little Monsters

“A disturbing portrait of how bad news and gossip can curdle when mixed together.”

—Oprah.com

“An eerie and masterly psychological thriller . . . [that] culminates in a shocking and disturbing ending. Thomas expertly captures the pointed nuances and the fickle, manipulative bonds of adolescent girls’ friendships.”

—*SLJ*

“Taut and suspenseful . . . this gritty page-turner will easily hook a broad range of readers.”

—*Booklist*

“An intense psychological thriller that all but ensures the lights will be left on between dusk and dawn.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Gritty and realistic . . . this mystery will leave readers in awe.”

—VOYA

“A twisted story of obsession and manipulation, *Little Monsters* captivated me right up to its surprising conclusion—and left me wondering how well I really know my friends.”

—Chelsea Sedoti, author of *The Hundred Lies of Lizzie Lovett*

“A brilliant, well-written masterpiece, full of unreliable narrators, suspense, and plot twists that will leave you at the edge of your seat.”

—Inah P., *The Bibliophile Confessions*

“A twisted and evocative tale of teenage friendships, obsession, and family dynamics all wrapped up in a mystery that is as compelling as it is dark.”

—Liz, *Liz Loves Books*

“The ending left me staring slack-jawed.”

—Leah Lorenzo, *Bumblebee Books*

“*Little Monsters* was absolutely amazing. It pulled me in, and now that I am done with it, I am going to have such a major book hangover . . . Every time I thought I was close to having [the mystery] figured out, Kara Thomas would throw something at us and it would change EVERYTHING!”

—Stephanie Torina, *Reading is Better With Cupcakes*

The Darkest Corners

“Gripping from start to finish, *The Darkest Corners* took me into an underbelly I didn’t know existed, with twists that left me shocked and racing forward to get to the end.”

—Victoria Aveyard, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Red Queen*

“A tight, twisted thriller, full of deft reversals and disturbing revelations—deeply, compulsively satisfying!”

—Brenna Yovanoff, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Replacement*

“As dark as Gillian Flynn and as compulsive as *Serial* . . . Kara Thomas’s mystery debut is intricate, chilling, and deeply compelling. Unforgettable!”

—Laura Salters, author of *Run Away*

“You’ll be up all night tearing through the pages, gasping through the twists and turns.”

—Bustle.com

“[It] will have you questioning the lies young girls tell, and the ripple effects they can have.”

—EW.com

“Thomas carefully crafts the suspense, leaving present-tense narrator Tessa—and readers—to doubt even those she loves the most . . . An unsettling story of loss, lies, and violence lurking in the shadows of a small town.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

“On the heels of *Making a Murderer* and *The Jinx* comes a psychological thriller strongly rooted in the true-crime tradition . . . Expertly plotted with plenty of twists and turns—never mind a truly shocking conclusion—this gritty thriller is sure to find a wide audience among teens and adults alike. Equally concerned with a quest for the truth and the powerful motivation of guilt, this compelling novel won’t linger on the shelf.”

—*Booklist*, starred review

“Thomas keeps it real with a jaded heroine from the have-nots societal segment who holds on to her humanity, and a frank illustration of failure in the justice system. Hand this one to older teens who love dark mysteries or fans of Netflix’s *Making a Murderer*.”

—Shelf Awareness, starred review

“Clearly drawn . . . [and] alive until the twisty end.”

—*Bulletin*

“Strong character development and thrilling reveals . . . this novel is a sure bet.”

—*SLJ*

**LOST
TO
DUNE
ROAD**

OTHER TITLES BY KARA THOMAS

Out of the Ashes
That Weekend
The Cheerleaders
Little Monsters
The Darkest Corners

**LOST
TO
DUNE
ROAD**

KARA THOMAS

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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*This is a story about mothers, so this book is dedicated to
mine.*

CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

Chapter One

Pete Marino took a dump every morning at exactly 10:00 a.m.

Pete Marino had also figured out that the third-floor restroom of the government building where he worked was never occupied at 10:00 a.m., unlike the bathroom on the eleventh floor, where he performed clerical duties for the Department of Economic Planning and Development. The only motive I could determine for him making the daily pilgrimage was that Marino was the type of man who was embarrassed by his colleagues knowing that he shits at work.

I also suspected that Pete Marino knew he was being watched. Most car accident victims who are suing for over a million in compensatory damages assume the defendant's attorneys are having them watched, but Marino was one of the smarter individuals I'd had the privilege of surveilling.

In the three-plus weeks I'd been tailing him, he hadn't sneaked away to run a triathlon or had any loud phone conversations about trying to fleece the driver who T-boned him on the LIE service road six months ago. But Marino was suing Dom Rafanelli's client over the accident, claiming the knee injury he'd sustained left him unable to run or even use the stairs at work.

I was growing impatient, as was Dom. The lawsuit was going in front of a judge by the summer, and so far, I'd dug up nothing that could discredit Marino as a witness in his own case.

And now I was back at Marino's workplace for the third time this week, ten minutes ahead of his morning constitutional. In my back pocket was an old red-light camera ticket that had gotten me through security at the main entrance. I stopped by the security desk, drawing the bored guard's attention away from Wordle.

"Do those work?" I gestured to the cameras angled toward both the

stairwell and the elevator.

The guard nodded, alarm in her eyes. Why did I need to know this information? She looked me up and down and went back to her phone, deciding the odds of a five foot five, thirtysomething white woman being the next government building bomber were low.

I thanked her, took the stairs to the third floor, and consulted my watch—9:58. I summoned both elevators. I slipped inside the north elevator and depressed the emergency button.

Quickly, quickly, I darted out of the north elevator and into the south. I held down the button for the eleventh floor at the same time as the door close button. Just as HowTo.com promised, the little hack had created my own personal express elevator.

The carriage hovered over the eleventh floor at exactly 10:00 a.m. I continued to hold both buttons; as I stalled at the eleventh floor, the sound of the emergency bell in the opposite elevator shaft persisted. I imagined Marino waiting right outside, beginning to panic.

At 10:05 I released the buttons. The elevator doors glided open in time for me to see the stairwell door slam shut.

I reached the door in time to see Pete Marino flying down the stairs as if Usain Bolt had personally coached him. A satisfied smile bloomed on my lips.

Out on the eleventh floor, the elevator alarm continued to blare.



I was out of the building and at my car by ten fifteen. I made the twenty-minute trek to Dom's office in Dix Hills, spent another ten minutes looking for parking.

The law office of Rafanelli & Company was in an industrial complex, right next door to a Wells Fargo Advisors and a day care. All my usual markers greeted me in the parking lot—the Baby Shark Band-Aid adhered to the pavement, a discarded 7-Eleven coffee cup.

I depressed the button for Dom's suite. His receptionist buzzed me up, told me Dom was waiting for me in his office.

Dom was staring at his computer screen, the glow reflected in his thick black frames. I had been taken aback when I first met Dom after trading emails. He'd mentioned he was from Brooklyn, and combined

with the aggressively Italian name, I'd assumed he was going to look like the lawyer from *My Cousin Vinny*.

Dom was more Buddy Holly than Joe Pesci, though. I didn't know how old he really was, but I put him in his late thirties, early forties, judging by the offhand comment that his daughter attended the day-care center next door.

"You might want to subpoena this morning's security footage from Pete Marino's work building," I said.

Dom spun in his chair to face me. The mention of Marino's name seemed to coax him out of whatever stupor the screen of his computer had inspired. "*Really.*"

"He made it down eight flights of stairs in a minute." I grabbed a mint from the bowl on Dom's desk and invited myself to sit in the chair opposite him.

"Huh," Dom said. "Do I want to know what sent him running down the stairs?"

"It was my understanding I would be able to keep my methods to myself, as long as they're legal." I unwrapped the mint while Dom smiled.

"So you were right, then."

Dom had agreed to represent the driver who had hit Marino because the suit had seemed excessive, and he was confident he could win. But I could tell it bothered him, the absence of an obvious motive for Pete Marino to exaggerate his injuries so greatly. He was a reliable government bureaucrat who had never so much as netted a parking ticket. His wife was entering her twentieth year teaching high school math and made a comfortable six figures. The couple had no children, no significant college loans.

It felt tacky to say, *I usually am right*. It's not arrogant; this was what Dom had hired me to do, because he knew I was good at it. He had used the words *perceptive*, *intuitive*; most of my life, I'd been used to people saying things like *creepy* or *nosy* instead.

Dom sighed, lifted his glasses so he could knead the skin on the bridge of his nose. "Here's the thing, Lee."

It wasn't like Dom to offer a preamble. When he had work for me, he simply handed over his files on the involved parties and told me to call his receptionist or the other PI with any questions.

I did not like the *I just ran over your puppy in the driveway* look on

his face right now.

“We just took on Charles Milligan as a client,” Dom said.

“Okay. I don’t know who that is.”

“He was in the news, few months back—he claims two Suffolk County police officers assaulted him while he was in custody on drug suspicion.”

“He’s suing the police department?” I asked.

“It could be a huge case. It’ll probably get ugly.”

“And I can’t go anywhere near anyone involved, for obvious reasons.”

The whole point of an investigator on retainer is to discredit the other side’s witnesses. Over the past two years, I’d had to be a nonentity, a trustworthy face with an *I’m not on either side here* shtick.

That would be impossible if Dom’s client was suing the SCPD. Almost every cop in Suffolk County knew who I was, and even after four years, they probably wanted nothing more than to discredit me even further.

Dom began: “You know it’s not personal—”

“It is, though.” I swallowed, guilty at the stung look on Dom’s face. “It’s like you said to me a few years ago. Not everyone has the privilege to make an enemy of the chief of police.”

“I’ve got contacts at other offices who need investigators.” His voice was strained enough to betray the fact he had not yet had the chance to touch base with his lawyer buddies to ask if he could off-load me on them. I thought of the look of surprise on Dom’s face when I stepped inside his office. He’d thought the Marino case would keep me busy for another week or two, at least.

I stood. “All right, well, let me know, I guess.”

“Lee—”

“Don’t worry about it, Dom.”

Back in the parking lot, a thin mist began to work its way down from the sky. Before I got into my car, I stopped. I bent, scraped the Baby Shark Band-Aid off the pavement, as I’d thought of doing dozens of times since I first set foot in Dom Rafanelli’s office two years ago.

He had reached out to me after Mallory Switzer’s *Good Morning America* interview accusing me of ruining her life.

Mallory had flown to New York to meet with me after I published an

article about the Suffolk County Police declining to formally interview the last person known to have seen Jenna Mackey, a nineteen-year-old who had gone missing in the Hamptons in 2019.

Paul Brennan was a prominent Manhattan attorney who owned a \$12.5 million home on Dune Road. Even after a witness came forward and said he saw Brennan speaking to a girl who fit Jenna Mackey's description the night she disappeared, Brennan denied knowing Jenna or ever having seen her.

Paul Brennan was a liar and a manipulator. Mallory Switzer had convinced me of that. She'd been his student when he taught at UCLA's law school in the late '90s. She flew out to New York to tell me about the affair she'd had with the newly engaged Paul Brennan while she was in his class.

Mallory was twenty-three to Brennan's thirty, and she'd been struggling her first year of law school. Brennan was her adviser, and instead of helping her, he dated her. Mallory swore she didn't know he was engaged. Sure, the relationship was consensual—until Mallory tried to end things and Brennan threatened to fail her and then kill himself when she called his bluff. She ended up dropping out of the program entirely.

After my interview with Mallory was published, Brennan dismissed her as a spurned hookup, a youthful mistake his wife had forgiven him for years ago. He retained an attorney with Lathan & Watkins, who dredged up Mallory's bankruptcy claim in 2016 and her transcript from the first graduate program she'd dropped out of.

And then, the clincher: fifteen-year-old Mallory Switzer, during her tenure at a boarding school in Oregon, had accused a classmate of rape. A week later, her roommate told school officials that Mallory was upset that the boy, an upperclassman, had rejected her. Mallory recanted and was forced to write the boy a letter of apology. The harassment from her fellow classmates was so bad in the aftermath that she'd had to transfer to a school out of state.

There was talk of an ethics review at the magazine, possible disciplinary action for my improper vetting of a source. Then the shit hit the fan with the Jenna Mackey investigation. Paul Brennan was cleared as a suspect, and I was fired, no longer protected by union lawyers.

Dom Rafanelli emailed with an offer to represent me pro bono. He fended off a lawsuit from Brennan's family, got the Suffolk County chief

of police to stop barking about criminal charges for my role in everything.

Still, my career as a journalist was over, forever.

They wouldn't find Jenna Mackey's remains until over a year later, when a fisherman stumbled upon a human skull in a remote area of marsh in Mastic Beach, over an hour from where she had disappeared into the night.

Chapter Two

After I lost my job at *Vanity Fair*, I spent nine months in Brooklyn being turned down by every news outlet in the city, and then every shitty podcast, and even a job tutoring undergraduates in writing at my alma mater, NYU.

Two years ago, I moved to Massapequa on the Nassau-Suffolk County border on Long Island, where I now rent an apartment from an elderly Filipina whose teenage granddaughter lives with her. I am constantly battling the granddaughter's boyfriend for my parking spot, and the view from my living room is a garish pink stretch limo parked in the driveway of the house across the street. But my rent is under market value, and the proximity to the highway means I can usually get to wherever Dom needs to send me on assignment without major headache.

I cut my engine, the tension in my abdomen returning—the one I'd spent the drive home fighting off, the one that would say, *Wow, you're totally fucked!* if a bad feeling could speak.

My bills were paid through the month. Thanks to my public fall from grace, I no longer had things like eighteen-dollar cocktails after work to pad my credit card bill. I'd accrued a decent savings the past couple of years, enough that sometimes I found myself checking two-bedroom house listings in Suffolk County.

I would be fine until I figured out another job, or maybe until Dom's case against the county was settled and he could rehire me.

But his cutting me loose stung, even if he was right. Any witness I could possibly procure for Dom would be dismissed because of my connection to Chief Mike Molineux and his commitment to ruining my career and reputation.

At the click of the door behind me, I was greeted with a "Fuck you, Gus!" followed by happy trilling. In the living room, my father's beloved