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Daughter of the House

Written by Rosie Thomas

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The background of the cover features a large, ornate hourglass with red sand. The top bulb is partially filled, while the bottom bulb is mostly empty, with a small amount of sand at the base. To the left, a white, textured glove is visible. In the bottom right corner, a vibrant red poppy flower is in bloom. The overall color palette is dominated by reds, golds, and whites, creating a classic and elegant aesthetic.

Rosie
Thomas

SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Daughter
of the House

Rosie Thomas

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Kent, 1910

Mr and Mrs Devil Wix and their three children made a vivid picture as they strolled towards the steamer jetty. Devil wore a loose blue flannel coat with patch pockets, and a straw hat that he tipped to the other holidaymakers. His wife Eliza's short steps were dictated by the fashionably narrow hem of her rose-pink and dove-grey hobble skirt. She had dressed her hair under a grey turban with a matching pink feather cockade.

Arthur, the youngest child, dashed ahead in his enthusiasm to get aboard the pleasure boat before doubling back to chivvy his family. Cornelius and Nancy trailed behind with Phyllis, their paid companion. Cornelius's slumped shoulders revealed how much he would have preferred to spend the morning out on the heathland with his butterfly net. He was gloomily asserting to Nancy that with the swell that was running out in the bay they would certainly all be seasick. It was very like him to adopt nautical terms without having ever ventured out to sea.

Nancy only half-listened. She was watching the little

procession of guests strolling from their hotel towards the sea, and to her dismay she saw that the Clares and Mr Feather were also planning to take the excursion. Her mother, Eliza, had chatted to Mrs Clare on the hotel terrace, and on one or two evenings Mrs Clare had invited Eliza to sit with her after dinner in the drawing room. Once the two men had enjoyed their cigars they had joined them too. Devil had not been present to keep Eliza company, of course. He was almost always in London, because of the theatre. He was only here with his family now because it was a Sunday afternoon and there would be no stage show until tomorrow evening.

Nancy and Cornelius and Arthur had been introduced to Mrs Clare and to her husband and brother, and they had endured the usual polite conversations. Arthur and Mr Clare talked about cricket while Mrs Clare's pale blue eyes assessed Nancy's clothes. Nancy knew she was dressed too brightly. Her cerise coat marked her out, instead of concealing her in mouse-grey or mole-brown folds like the daughter of a conventional family. She tried not to mind about this, noticing on her own part that Mrs Clare looked quite prim and colourless next to Eliza's abundant glamour.

Mr Feather was Mrs Clare's brother, and it was his presence more than the others' that made Nancy feel uncomfortable. Mrs Clare was always anxiously glancing at him, almost as if she suspected he might be angry and she was obliged to soothe him, but whenever Nancy looked in his direction he was staring at *her*. She couldn't help returning his look even though she tried very hard not to. His dark eyes seemed to drill into her temple or the back of her head. Whenever he spoke to her it was always in a low voice and with a sympathetic half-smile, as though she had already confided something incriminating to him. His

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manner seemed to suggest they held an experience in common, and Nancy particularly hated this because she did have a secret. But she held it so deep within herself that she had never told a soul, and certainly not Mr Feather. How could the man know about her Uncanny? And if he didn't know, why did he watch her with such close interest?

His presence was like one of her father's hidden stage magnets, dragging her closer and weighing her down, and now he was coming on the steamer trip with them. Was she never to take a step in any direction without the man's unwelcome concern reaching out for her, like the tentacles of an octopus? She could feel the tickle of one on the back of her neck right at this moment. She wanted to slap it away.

'Come along, dear,' Phyllis said.

The companion was clutching the frame of her bag in two hands and looking as if she was already seasick. Poor thing, Nancy thought. Why must her father always sweep them all along with his enthusiasms? The steamer trip had been his idea and Eliza had taken some persuasion before she agreed to it.

The Wixes joined the short queue to board the steamer. Arthur struck up a talk about the Eton versus Harrow cricket match with two boys of his own age. Devil had promised to take his sons to Lord's for the Schools' Day in a month's time and Arthur was already working himself into a froth of excitement.

'Half a crown's on Eton,' one boy taunted and Arthur feinted a punch at him. The three of them chased up the short gangway and sprang down into the launch.

When it was Nancy's turn a seaman with a full beard took her hand and called her 'miss' as she stepped down

to the rocking deck. She hesitated. Although she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary the smells of engine oil and seawater and boat varnish were overpowering, and that was always a sign. All her instincts were to leap back to safety on dry land.

The man's grasp tightened.

'I won't let you fall, missy. Step this way.'

Salt-caked sisal matting was laid on the deck in case any of the ladies should lose her footing. Nancy felt she had no choice but to take the seat that was offered to her. Hampered by her fashionable skirt Eliza needed a helping hand on either side before she could step down. Devil escorted her to a cushioned bench under the awning and Phyllis nervously sat further along towards the rail.

Nancy watched the boatmen making their preparations for departure. Heavy ropes dragging swags of weed were hauled through the water and thick-legged boys in ragged trousers applied their backs to the capstan. The air was thick with more layers of stink, of tar and brass polish and coal smoke. Nancy had to swallow hard.

Devil chose a seat in the open nearer to the bow. He beckoned to some of the younger children and they sidled towards him. He winked at his little audience, making a show of flexing his fingers and pushing back the cuffs of his coat. One of Arthur's new friends was playing with a cricket ball and as soon as he spotted it Devil held out his hand. The boy was reluctant but at a stern nod from his father he passed it over. He watched apprehensively as Devil tossed the ball high in the air. Even though the boat was rocking he caught it without an upward glance, as Nancy knew he would. With a casual flick of the wrist he threw the ball a second time, higher still. A big wave slammed the boat against the jetty, causing a gentleman to stumble as

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he squeezed between the crowded benches, but again the ball was drawn back to Devil's hand as if magnetised. Three more times he threw and caught, defying the boat's pitching. The owner of the ball had relaxed enough to smile as the ball flew upwards one more time.

There was a beat, stretched by the breeze and the shriek of a gull gliding overhead. This time there was no satisfying slap from the leather dropping into Devil's cupped palm.

Devil took off his straw hat and peered inside it, scratching his head in astonishment. Several children looked down to the deck and others peered over the side, but there was no clatter or splash.

'It's gone,' the owner wailed.

Devil replaced his hat.

'Sorry about this, old chap,' he murmured to the boy. 'I'll make it up to you somehow.'

Peering around, he noticed a girl with a posy basket set on her lap.

'May I perhaps have a look in your basket, miss?'

Seated a little to one side Mrs Clare raised her eyebrows at her brother and almost imperceptibly pursed her lips. No one else was meant to see, but Nancy did. She hated it when her father chose to be conspicuous in this way – even though he had always been the same – and she turned her head in anguish. A yard away, on the jetty, the bearded captain and one of the other sailors spoke urgently together. They had been considering the wind and the sky but the bearded man indicated the full boat and the jaunty pennants snapping in the breeze. With his big sea boot he kicked the boat away from the moorings, leaping inboard over the widening gap at the very last moment. There was a roar from the engine and a churn of green water, a sailor snatched up the last end of rope and dropped it into a loop, and the steamer's

bow swung out into the bay. Nancy sneaked a look towards her father and saw that – of course – he had produced the cricket ball from the little girl’s basket. The boy grabbed it back and stowed it inside his coat as Devil bowed over his doffed hat.

Please, no more, Nancy prayed with a twelve-year-old’s disloyal fervour.

It seemed that she was heard because Devil came back to sit beside Eliza under the awning.

Arthur and his companions were gamely ragging each other and Cornelius had never looked up from his book. The steamer ploughed the length of the pier and then drove out into the stiff wind. Spume flew and Phyllis’s hands tightened on the cane handles of her bag. In trying not to look longingly at the pier amusements Nancy made the mistake of meeting Mr Feather’s eye again. Beadily he held her gaze and she thought there was a glimmer of superior amusement, as if the pleasure craft and the crew and the benches lined with ladies and gentlemen in their holiday outfits had all been placed there for just the two of them to observe, and enjoy.

It was intolerable.

The prow reared upwards. The view of the houses clustered at the side of the bay vanished behind a wall of green as a huge wave lifted the steamer. Spray scattered over the laughing gentlemen and bolder boys in the forward seats, sending them scurrying for the shelter of the awning even though a crewman shouted that they were to hold tight and keep their places. A second later the boat pitched down – and down – into the wave trough. Phyllis let out a mouse’s squeak of alarm. Nancy wondered if the budding apprehension she was experiencing inside her ribcage, like a dark flower beginning to unfurl, might be the beginning of

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seasickness. It was *not*, she told herself firmly. At least Mr Feather had transferred his attention to Mrs Clare. He was patting his sister's hand and reassuring her.

Cornelius raised his head. Another huge wave lifted and tossed the boat down again. Eliza was the only one of the ladies who did not show any sign of dismay. She sat upright, seeming quite ready to meet the salt wind and the flung diamonds of spray.

The land dropped further behind them. After a few minutes Nancy grew used to the motion. It was even quite exhilarating to watch the glassy rollers with their curling lips of white foam as they swept towards them, and to feel the sharp upwards swing and then the answering downwards plunge as the boat cleaved through the water. The beat of the engine was steady, and her bearded sailor stood squarely in the wheelhouse with his pipe between his teeth and his eyes on the horizon. He looked just like a hero in a book.

'I say!' Arthur sang out. His childish grin split his face. Arthur loved all kinds of roughhousing.

Phyllis's face had taken on a sweaty glimmer. She left her seat, treading with exaggerated care, and the gentleman next to her supported her arm and handed her closer to the rail. She sank down, her handkerchief to her mouth.

'Oh dear, poor Phyllis,' Eliza murmured.

She stood up too and took short, swaying steps to the companion's side. Phyllis fended her off, clearly indicating that she preferred to be left to suffer alone. Eliza returned to her husband. The steamer turned slightly in its circuit of the bay and immediately pitched even more threateningly as the waves caught it broadside. Mrs Clare got unsteadily to her feet and joined Phyllis. One of the gentlemen had to make the same move and Nancy became aware that the

talk and laughter had faded. Most of the passengers were sitting in silence. The stink of smoke and hot oil was not helping matters. Nancy uneasily scanned the faces, and black petals further unfurled in her chest. Two sailors passed down the twin gangways, moving with easy confidence. One of them ducked into the wheelhouse and conferred with the captain.

‘Pappy?’ Nancy said. His nod reassured her.

Mrs Clare leaned miserably over the rail. As if she set the proper example in this and in all other social matters, some others followed suit.

The bearded captain surrendered the wheel and took a megaphone from its cabinet. Bracing himself at the wheelhouse door he announced, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the sea is not going to be our friend this morning. We’ll make an early turn about. We don’t want any of our passengers to feel uncomfortable aboard *Queen Mab*.’

The engine laboured as they swung round in an arc, the churn of water at the stern swallowed by a wave that broke over the gunwale as it surged past them. The steamer bobbed and rolled, seeming for the first time unequal to the job of keeping afloat.

Devil said merrily, ‘Will we get our shillings back, do you think?’

At least the waves now swept them towards the welcome shore. Phyllis laid her forehead against the rail. Within quite a short time they were nearing the seaward end of the pier, where the strollers and fishermen were clearly visible. Cornelius’s book was closed in his lap but he held his place with his forefinger.

There came a lurch and a shriek of protesting machinery, and then a rending noise like metal plates being crunched up and pitched on a metal floor. When this din stopped the

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engine had stopped too, and in the strange quiet the buffet of wind and the waves churning beneath the pier sounded even louder.

From Cornelius's expression Nancy knew that something must have gone seriously wrong.

The steamer rolled heavily as its prow turned through the water, unable to make headway without engine power. Two sailors dashed to the rail, pushing aside the passengers in their hurry. One of them grabbed a fender and the other took a boathook. Turning to her hero, Nancy saw that the pipe was gone. He fought with the wheel, trying to bring his boat round, but wind and current swept it towards the pier supports.

A woman pressed her hand to her mouth, stifling a scream.

The male passengers began shouting and dashing to the seaward side, propelling their children and womenfolk away from the looming pier. The people on the walkways were now far above them and at the lower level yawned an underworld of heaving water and dripping iron stanchions.

Devil caught Eliza tightly at his side. Arthur was trapped in the press of people who had fled to the far rail.

'For God's sake hold on,' Devil bellowed to his family.

The sailor made a stab with his boathook, but the sturdy pole splintered as the *Queen Mab* smashed into the pier.

The force of the impact threw the steamer sideways. The outer rail dipped and water flowed over it before the vessel sluggishly rolled in the opposite direction, sending bodies tumbling across the decks and falling against the benches. Cornelius lunged towards his sister and caught her by the arm to stop her skidding down the crazily angled gangway. A confusion of shouts and screams tore the air. Water

poured everywhere, covering the decks and the seats and flooding into the wheelhouse.

Devil supported his wife as the water rose past his knees. She was trapped by the weight of her sodden skirt. A barnacled ladder on the nearest pier support rose to an opening that was already jammed with shocked faces. An arm reached down with a dangling lifebelt and Devil somehow hoisted Eliza up the lowest metal rungs. She grasped the lifebelt and men began to haul her up from above. Only when she was safe did Devil turn to look for his children.

Nancy saw all this, as if from the depths of the Uncanny.

Cornelius shouted her name as icy water sucked round her knees. A wave slammed into her chest; she was torn away and thrown against the submerged rail. All around there were people in the water, splashing and flailing as the *Queen Mab* went down.

To her horror she saw Arthur amongst them. His blond head was darkened with the hair plastered against his skull. Nancy let the next wave lift her free of the sinking vessel. Her skirt caught between her legs as she tried to kick out. She was submerged, sinking into bubbling depths with her hair fanning out like seaweed. Somehow she freed her limbs and frantically fought her way upwards. Her face broke the surface and she gulped for air.

There were boats approaching, and at the same time men with ropes came swarming down the pier stanchions. A half-submerged dark shape was bobbing close at hand and she recognised it as one of the boat's wooden benches, the green seat cushion still attached. She launched herself at it and somehow caught hold. She took a sobbing breath, trying to remember where she had seen Arthur in the water. Clawing back the hair that clogged her eyes and mouth she yelled his name.

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The waves were dotted with hats and cushions and a dark floating web that had been a woman's shawl. Rotating as far as she could without losing her hold on the seat she caught sight of him. He had torn off his coat and his shirt billowed in the swell. When she glimpsed his face it was dead white, frighteningly like a corpse.

But Arthur knew how to *swim*.

She screamed again, 'Arthur. Here, Arthur. Swim to me.'

He caught sight of her and tried to reach out, a splashy scramble that brought him no closer. He was already exhausted by his efforts to stay afloat. His head seemed to sink lower in the water.

Powered by desperation Nancy kicked towards him, towing her makeshift raft. Arthur's shirt ballooned as another wave caught and released them. They were only a yard apart now. Filling her lungs with a huge breath Nancy let go of the bench. She splashed frantically to her brother and at last caught hold of him. They clung together and there was a long, suffocating and terrible moment when it seemed certain they were going to drag each other down. But then Arthur seemed to revive a little. He struck out with his free arm and Nancy followed suit and somehow they propelled themselves through the water to reach the floating bench. They grabbed it at the same instant. The seat wallowed and sank deeper but it was just buoyant enough to support them both.

A rowing boat swayed on the crest of the next wave.

'Two children here,' a man at the prow shouted.

Nancy's layers of clothes were dragging her down. It took every ounce of her strength to keep her head above the waves, but somehow she managed also to watch Arthur and make sure his grip was secure. He shuddered and coughed as the waves tipped their raft up and down.