



# *The* Deceptions

A compelling story of war, betrayal and  
family secrets better left buried

**SUZANNE LEAL**  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE TEACHER'S SECRET*

## Praise for *The Deceptions*

'*The Deceptions* is a stunning example of the way fiction tells war better than any other form—I could taste its madness, its horror. Saw from the outside, its utter absurdity. For days after reading the novel I found myself wrestling with the price of betrayal, and the value of truth.' —Sofie Laguna, winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award

'Those who grew up in the shadow of the Second World War had Elie Wiesel's *Night* to define for them the enormity for the Holocaust. Those who were born later can now rely upon Suzanne Leal's brilliant and confronting novel *The Deceptions* to open their eyes to the true horrors of Nazism.' —Alan Gold, author of *Bloodline*

'At what cost can a survivor of hell rebuild a seemingly normal life? *The Deceptions* is a gripping and tragic story for our times.' —Leah Kaminsky, author of *The Hollow Bones*

'Impossible to put down. Leal is a master storyteller. Mesmerising, heartbreaking, honest—*The Deceptions* is ferociously good.' —Nikki Gemmell, author of *After*

Praise for *The Teacher's Secret*

‘Elegantly structured, unsettling, yet with moments of surprising wit—in this novel Suzanne Leal captures the life of a small community with real tenderness.’

—Kathryn Heyman, author of *Floodline*

‘An eloquent story of a life thrown into disarray; it drew me in and held me, page after page.’ —Rachel Seiffert,  
author of *The Dark Room*

‘In *The Teacher's Secret*, Leal intelligently sifts a great many personal and professional observations and political reflection.’

—*The Weekend Australian*

‘Given its multiple perspectives, *The Teacher's Secret* is a fast-paced novel. This is a product of suspense, and Leal's ability to take readers straight to the heart of each character's dilemma.’

—*The Sydney Morning Herald*

‘Suspenseful, moving and full of heart. I couldn't put it down.’

—Richard Glover, author of *Flesh Wounds*

‘Leal's novel shows us, achingly and beautifully, the slippery nature of truth and the destruction that is occasionally wrought from good intentions.’ —Maggie Joel,

author of *The Safest Place in London*

‘Beautifully written, entirely absorbing, and full of characters that live with you long after you finish reading, *The Teacher's Secret* is packed with heart and suspense . . . This brilliant book is a true page-turner, and I absolutely loved it.’

—Jenny Ashcroft, author of *Beneath a Burning Sky*

‘A delicately woven tapestry of interlinking stories . . . This is a big-hearted book about a small community and how small acts of kindness and courage, and the willingness to face the truth, restore the human spirit to a sense of new belonging.’

—Joanne Fedler, author of *Secret Mothers’ Business*

‘Masterfully constructed, this moving novel warns us of our capacity to make or break the lives of those around us . . . Drawn with wit and clear-eyed affection, the inhabitants of this wonderful novel will remain with you long after you have put it down.’ —Mark Lamprell,

author of *The Full Ridiculous*

‘A rich interweaving of beautifully drawn characters told so gently and in such exquisite detail that they grew on me until I was lost in their world.’ —Robin de Crespigny,

filmmaker and author of *The People Smuggler*

‘*The Teacher’s Secret* is a gutsy yet intricate examination of one of society’s nightmares, filled with strong characters and relationships interwoven in a storyline that has the reader engrossed to the last page.’

—Robert Wainwright, author of *Sheila*

*The*  
Deceptions

SUZANNE LEAL

  
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are sometimes based on historical events, but are used fictitiously.

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# PART I

## HANA

My husband is dead, dead a year now—dead since the fourteenth of March 2009—so I lit him a candle. Then I let it burn. Because that's what you do with a Yahrzeit candle: you let it burn and burn until finally it burns itself out.

Not that mine was a real Yahrzeit candle. Mine was simply a long-burning candle from the new gift store in Dorchester. It won't last. The gift store, I mean, filled as it is with overpriced knick-knacks, my faux-Yahrzeit candle included.

It was the first time I had left a candle to burn all night. As a child I had witnessed my mother do it. Every year she would light a candle on the anniversary of my grandmother's death. She would light it in the evening and she would leave it while we slept. And never once did the house burn down. It never even crossed



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my mind that it might. Then I had absolute confidence in the way of the world. Then I knew for certain that, each year, our Yahrzeit candle would simply burn all night and all day and then it would stop.

Afterwards, when everything around me had burnt away and everyone I had known was gone, I did not light a candle. Not for any of them. I had people to mourn, that was true enough, but I didn't know when, exactly, they had died. And if I did not know that, how could I light a Yahrzeit candle on the anniversary of their passing?

Instead I determined to leave it all behind me. All the dead, all the misery, all the loss. I would make of myself something new, someone new.

As luck would have it, my husband came at exactly the time I needed him, bringing with him the disguise I required to become the woman I was not.

But now he is gone. One year gone and still the sadness lingers. That has surprised me. In this long life of mine, there has been sadness such that it might have engulfed me had I let it. But I never did. I never let the sadness smother me. So, why can I not shake it now? Why will it not leave me now?

The answer comes in the small hours of the night, the candle burning beside me. With my husband gone, I no longer have the strength to resist that push inside me, that urgent press from the girl who had once been me, and who was calling once again to be seen.



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Hana is the name my parents gave me. The Germans added Sara. Lederová was mine by birth.

Afterwards, I got rid of them. The whole lot. I discarded all those names and I started again.

My husband handed me a new surname. The given name I came to myself. And in this way, I disappeared. In this way, Hana Lederová—Hana Sara Lederová—was no more. And I was happy about that.

When I was still Hana, I lived most of my life in Prague. It was a life of good fortune and I was a fortunate girl, even if I didn't know it at the time.

Let me tell you a little of this fortunate girl, this girl who was once Hana Lederová. She was attractive, appealing. Some might even have called her compelling. But few would have described her as a great beauty: her eyes, noteworthy for their colour—honey brown with flecks of green—were too deeply set, and on the right cheek, her skin was marred by a distinctive mole. Her hair, dark with glints of auburn, was worn long, in defiance of the fashion, and those who hankered for sleek, glossy hair would have been disappointed by the unruliness of the abundant curls.

Now, as I run my comb through hair that is no longer dark, that is no longer thick, I envy this girl with everything except conventional beauty.

I was the only child of parents who doted on me. By the time I announced my appearance, my mother was almost forty and had despaired of ever having a child. And her delight when finally I arrived was, I am told, beyond measure.

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My father was a dentist. Dentists are never loved the way doctors are loved but perhaps they should be: many were the patients who presented to my father in agony, only to leave the surgery if not with a smile on their face, then at least with relief in their eyes. For his patients, my father would always make himself available. For my mother and me, he was everything.

Without descending to sycophancy—I have never been a fan of this—my father was an exceptional man, an exceptional person. Dentistry was his vocation but music was his great love. And so I was raised to be musical. And musical I was.

My mother appreciated my playing and also my singing: it was a gift, she told me. Sometimes she told this to other people, too. She herself did not play the piano, did not sing. Her parents were serious and business minded, with no interest in music. They were solid, wealthy, unremarkable people who had somehow produced my mother, who was so beautiful she astonished people. For a woman she was tall. She was also slender. Not boyish but almost. In this regard, I did not take after her. I was lean, yes, but buxom where she was small, my waist pronounced where hers was not. My mother's beauty was an exotic combination that puzzled her family: her eyes were dark and the shape of almonds, her skin very pale and her hair, which she kept closely cropped, was dark and shiny. She had that particular confidence some call arrogance. It was from my mother I learned how to hold myself. 'If you stand tall,' she would tell me, 'people will think you confident. And if people think you confident, they will believe that there is a reason for it. And whatever they believe that reason to be—intelligence, wit, beauty—they will think you have it. Simply by the way you stand.'

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Throughout my life, this is exactly how it has been. I have stood tall, even when I felt small and frightened. Even when all of my confidence was gone, still I stood tall. And now, when my contemporaries hunch over in a stereotype of the ageing process, still I stand tall. I am proud of this. And why not? I have reached an age where there is less to look forward to, fewer markers of success. So, why not be proud of standing straight? Surely I shouldn't be denied this opportunity.

Ha! Listen to me, with my whining, my declaration of the right to stand tall. Then again, why not, in a world obsessed by a right for this and a right for that?

Such a nonsense, but so you have it.

Physically, my parents were an odd match: my mother so tall and dark and willowy, my father—well, let's not search for better words—squat and thickset and plain. But clever and loving and doting.

My father's dental surgery was attached to the front of our white, thick-walled house but not accessible to it. Instead, there was one entrance to the surgery and a separate entrance to our house. While my father administered to his patients—at all hours of the day—my mother managed the surgery: she was receptionist, office manager and, when required, dental assistant, too. Meanwhile, I was raised by my nanny, Ada. Ada was cheery and energetic and kind and she ran our household—first as nanny, and then when I was too old for that, as housekeeper—until we were ejected from the house. And the surgery. Until we were forced to leave everything. Even Ada.

What happened to her? I don't know. I never found out. Nothing much, in all probability. For she was not Jewish. She was not like us.

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Jewish? Yes. Jewish. Well, yes and no. For Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur you might find our family in the synagogue. Never more regularly than that. And we ate whatever we liked. On New Year's Eve we had pork and lentils for good luck. My father was partial to shellfish. It would be a mistake to say we kept kosher.

All of this to say one thing: Yes, we were Jewish, and no, we were not Jewish. We were Czech, simply Czech.

But only until 1939. Yes, yes, yes. Everyone knows the significance of the year. Or perhaps not everyone. Perhaps not the young ones for whom this is now too far away to contemplate. 1939. The year after we were thrown to the wolves, the year after that apologist Chamberlain decided the Czechs were expendable and that Hitler was welcome to our land, our Sudetenland.

So, yes, first the Sudetenland was gone: off to Germany, off to the Third Reich. A bone to throw to that madman. But madmen are so hard to satisfy, aren't they? And Herr Hitler was not only a madman, he was also clever. So much better to have a madman who is stupid. Not Hitler. Not him. So, thank you, Mr Chamberlain, for your appeasement of the madman, which was no appeasement at all. Which simply opened the door to the remainder of our small country. And when, sure enough, Hitler and his men took over all of it, what did we do? With the rest of the world, we looked on. I did, too, I admit it. I didn't scream and yell and throw myself under the tanks that rolled into Prague. Rolled in on the wrong side of the road, I might add. German skill at its best: invade the country and change the direction of its traffic, all in one move. In a bloated Third Reich, there was no

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place for left-hand traffic. Conformity is the enemy of dissidence, and the friend of efficiency. And the Germans have always been an efficient bunch, haven't they?

But hush with this. Hush. For though the Nazis were German, the Germans were not necessarily Nazis. So, they should not be lumped together. Although I confess that sometimes I still do, even now. When, for example, I see a German car, still I have to fight the urge to grab something sharp, a knife or a screwdriver, so I can scratch down the side, the front, the back of it: no matter the brand, no matter whether it is a Mercedes-Benz, an Audi, a BMW or that ludicrously named people's car, the Volkswagen.

Enough.

Enough.

Thoughts like these still trouble me, leave me disturbed. Breathe, breathe—for where does the anger get me? Nowhere. That is my mantra to myself: *Anger gets me nowhere*. Although if I am honest—and I am mostly honest—sometimes I still have a need to feel the fire of it.

With the arrival of the Germans, I became a Jewish girl who happened to live in Czechoslovakia rather than a Czech girl who happened to be Jewish. Every day, it seemed, there were more rules for a Jew like me. First came the curfew, then the headcount, then the confiscation of our radios, then we were banned from leaving the country.

Earlier, much earlier, my mother had agitated to get us out, to flee to Britain. My father had some English—even if she did not—and his skills as a dentist would surely have been valued. But my father wouldn't countenance it.

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*The madness will not last.* This was my father's catchcry. For years he had been saying it, would continue to say it: *The madness cannot last.*

In the end, he was right, wasn't he? The madness did not last and the madman did not last. He saw to that himself. A gun in his mouth, or was it to his head? And that was that. Only a decade too late.

Yes, I sound matter of fact. Yes, I sound callous. I know that. But even now this is how I must behave. For were I to unleash myself, were I to give voice to the horror, the anger, the fury still inside me, I would completely lose control.

Instead I try to breathe. I breathe in, I breathe out. This is the way I calm myself. When I think about my father—who could have listened, who should have listened—I breathe in and I breathe out. And I try to accept what is done, that nothing can be changed and no one can be brought back. Yes, I try to accept this, for as everyone tells me, if there is a peace to be found, this is how I shall find it.

But that is a noble endeavour and I cannot always manage it. For sometimes a flicker of rage will rise in me. Not untethered rage, not rage that flails and thrashes. Not that. Just a flicker. A flicker I try to manage so it will not ignite me, will not consume me. But that is not always so easy.

# KAREL

Alarm or no alarm, winter or summer, it didn't matter. Every day, Karel Kruta woke at 6.30am. And the moment he stirred, Irena would stir, too. And when he got up, she would get up, too.

Mostly he wished she wouldn't. Mostly he wished she would stay sleeping. He liked those early hours, and he liked to spend them alone. He had always been an early riser. As the son—and grandson—of farmers, he had needed to be. But the mornings had been brutal in Czechoslovakia. Brutally cold. Here in Sydney they were nothing, here the mornings were a delight even if the getting out of bed itself had become harder. Because he was old now. As Irena was old, too. Already it was 2010 and they were both so very old.

These days, the closest Karel got to a farm was the vegetable



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patch in the backyard. That was where he could be alone and that was where he could smoke. Even though he had been warned of the dangers for years, and for years had been urged to quit. But he had smoked for decades—decades and decades—and it would be a hard habit to break. If he even wanted to. And he wasn't at all sure that he did. For what gendarme did not smoke? What gendarme did not appreciate a cigarette? And even now, with so much time behind him, in his head that was still what he was: a gendarme. A gendarme of the Provincial Detachment of Bohemia. A position to be admired, to be respected—and a coup for this son of a farmer. Not quite military, not quite police, the gendarme was a support to the people: a protector, an adviser, a friend. And how Karel had savoured the role! To be such a man. A man in uniform, a man who, for that reason alone, could turn heads. Including the head of Irena Novotná who had never once turned to him at all.

After Mass one morning she had stopped him. 'I like the uniform,' she said.

They had been to school together but rarely had they spoken. This was not so surprising. Irena Novotná had always been beautiful—blonde-haired and hazel-eyed—while he had never stood out. That alone had kept them apart.

Surprise, and his nature, had seen him fumble his reply. *I like your dress*, was all he could manage.

This had made her smile. 'Thank you, *Pane Gendarme*,' she said, a hand on the waist of her frock.

That day, he had walked her home, out of the village of Chocnějovice and up to the farmlands surrounding it. Her family were farmers too, but not on the scale of his. Irena's family, for

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instance, did not have a separate shed for their animals. Instead the shed adjoined the farmhouse, itself so small compared to his own family's house. Not that he gave this more than a passing thought when later he was asked in for coffee.

It was 1940, the country was crawling with Germans, and Karel was stationed in Mladá Boleslav, just south of Chocnějovice. During the week, he would stay in the town and when off duty would return home, mostly with Miloš Novák, school friend and gendarme now, too. Tall, lean, green-eyed Miloš, who had been courting Irena's good friend Adina.

And when, on weekends, the men came home, Karel would always arrive in uniform—knee-high black boots, bottle-green trousers and matching jacket. Given a choice, he would have gone in uniform to his own wedding; his wedding to Irena, the following year. Only after months of his mother's entreaties had he finally agreed to wear what all the local grooms wore: the buttoned waistcoat, the long jacket, the breeches, the buckled shoes and the felt hat.

Irena had made the most beautiful bride, a truly Bohemian bride, her wedding dress—folkloric and hand-stitched—passed down from mother to daughter.

It was a happy day. He couldn't pretend otherwise, couldn't pretend he hadn't been bursting with pride to have scored such a prize. A prize he promptly installed in the farmhouse he shared with his parents and brother, before he resumed his post at Mladá Boleslav.

Within months of the marriage, Irena was pregnant, and within a year of their daughter's birth, Karel—and Miloš—had received

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a new posting. To Terezin: a fortress town outside Prague; a town the Germans were now calling Theresienstadt and were steadily filling with Jews. Jews from Czechoslovakia, from Germany, from Austria, from Poland. Jews from everywhere, it seemed.

As a child, Karel had not known any Jews. There were no Jews in the village and none on the farms around them. Before his posting to Mladá Boleslav, he hadn't set eyes on even one of them. Only in Mladá Boleslav had he come to know Kurt Adelstein and Gideon Gold, among others. Not that any had stayed very long. Soon, they had all disappeared.

It wouldn't be fair to say that Karel had helped them along. He and Miloš had simply been doing their job. The Jews had been ordered to gather together, and there in the Scout Hall, Karel and Miloš had ensured the process was orderly. That was all. And, really, it hadn't been hard. For no one had made a fuss; everyone had followed the rules. And Karel and Miloš hadn't needed to raise their voices at all. Not once.



When the doorbell rang, Karel was in the kitchen. Irena was, too. The bell rang once, then twice, then once again.

Petra. Her own distinctive ring. She had a key, of course, but still she would ring first. At the sound, they both straightened: Karel, his hands holding the dinner plates, and Irena, having just checked on the roast. They stopped and surveyed one another, each keen to be the one to answer the door to their daughter.

Irena gave in, as usual. And, as usual, he let her.

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‘You go,’ she said, but in Czech, which always annoyed him. Especially in public. ‘English,’ he would hiss at her. ‘English.’ Sometimes in private, as well. But today, he let the words go and hurried instead to the door. Despite his age, his legs were good, his movements quick, his back straight. For the strength of his back, he had the gendarmerie to thank. Everything else was pure luck.

When he opened the door, there she was. His daughter. His Petra. His delight. She had been a beautiful child and now was a beautiful woman. And yet, as always, his reaction was one of surprise. Surprise that, by some mistake, the child he still expected to see had been replaced by a woman others might call old.

How had that happened? How had life pulled such a prank on him? Surely Petra should still be a teenager, and he no more than forty. Instead, at eighty-nine he had become so old he astounded people simply by being alive. And there was his daughter, her radiance belying the unbelievable truth of it, that this year she would turn sixty-eight. *No, no, no*, he wanted to shout. *It is a trick. Time is passing so fast it is tricking us all.*

Petra leaned in to kiss him. ‘Hello, Tati,’ she said. Biting his tongue, he stifled the urge to correct her, to demand that she call him Dad, not Tati.

Instead, he kissed her in return. ‘Petra,’ he said, ‘you look lovely.’

This was true: with her still-fair hair and her light-blue eyes, Petra Barrett née Kruta did look lovely. There were lines in her face—of course—but less from age than from sadness. For after Thomas Barrett had left her, that beautiful face had crumpled and never quite recovered.

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For this reason, Karel held little affection for his former son-in-law. He was an Aussie, with not an ounce of Czech in his make-up. This had not been a bad thing. Not at all. From the moment the Krutas had arrived here—narrowly beating the Russian tanks rolling into Prague—Karel had embraced Australia and the Aussies who lived here. He had even changed his name for them, a concession to all the locals he had quickly managed to bewilder.

‘Carol?’ They would say, the vowels flat and nasal. ‘You’re a bloke, but your name’s *Carol*?’

And so, he had become Karl.

But Thomas Barrett was not just an Aussie, he was all Aussie. He surfed and he drank and he watched cricket, swallowing his words when he spoke so that Karel often wouldn’t understand what he said. In summer his hair was bleached blond and his skin a broiled red, while in winter his hair was brown and his skin bright white. His eyes—sometimes grey, sometimes green—had a sparkle, and for a time they had sparkled for Petra. Then they had not. And one day, he was gone. Not very far, as it happened, just a suburb away, where his receptionist had a nice home.

And Petra, poor Petra, had known nothing. Not a thing. Even now, Karel’s lip curled to think of it.

‘Is Tessa here yet?’ his daughter was asking.

Blinking himself back, Karel turned up his palms. ‘Not unless she is once again hiding.’

That made her smile. That made her face light right up. ‘Do you remember,’ she said, ‘all the places she hid?’

Karel smiled with her. Of course he remembered. He remembered it all. How his little Tessa would squeeze herself into the

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back of the wardrobe; curl herself under the bed; squash herself into a corner. Yes, he remembered it. She was his only grandchild and he remembered it all.

Especially the joy when they had been given the news: that, finally, there would be a baby. When Petra had told them, she had clasped her mother, eyes glistening, their smiles luminescent. Karel had watched their faces fill with pleasure, and, feeling it travel across, had let himself be completely caught up in it.

When Irena had seen his face, his moist eyes sparkling, she had ventured a smile, one that was just for him. Not like the smiles she kept for her daughter—wide and unchecked—but one that was cautious and timid, one that might easily have turned to a flinch. It had made his heart sink to see it, how nervous she was, how wary. It made him wonder then, and not for the first time, whether, given the chance, he would take it right back again, whether he would unstitch it all, Hana Lederová included.



Petra had turned away from him, her hands on the porch railing, eyes scouring the road below. ‘Here she is,’ she announced. And when Karel followed his daughter’s gaze, he saw she was right: there was Tessa’s white car, turning into the street to stop behind Petra’s Toyota.

Karel smiled as he watched his granddaughter step out of the car. Fair as a baby, her hair was now dark but her eyes had stayed blue. His blue, and Petra’s blue, too: light blue and clear.

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And Karel loved that, loved to be able to trace himself right down their family line.

As usual, Tessa had come alone. There had been boyfriends—a good few of them over the years—but none had stuck. And now, for some considerable time, there had been no one at all. Irena had started to fret about it. Tessa was already thirty-two and time, she would say—but only to him—was starting to slip away.

‘Grandpa,’ Tessa called as she walked up the stairs, arms outstretched. Reaching him, she hugged him hard. Irena was at the door now, too, her smiling face twinkling. ‘My girls,’ she said, first kissing their daughter then sweeping Tessa right up against her.

‘Babička,’ said Tessa, snuggling against her grandmother’s plump body. ‘I’m happy to see you.’

‘Can’t you be Grandma?’ Karel had implored her the moment the baby was born. By then, there had been little his wife would refuse him, little she wouldn’t do to please him. But on this point alone, she had been adamant. She would not be Grandma. She would be Babička.