

THE  
FIRES  
BENEATH  
THE  
SEA

*a novel*

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**Big Mouth House**  
Easthampton, MA

## One

*The end of August, after the summer people left, was Cara's favorite time of year. It was still warm enough on the Outer Cape to go to the beach and run headlong into the crashing waves. And since all the cars were gone, with their blaring horns and the smog from their tailpipes, she could ride her bike along Route 6 without feeling nervous.*

After two months of crowds and backed-up traffic, the loneliness of it felt like a deep sigh of relief.

Now she was riding along the top of the tall, crumbling cliffs that overlooked the long stretch of sand and blue water that was the national seashore. The wind sighed as it ruffled the wild grass and the low, scrubby pine trees. From here, though she was high above the ocean, she could still smell the salt spray and hear the faint crash of the surf. She could even make out the small figures of people below—a few end-of-summer stragglers leading their bounding dogs along the lacy white line of the tide.

Sometimes there were ships like tiny dots in the gray haze of the distant water; sometimes there was nothing there at all. Then she could imagine she was looking all the way over the end of the earth.

If the earth had an end.

Panting, she pedaled hard along the cliff trail. She was headed to Nauset Light Beach, wearing some flips and a tank top, to meet her friend Hayley; a mesh bag was stuffed into one of the bike's saddlebags and held her swimsuit and a towel. The sand was fine and loose up here and it was hard to ride, but then, finally, the trail on the cliff's edge turned inland for a few hundred yards and emptied into the beach parking lot.

She was struggling to catch her breath when she got off and locked her bike to an old split-rail fence. Because it was late summer, and also late afternoon, the parking lot was nearly empty of cars—just a rainbow-colored hippie van in one corner and a park ranger's jeep in another. The red-and-white striped Nauset lighthouse loomed over the lake of pavement.

All the tourons, as her older brother Max and his friends called the tourists when they were acting cooler-than-thou, liked to stand in the parking lot to take pictures of the lighthouse. It was famous because it was near where telegraphs had been invented, or at least where the famous Marconi, who had the next beach over named after him, sent the first one across the Atlantic.

Telegraphs had clearly been more of a hassle than email, she thought, but like everything back then, cool in their own way.

The Park Service had a display on Marconi but she wasn't that interested. Her dad had told her Marconi stole his ideas from better men like Nikola Tesla, then took all

the credit himself, and anyway Marconi was a fascist-type dude. Which wasn't too ideal.

But apparently didn't stop them from naming beaches.

“Hey, you.”

Hayley was leaning against the fence along the boardwalk. She'd lived just down the street from them ever since Cara could remember, and though she and Cara were really different they'd always been best friends. Her blond hair had tiny braids at the sides, tied with elastics whose pink matched her lip gloss and bubble gum; Hayley was addicted to lip gloss and to gum.

Cara's dad, who called gum “that filthy habit” as if it were a new designer drug or something, had recently said Hayley was “like a gawky calf chewing her cud.”

“What took you so long?” went on Hayley. “I've been here for ages.”

“I had to help my dad with something,” said Cara.

The truth was she'd been crying a bit pathetically in her room. And even though she trusted Hayley, she didn't want to overshare.

They went into the shower room to slip into their suits, Hayley's a hot-pink bikini, Cara's a one-piece blue Speedo she used for swim team. Hayley was on the team too, but when it came to beach apparel one-pieces were a fashion don't, she told Cara.

They came out of the changing room to find a big gray cloud covering the sun.

“Oh. Nice,” said Hayley, shivering, and hung her towel around her neck as they headed down the wooden steps to the beach.

There were a couple of guys playing Frisbee on the sand, and an older lady reading a book, but that was it. No lifeguard on duty, and the waves weren’t big enough for surfers.

They laid down their towels and tested the edge of the water with their toes.

“It’s freezing,” groaned Hayley. “You gotta be kidding me! Like, forget it.”

The ocean-side water was always colder—your lips turned blue and you started to shiver as soon as you went in. Because the Cape was a peninsula, with one side facing out to the ocean and the other facing the Massachusetts coast, the beaches on the two sides were different. The bay side, as they called the side facing in, had warmer water, which was why they usually swam either there or in the turquoise kettle ponds that dotted the piney woods. But the bayside water was often silty, too, and full of floating debris, while the ocean-side water was clear. The ocean side also had softer, whiter sand, bigger waves, and the tall, amazing bluffs.

“I’m going in anyway,” said Cara. “Come on. Don’t be a wuss. What if I drown because I had no swim buddy?”

“That’s like emotional blackmail,” said Hayley. “I think.”

“Call it what you want,” said Cara. “Are you a man or a mouse?”

“Mouse, chick,” said Hayley. “And Miss Mousy has a magazine. But hey, you go crazy.”

She backed up and settled down on her towel, and Cara waded in and stood in a foot of frigid water looking out at the rest of the ocean. She watched the sand beneath her feet get sucked out by the tide, felt her heels sink into the hollows. After a while she splashed out farther and then dove.

As the water closed over her she thought of swimming with her mother, who always dove right into the ocean, no matter how cold it was.

Her mother. Who was gone.

It was her mother who had taught her to trust the water; now the slow pull of the tide and the water's buoyancy helped her forget her worries a bit. She dove in and splashed out again, floated on her back and gazed up at the sky.

Last summer it had mostly been her two brothers and her at the beach, but this summer things had changed. Since Max was sixteen he could work at restaurants, so he'd been bussing tables during the high season, and even this week—though the crowds had thinned out and tips were nothing much once the stream of tourists slowed to a trickle—he was still working the dinner shift, which began in the late afternoons. It sounded like fun, in a way—all the wait staff and kitchen staff knew each other pretty well by the end of the season and now were a kind of big, squabbling family—but if Cara wanted to do restaurant work herself she still had three years to go.

Jax, short for Jackson, had just turned ten and was off at summer camp on the wildlife sanctuary on the bay, where the