

# *Deception's Daughter*

a Martha Beale novel

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*In the Wind, Ghosts*

THE GUSTS GROW IN STRENGTH AND PURPOSE, swirling over the ground in rust-colored eddies that pluck up and then discharge particles of desiccated leaves, ochre-brown twigs, gritty pebbles and the sere, yellowish grasses that were once the verdant summer-scented lawns and meadows of Beale House. When the breeze spins away in order to buffet another area of the property, the wake smells acrid, brittle and dead as if no flowery plants had ever graced its path, no fresh green shoot had ever ripened, no inch of soil had ever yielded up a nurturing loam and the dense aroma of burgeoning life.

Standing on the veranda of her father's country estate - her house and property now - Martha raises a hand to her bonnet as she gazes past the gardens with their artfully-arrayed statuary, past the *jardinières* imported from Europe, past the formal promenades and rose walks until her view takes in the fields and woods that stretch down to the Schuylkill River's distant banks. *And yet the heavens are blue*, she thinks, *and the river, half-full and sluggish though it may be, is as azurine as hope*. Despite the scorching September afternoon, despite the sun and cloudless sky, she shivers.

Then a voice calling her from within disturbs her reverie; and she turns, as she always does, in habitual and brisk compliance. It will take her many months or many years to unlearn the patterns of her youth.

"Mother," she hears again, and Ella flies outside, her high-buttoned boots tapping across the stone flags, the skirts of her traveling costume creating miniature storms from the powdery soil that has blown up against the house. "Must we leave? Must we? And why today? Why?"

Martha's green-gray eyes don't lose their clouded apprehension and her long, aristocratic face retains its pensive stamp, but she smiles for the child's sake. "We must

return to town for your schooling, dearheart. As you well know. For your schooling and for Cai's."

Ella's expression remains defiant. Since becoming Martha Beale's ward seven months before, the eleven-year old's sallow complexion has grown pink with health; her thin shoulders have rounded; and her fair hair has taken on a lustrous flaxen-hue, but her eyes can still spark with mistrust as though she cannot help but anticipate the loss of everything she has come to know and love.

"All pleasant occasions must come to an end eventually," Martha continues, although her words are accompanied by a frown that for a moment replicates Ella's.

"But why? We're happy here. You and I and Cai."

"Mistress Why and Wherefore." Martha tilts her head and smiles in earnest. "Because the summer has reached its conclusion as it does every year, and always will. And we three must leave the countryside and journey to our home the city. But we'll return here. This house and these barns and fields won't vanish. They'll patiently await our coming again, just as they awaited me during the times I traveled back and forth to Philadelphia with my father. There will be many more holidays, and many more hours of idle pleasure. Now, you go and find Cai, and then we can have a final tramp in the gardens while the footmen load the trunks into the carriages in preparation for our departure."

"He's with Jacob and the dogs," is the short reply. "Cai was crying. Jacob took him to see the hens in order to cheer him."

"Just so." Martha nods in agreement with this decision. Jacob Oberholtzer is the estate's head gardener, and was one of her father's most faithful servants. The old man, for he surely is that by now, will know precisely what to do with an unhappy five-and-a-half-year-old boy. "Well, you go and ask Jacob if he can spare our Caspar for a few moments."

But before Ella can do as she's bidden, the wind kicks up again, racing across the veranda where the two stand and beating hard against Martha's dark purple peau de soie skirts. They fly out stiff and loud while her bonnet, too loosely tied, flies upward before crashing earthward and rolling end over end across the bristled lawn.

“Oh, this wretched wind,” she mutters through clenched teeth as she smooths and rewraps her tangled mantilla. Her hands, unfashionably bronzed by a season spent out of doors, are tense. “And no rain in sight. What will become of the crops? What will become of the wild creatures who dwell in the woods?”

“But the wind cannot be wretched, Mother” is Ella’s staunch reply. “It bears the ghosts of all the souls who have gone before us.”

“Who says such things?” Martha’s voice is unexpectedly sharp.

“Miss Pettiman. She told me that is why I hear howling in the chimney flue in my bedroom or in the day nursery. She says it’s a soul crying out, but it cannot make human noise until it enters a human dwelling.”

“That’s nonsense, Ella. When people die, their souls escape to either Heaven or to Hell -”

“Not all of them, Mother,” her adopted child argues in return. “Miss Pettiman said there are folk who cannot quit the earth, that either anger over some outrage accomplished during their lifetime, or grief at forever forsaking loved ones holds them here. Miss also said that’s why Cai is so often quiet and why he sometimes falls into that awful trembling state, because he’s listening to the murmurs of the parents he cannot recall. It’s doubly hard for him, she told me, being a mulatto child and being born so frail and sickly and everyone believing he was no better than a deaf mute.”

“Oh, goodness me! What foolishness is that nursery maid teaching you?” Martha’s cheeks are flushed with irritation. She relinquishes her place on the stone veranda floor and marches away to retrieve her wandering bonnet while Ella, now chagrined and a little frightened by her adoptive parent’s quick wrath, trudges warily behind.

“And are Miss Pettiman’s heedless words the reason Cai is weeping with Jacob?” Martha demands as she swoops up the dark headdress and thrusts it haphazardly onto her ringlets, retying the long mulberry-colored ribbons in a tight and clumsy knot.

“No. He doesn’t want to leave the countryside. And neither do I.” The tone, however, has lost its boldness. Ella has reverted to the supplication and hesitation that

were the mark of her younger days. Then she regains a little of her bravado. "Is it because of Mr. Kelman that we're returning to the city?"

"Is that Miss Pettiman's opinion you're quoting?" Martha demands with more warmth than she intends, and Ella's reaction is swift contrition.

"No. It's mine... because he was a guest here on occasion. And he hasn't visited us in a long while."

"Mr. Kelman was helpful to me during a difficult period in my life. Of course, I would be grateful for his friendship - and happy to see him, as well," Martha states, although by now her cheeks are very red, and she realizes she's doing precisely what she's warned the children against: She's lying. The problem of her relationship with Thomas Kelman is very much on her mind.

"Cai likes Mr. Kelman," Ella continues.

"I hope Cai will like many people. And that you will, too" is the ambiguous answer, then Martha adds a more forthright. "Now please fetch Caspar, or we will be late for our departure."

BUT LEAVE AT THE HOUR ALLOTTED THEY DO. The servants, both the house and grounds servants, line up in front of the entry portico to bid farewell to their young mistress, her two wards and their nursery maid who, in a breach of custom, has been consigned to the second carriage with Martha's lady's maid and the various trunks and valises that have accompanied the group for their summer sojourn. Miss Pettiman has already taken her place among the piled boxes, staring straight ahead as if she were studying a distant mountain, although no such heights can be found on the banks of the Schuylkill River.

The housemaids and the cook drop curtsies as Martha passes; the stablemen and farmers bow bared heads, their caps twiddling in their calloused fingers, their eyes fixed to the dirt of the drive. Every face evinces sadness at Martha's leave-taking. Her father garnered respect but a dearth of kindly thoughts from those who served him; the daughter has gained loyalty because all employed at Beale House, from the youngest scullery maid of thirteen to the senior laundress or the most laconic groom, carry in

their hearts a desire to please her. She shakes each hand: wide, narrow, rough-skinned and red, or hard and smooth as stone; and extends her thanks on behalf of herself and the children.

Then a footman helps her into the coach, decorously offering her long, wide skirts into her lace-gloved hands before he closes the glossy door; Ella clammers in at the carriage's other side, followed by a silent, stricken Cai. The coachman cracks his whip; the four black geldings strain forward in their traces; the wheels crafted of wych elm, heart of oak and ash begin to turn; and the procession commences.

Martha looks backward as Beale House dodges out of sight: its Gothic-revival turrets and stone tracery, its slate roof and clipped boxwood hedges, its kitchen garden and outlying buildings hidden for a moment and then springing back into view as the carriages proceed along the dappled and winding trail. The unexpected angles are disconcertingly unfamiliar as if the house were in the midst of being reformed and refashioned.

She turns her head this way and that, pondering the strange mutations to a place she knows so well. Then a gust catches a tree bough, tossing it downward with a sighing snap. The horses start in fear at the creaking wood and the sudden roar of wind rioting in the neighboring branches. The coach buckets from side to side; and Cai, now Caspar Beale, begins to whimper about invisible demons winging through the air. For an anxious moment, his hands quiver spasmodically as though one of his epileptic fits were imminent. Martha coos to him, stroking his fingers, repeating his name and gazing into his eyes until the threat passes. Then she tries to convince him that the unseen spirits are not ghouls or wraiths come to haunt and harm him, but angels with enormous and shining wings flying close to earth in order to protect him. Cai, however, remains steadfast in his belief that ghosts are riding in the wind.

THE JOURNEY BACK INTO PHILADELPHIA consumes over two hours; a man on horseback would require an hour or a little more, but the roads in the area known as Falls of Schuylkill are often no better than cart tracks, and the large, laden carriages must go slow. Inaccessibility is precisely what drew Martha's father to the spot when he

built his grand and aloof mansion; in the Philadelphia in which he rose to fortune and fame - as in the current city of 1842 - the country estates of the prominent are customarily chosen for their convenience to visiting friends and acquaintances; such was not the desire of Lemuel Beale. When he removed himself and his only child from their house in town, he expected no one to follow.

Within the drowsy heat of the carriage, Martha alternatively watches the passing scenery and the children who are now asleep. Slumped in a doze, Cai's expression remains fearful, his brown face wizened and preternaturally aged as if no amount of healthy sustenance and kindly encouragement will ever be enough to satisfy or fully cure him of his brain disease. Ella looks merely vexed; her legs kick in time to the coach's jouncing motion.

Martha sighs and shakes her head, wondering again - as she does at least once every day - how she can gain the necessary wisdom to raise these two needy children. For a moment, she considers whether her decision to bring them into her home was a wise one. But then immediately counters the question with a brisk: *But what could I do? Leave them on the streets? Let them starve? Kittens and horses are rescued; shouldn't children be, too?*

So debating with herself, she removes her bonnet, gloves and mantilla, tosses them aside, then briefly touches the elaborately curled braid that lies at the base of her neck. Finding the plait has come unpinned and the chestnut-colored locks in which she takes secret pride are tumbling down her back, she mutters in frustration as she stabs the long hairpins back in place. *Ringlets, braided bands, hats, capottes, petticoats and stays despite this grueling heat... an underskirt and overskirt, and a flannelette chemise. It's a wonder ladies do not expire in such voluminous and ill-considered costumes!* She fans herself energetically, switching her skirts from side to side but instead of cooling the coach's cabin, the cloth turns as dusty as the air which increases her irritation. At the august age of twenty-six, she knows she should behave with greater decorum. No man wishes a wife who's as careless and precipitous as a child. Not even the daughter of the illustrious Lemuel Beale.

But that reminder leads directly to her quandary over Thomas Kelman. For Ella is correct in guessing that her adoptive mother is far happier in his company than without it. *Oh, Thomas!* Martha's brain demands. *Where do we stand, you and I? I believed we'd reached an understanding, but was I wrong? Has your time in my company been no more than empathy for my father's death? Or a noble sense of duty? Or can it be that the great Beale wealth prevents you from seeking my hand? Or... or perhaps, the opposite is true, and my sole attraction is -?* Here her thoughts crash to a halt, leaving her to stare disconsolately at the passing scenery until she becomes aware that the carriage has reached the northwestern outskirts of the city.

Where the road winds close to the river's tree-dotted banks, the Schuylkill is clearly visible. In the small, rock-strewn pools that lap the stream's earthen borders lie puddles of yellow sycamore leaves. Against the slowly swirling water and the dense green of the reeds and riverine grasses, the leaves gleam like purest gold, and Martha cannot help but feel her spirits start to revive. She's ordered the coachman to follow the river rather than turn eastward into the heart of the town, reasoning that Ella and Cai would enjoy the longer journey, but it's Martha who takes pleasure in the sight.

As she watches, a figure catches her notice, a woman on the opposite shore, standing upstream from where the ferry crosses from Philadelphia's prosperous environs toward the almshouse built in the pastureland along the Darby Road. She's fair-haired and hatless in the sun, and although her clothes are drab she carries herself with purposefulness and pride. In her hands is a new wicker-ware basket which she lowers to the water's edge, then bends to reach inside. As she does, the light from the liquid at her feet spills upward into her face, turning it an incandescent white. Her hair also blows out as pale-yellow as thistledown, although Martha intuits she's only in her twenties. Younger than she is, she suspects.

Wading ankle-deep in the water, the young woman propels the basket along, then spins backward, startled; and Martha follows the unknown female's gaze. On the promontory above her range a group of boys. All are raggedy; all are barefooted; all are thin. They call down to the rocky strand, and the object of their attention appears to respond before turning away and continuing her progress through the shallows.

Then the sight is lost as the carriage and river road part company, and the city's streets begin in earnest. Martha straightens her spine against the horsehair cushion, then reaches for her cast-aside bonnet and mantilla, pulls on her gloves and begins to awaken the sleeping children.

WHEN THE PAIR OF RESPLENDENT COACHES with their equally grand steeds and obviously wealthy passengers vanish among the trees, the boys' shouts intensify. In frustration, they throw clods of earth, stones, sticks, and handfuls of brittle grass down upon the wading figure, howling for her return.

Her response to their shrieks is to sing in a soft, unfocused lilt.

*"Hush! my dear, lie still and slumber;*

*"Holy angels guard thy bed...*

*"Soft and easy is thy cradle;*

*"Coarse and hard thy Savior lay..."*

The boys know the hymn well. They're forced to sing it every night by the warders in the children's asylum of the almshouse as they pace among the rows of beds, exhorting their charges to greater heights of ardor with a rod each man carries in his right hand. The fact that their quarry can so heedlessly warble the detested words makes the boys all the more fierce in their determination to call her back. None can venture down to the river, however, because none can swim, and they've learned by heart the tales they've been taught: How devils lurk in the Schuylkill's depths waiting to snag a foot from a slippery rock, or suck the mud beneath your legs; and how once you are pulled into the waves, the devils work in consort to drag you down to their black and lethal lairs.

The boys wail out their distress, their bodies crouching forward while their prey's indifferent voice continues to assail their ears.

*"May'st thou live to know and fear Him,*

*"Trust and love Him all thy days;*

*"Then go dwell for ever near Him,*

*"See His face and sing His praise."*

With that, she sets the basket adrift, pushing it well beyond her reach with a mighty shove that seems to take all her diminishing strength. The basket bobs and spins, dips to one side as the burden within rolls in response to the sudden motion. The high-pitched mewl of a new-born infant rends the air; and the children on the embankment scream at the cry, raining down a fresh avalanche of missiles. "You will burn in Hell forever for what you've done!" the eldest of the pack bellows.

The threat goes unnoticed. Her tormentors cannot know that her mind is envisioning not a river in Philadelphia on a hot September day, but the far-off land of Egypt and the baby Moses set adrift on the stream. Set adrift to be discovered by the daughter of a mighty king.

"See His face and sing His praise," she repeats in a singsong fashion that has now become tuneless and weary. Then she adds a whispered "*A morte perpetua... ab omni peccato... That thou would'st spare us...*"

She watches the basket take to the currents; she hears another milky cry, imagines the red and wrinkled face, the miniature hands, legs still sticky with blood. Then she walks deeper into the water, slipping on the slimy stones, falling and righting herself until she sets herself adrift.

AS ONE BODY, THE BOYS RUN, then stop as one body. What can they do? They, who have defied all rules to follow the young woman and her baby. Surely the punishment meted out for such an infraction will be terrible. Fear of those who rule the almshouse paralyzes them. Then the threat of eternal damnation sends them on their way again. If they say nothing, the infant and its mother will surely drown. Why, the two may be dying already! The devils might already have lured them to their nasty graves!

By now the bare and filthy feet are flying along. In panted breaths, it's agreed that the eldest among them, a runty and cunning boy who goes by the name of Findal Stokes will sound the alarm alone - while the others creep away and return to such pastimes as they've stealthily forsaken.

And as Martha's twin carriages arrive in noisy splendor at the equally grand house on Chestnut Street, young Findal reaches the less consoling destination known as Blockley House.