EVERYBODY HAS...

SOMETHING TO HIDE

DEBORAH MOGGACH

AUTHOR OF THE BEST EXOTIC MARIGOLD HOTEL

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About the Book

“Nobody in the world knows our secret... that I’ve ruined Bev’s life, and she’s ruined mine.”

Petra’s romantic life has always been a car-crash, and even in her sixties she’s still capable of getting it disastrously wrong. But then she falls in love with Jeremy, an old chum, visiting from abroad. The fatal catch? Jeremy is her best friend’s husband.

But just as Petra is beginning to relax into her happy ever after, she finds herself catapulted to West Africa, and to Bev, her best friend who she’s been betraying so spectacularly. Meanwhile, on opposite sides of the world, two other women are also struggling with the weight of betrayal: Texan Lorrie is about embark on the biggest deception of her life, and in China Li-Jing is trying to understand exactly what it is her husband does on his West African business trips…

It turns out that no matter wherever you are in the world, everyone has something to hide. Can Bev – can anyone – be trusted?

About the Author

Deborah Moggach is the author of many successful novels including *Tulip Fever* and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, which was made into a top-grossing film starring Judi Dench, Bill Nighy and Maggie Smith. Her screenplays include the film of *Pride and Prejudice*, which was nominated for a BAFTA. She lives in Wales.

Also by Deborah Moggach

You Must be Sisters
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(first published as *These Foolish Things*)
Heartbreak Hotel

To Lyra, Kit and Merida, with love

Something to Hide

Deborah Moggach

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

Prologue

Oreya, West Africa

ERNESTINE WAS A tall, muscular woman who carried a beauty parlour on her head. This was a heavy wooden box, open at the front, packed with all the products a female might need to make herself desirable – face creams, hair accessories, soap, make-up, skin lighteners, conditioners, razors, hair-removal foam, kirby grips and ornaments, perfumes and body lotions. Ernestine sold these in the local villages, tramping along footpaths in her dusty flip-flops, stopping at the secondary school to catch the girls when they came out, working the crossroads where each Thursday the buses disgorged the women returning from market.

Though dealing in beauty, Ernestine herself was the least vain of women. Back in her house there was a small, cracked mirror propped on a shelf but she seldom had time to look at it. Besides, when night fell it was too dark to see anything because they had no electricity. And besides, her husband seemed happy with her as she was.

Or so she believed.

He was a good man, you see. A devout churchgoer, like herself; a hard-working father to their children. Unlike so many men, oh so many, he had never strayed, or even expressed the smallest interest in another woman. They had been married for seventeen years and never, not once, had she regretted leaving her family home in the north, beside the great lake with its drowned trees. The trees were drowned when they built the dam and her little brothers

used to make money swimming through the underwater forest, unpicking the nets that had tangled in the branches. Ernestine dreamed about the lake, about the sun sinking over the water and beneath it the fish swimming between the tree-trunks but she had no desire to return to her childhood, she had her own children now, she loved them and was loved, the Lord be praised, and Kwomi was a good man. Or so she thought.

The night before it happened, the Wednesday night, Grace came home late. Grace was the eldest of Ernestine's daughters, a studious young woman of sixteen. She was tall and big-boned, like her mother, with a square jaw and an uncompromising stare through her spectacles. She worked hard at school. In the evenings, when the village was plunged into darkness, she toiled at her homework under one of the few glows of illumination – the strip light of the fried-fish stall on the main road. People stopped to gossip with her auntie, who ran it, but Grace kept her head down, she was uninterested in tittle-tattle, she was fierce in her determination to pass her exams and go to college. Not for her the girlish giggles at school, the huddled whisperings about boys and lipstick. Grace was above such things; indeed, she had recently been elected Team Leader of the Abstinence Programme, its slogan Just Say No. She lectured her fellow teenagers on the perils of premarital sex and how early parenthood destroyed all hopes of a future career. She led the singing, 'Boys boys boys take care of girls girls girls', and offered, as an alternative to temptation, the taking up of vigorous sports and the reading of improving texts.

All in all she was an admirable young woman. Ernestine was proud of her – how could she not be? Sometimes, however, she felt awed by her daughter, and feared for the girl whose rigid convictions were so untempered by the harsh complications of life. And Grace was not the easiest person to live with; recently she had grown short-tempered,

as if her own family, even her brothers and sisters, were included in the congregation of sinners.

That evening she was particularly irritable, and snapped at her granny for forgetting to wash her football shirt. There was a match the next day with the team from Oreya High School. She stomped off into the bedroom she shared with her sisters. Ernestine, at the time, presumed she was frustrated by the earlier power cut that had plunged even the fish stall into darkness. She was not an interfering mother and besides, with a family as large as hers there were always plenty of squabbles, particularly amongst the girls. The boys just fought.

For sure it was hard work, surviving day to day with eight mouths to feed, but the Lord had blessed them with good health and despite their worries they had much to be thankful for. Many of Ernestine's customers were women struggling to bring up their families alone, their husbands working a long way from home, or passed away, or gone off gallivanting with another woman. One of them had taken a seventeen-year-old girl as his second wife, would you believe, a man of forty-three, and had moved to Nigeria, leaving his children fatherless.

For sure, Ernestine was blessed to have Kwomi for a husband.

The next day, Thursday, was market-day at Oreya. Kwomi travelled there each week to sell the plantains and pineapples he grew on his land; on that particular day Ernestine accompanied him as she had to buy new stock from the wholesaler.

On market day the town was jammed with traffic – buses, trucks, tro-tros, burdened with sacks of produce. Hawkers crowded around them selling crisps, bananas, bibles, fried snacks, fizzy drinks, Arsenal T-shirts, selling everything under the sun. Ernestine recognized Mustafa, the little son of her neighbour, his head weighed down with a bowl of plastic water-sachets which he passed to the outstretched

hands. He choked in the fumes, he had asthma, but his mother could neither afford medicine nor to send him to school, she was a widow and Ernestine felt sorry for the boy and grateful, yet again, that her children knew their alphabet and had a father who took care of them and sang hymns beside them in church.

Kwomi left his mobile at the phone-charging booth before disappearing into the crowd of the market-place. Every week he left his phone there and picked it up in the afternoon, before going home. The phone-charger, Asaf, sat behind his array of mobiles. Ernestine had never seen him moving from his position; he had sharp eyes that missed nothing, there was something about him that made her uneasy. She could feel him watching her as she negotiated her way through the traffic to God Is Good Beauty Products, on the other side of the road.

Ernestine enjoyed her visits to Lily, who ran the business. They sat in the back room, the ceiling fan whirring, drinking Fanta and gossiping. Lily told her about the latest scandals, whose husband had run away with whose wife, whose daughter had become pregnant. That particular day she told Ernestine a story about two little girls who were tricked into having the Dipo, the initiation rite, but who escaped, jumping onto a tro-tro and hiding amongst the passengers. Ernestine was enthralled; dramas in the town seemed so much larger than those in her own sleepy village. Little did she suspect the drama brewing across the road.

At the end of the day the market packed up. Her husband was still busy so Ernestine went to collect his mobile phone. Asaf paused before giving it back.

'I have something to tell you, madam,' he said, his voice hoarse. She smelt alcohol on his breath. 'It's not pleasant, but I feel it is my duty.' Sorrowfully, he gazed at the mobile in his hand. 'I sit here, you understand. I sit here and watch the world go by. And I know what's going on because I have

this.' *He lifted the mobile and waved it in the air. 'It concerns your husband and a* certain female.'

He looked up at her, waiting for her reaction. She didn't speak.

He passed her the mobile. 'It beeped when it charged. That means it received a message.' Asaf raised his eyebrows. 'It's you I was thinking of, madam.'

'What do you mean?' she whispered.

'What do I mean, dear lady? I mean, I pressed the button and I listened to the message, which was of an intimate nature. Tell me I was wicked. I am *wicked. But it's done, and I believe you ought to know.'*

Ernestine stood jammed against her husband in the bus. She couldn't speak; she felt emptied of breath. Kwomi said nothing either but then he was a man of few words. His silence today, however, seemed pregnant with guilt. His bony hip pressed against her but now it felt like a stranger's body.

Her brain felt sluggish, drugged with shock. The questions turned over and over, laboriously. How could he do such a thing? How long had it been going on? How often had it happened? How could he betray her, and his children? How could *he?*

The woman's name was Adwoa and Ernestine knew her well. In fact Adwoa Shaibu-Ali was one of her best customers. She lived at the far end of the village and was a buxom, handsome, lazy woman with a brood of illiterate children, for Adwoa kept the girls at home to look after the babies that she produced at regular intervals and to do the housework which she was too indolent to do herself. Her thin, elderly husband worked uncomplainingly to keep her in the style to which she was accustomed – new make-up, new clothes, a monthly visit to Oreya to get her hair-weaves put in. Few of the local women could afford the hairdresser and wrapped their heads in cloths but Adwoa's hair was always

glossy, a curvy bob, ornamented with a selection of Ernestine's novelty clips. Most of the day Adwoa sat around nattering to her neighbours, leafing through magazines and pausing only to cuff one of her children. And texting on her mobile. She was always texting.

The sun was setting by the time Ernestine got home. Normally it was her favourite time of day. Up in the trees the bats detached themselves from their clumps that hung down like heavy bundles of fruit; they flew off, one by one, into the suffused sky. Today they looked sinister with their leather wings and sharp little teeth. Everything had turned upside down; it was as if Ernestine had plunged into the lake of her childhood, plunged beneath the placid surface, and found herself in an alien world, a warped reflection of the one that she had so foolishly taken for granted.

It was still stiflingly hot. She watched Kwomi as he washed himself in a bowl of water. His chest was bare, his hair dripping. He wasn't a handsome man, his nose was too big and his ears stuck out, but he was hers, they had been man and wife for half her lifetime. Beside him, the unsuspecting Grace was stirring banku over the fire. She looked so pure, so innocent. Kwomi's mother was chopping onions. Old and frail, she doted on her son. What was going to happen to their family, that a few hours ago had seemed so contented?

Night fell. Nobody noticed Ernestine's silence; she had never been a chatty woman. She moved around in a daze, the voices of her family echoing far away. She was more hurt than angry – hurt, and deeply humiliated, that her husband had revealed himself to be no better than all those fornicators whose wives she used to pity. How blind she had been! In bed she lay rigid beside him, and when he put his hand on her breast she muttered that she was tired and pushed him away.

Soon he fell asleep but for many hours she lay awake, her mind racing. What was she going to do – tell him she knew

about his trysts with Adwoa? Kick him out of their home? The prospect made her heart hammer against her ribs. Beside her slept her youngest boys, the twins. What would they do without a father? And what would Grace do, a budding young woman, filled with such purity and fervour, when she discovered that her father was an adulterer?

The next day Ernestine went to the monthly meeting of the women's savings group. In normal times she looked forward to this. The twelve of them had formed a close bond based on mutual trust and a shared stake in each other's financial matters; besides, it was a chance to catch up on each other's news. Ernestine was proud, that she had saved up her money each month to start her own business, that as a respected member of the community she now held one of the keys to the money box. Today, however, she was filled with dread. As they sat under the trees, she looked at the faces around her. Did any of them know? Did the whole village know, and had been whispering behind her back? Would she soon be like Dede, the widowed mother of little Mustafa the water-seller, who lived in such abject poverty that she could only contribute one ledi a month and had frequently been bailed out by the other women, much to her shame?

Adwoa didn't belong to the group; she was a stranger to thrift and female get-up-and-go, she let her husband do the work while she sat at home on her big bottom, leaving voice messages to Ernestine's husband. Ernestine wondered what Adwoa was doing – primping herself up for a tryst with Kwomi? Rubbing Imam Shea Butter onto her skin and anointing her lips with the Yana Luxury Lip Shimmer she had bought the week before, the better to kiss him with? Ernestine felt sick. Kwomi's patch of land was not far from Adwoa's house; was it there that they met, hidden amongst the cassava bushes? Ernestine hadn't heard the message, Asaf had deleted it to save her blushes, but the gist of it

seemed to be how much Adwoa was longing to see her Kwomi again, she could hardly wait. Her *Kwomi.*

Now Ernestine thought of it, Adwoa's youngest baby had a big nose, just like Kwomi's.

'Are you ready?'

Ernestine jumped. The other key-holders were waiting. Ernestine rallied and the three women opened the padlocks. They all sang a song together, gathered round the tin box, and got down to business. Dede, whose husband had died of AIDS, was saving up for a piece of land to grow maize. Humu was supporting herself through school by running a food stall. Lydia was setting up a biscuit bakery. Ernestine gazed at the scene – the dappled shadows, the chickens scratching in the dust, the kids walking from one woman to another, selling sweets and plantain chips. Her secret weighed her down; she had a strong urge to confide in somebody.

There was a burst of laughter. Nancy and Irene sat together, sharing a joke. They also shared a husband, Yawo. Two years earlier, when Yawo had taken the young Irene as his second wife, all hell had broken loose. The savings club, however, had brought them together. Previously both women had made a meagre living selling cassava, which they chopped laboriously by hand, paying a middle-man for the milling. But with the help of the tin box they had clubbed together to buy a milling machine and now they worked it together, joking about Yawo's sexual prowess and his pitiful boasts as the machine whirred away. Could Ernestine ever imagine sharing her husband with another woman?

The idea was disgusting. She would rather die.

Later, back home, she inspected her face in the mirror. It gazed back at her, naked, square-jawed. She had never worn make-up. Perhaps she should use some of her own products to woo Kwomi back. She could pluck her eyebrows and lighten her skin with Dimples Skin Lightener. She could

perfume herself with jasmine and use her Cote D'Azur make-up kit, complete with brushes, to shadow her eyes and paint her lips. Maybe then she could win back his love.

Or she could visit Giti, the witch. Everyone feared Giti. She lived alone behind the mosque, she was known to have the evil eye. Only the other week a headless chicken had been found outside her front door. Giti could put a curse on one of Ernestine's skin creams. When Adwoa bought it, her face would erupt in boils and Kwomi would recoil in horror.

What else could Ernestine do? She could go to church and pray. She could storm into Adwoa's house and tell her to lay off her husband. She could have a showdown with Kwomi.

Or she could do nothing and hope it would pass.

Ernestine was a coward; she did nothing. The sun sank behind the trees. The bats detached themselves and flew away. She swept the floor and washed her mother-in-law's hair. She separated her squabbling sons. Her older children came home from school. She cooked them jollof rice and red-pepper sauce. Her husband came home from the fields and put his mobile on the shelf, where it always sat. Grace came home, her books under her arm. She didn't say a word. Ernestine caught Grace looking at her and Kwomi with an odd expression on her face. Did she know something was up?

The days passed. Ernestine went out selling her wares but she avoided Adwoa's house, she couldn't bear to see the woman. On Wednesday the girls' football team played a match and Ernestine, working the crowd, made a number of sales. Grace had backed out of the match, saying she didn't feel well. She was nowhere to be seen, and wasn't at home when Ernestine returned. At the time Ernestine thought nothing of it, presuming Grace was menstruating. She had too many other things on her mind.

The next morning, needing to replenish her stock, she rose early to travel into Oreya with her husband. It was hard to believe that only a week had passed since her last visit.

The sun was rising as they climbed into the bus. It was just pulling into the road when someone yelled, 'Wait!'

Ernestine looked out of the window. Adwoa hobbled towards them, one hand clutching her long, tight skirt, the other hand waving the bus to stop.

Adwoa squeezed herself into the seat behind them. She was dressed in an orange and green batik outfit; her hair was embellished with one of Ernestine's gardenia clips, and she was perspiring from the unaccustomed exercise.

Ernestine froze. The harlot greeted Kwomi politely, as if she hardly knew him – she nodded to him as she nodded to the other passengers from the village. Her mascara was smudged and she was breathing heavily.

She leaned forward to Ernestine. 'My dear, I'm spitting mad,' she muttered. 'I've got a bone to pick with my brother, the good-for-nothing drunk.'

Ernestine's head span. She glanced at her husband but now the bus was moving he appeared to have dozed off. It was all a pretence, of course.

Adwoa was jabbering away. It seemed to be a family quarrel about a will: '... left him some land but he can't farm it, the rascal's a cripple!' The words seemed to come from far off. Ernestine's mind was busy. Was this a prearranged tryst between her husband and Adwoa? After all, it was unusual for her, Ernestine, to go to Oreya two weeks running. The two fornicators were certainly playing a clever game, Kwomi feigning sleep and his mistress engaging Ernestine in some incomprehensible story about a drunken cripple.

When they arrived in town Adwoa pushed her way to the front of the bus. Ernestine watched her big, gaudy body work its way through the crowd. She was heading for the phone-charging booth.

And now Adwoa was standing there, shouting at Asaf, the man with the mobiles, the man who never moved. The man

who, it turned out, happened to be her brother.

People said it was God's will that Asaf was born a cripple. People said it was an ancestral curse. People said it was just bad luck. Some people had shown him kindness; some had bullied him. Mostly, however, people had ignored him. When he was a child he had begged at the crossroads outside Oreya, where the traffic streamed between Assenonga, the big city, and the north. Every day one of his brothers or sisters would push him along the central reservation and leave him at the traffic lights. He sat on his little cart, his withered legs tucked beneath him. This was a prime spot for the afflicted and fights would break out between them as they jostled for the best position.

But the worst fights were with his sister, Adwoa.

Adwoa, who throughout his childhood bullied and teased him. Who stole his sweets and ran away on her strong, healthy legs. Who ridiculed him to the girls. Who left him on his cart, in the rain, while she disappeared into the bushes with her fancy men. Who stole his money and taunted him to come and get it. And who now was trying to steal back a cassava patch their father had left to him in his will.

A cripple has to develop alternative methods of survival. Over the years, Asaf had learnt to be wily. Of course he was bitter – how could he not be? But he had his wits. Each day, at his stall, he watched people come and go, busy with their day, blessed with their children, people who took it for granted that they could move from one place to another, dance, have sexual intercourse.

All Asaf had were his mobile phones. They sat there on his table, rows of them, plugged in and silently charging. When they came alive they beeped and twittered and sang. Within them lay the only power he had – the power to settle old feuds, to pay back his tormenters … and to make mischief.

It was weeks later that Ernestine discovered the truth – that Asaf had lied, that there was no message on her husband's phone, that the man had simply wanted to take revenge on his sister. Why had he chosen Ernestine and her husband, a respectable, hard-working couple who loved each other? What had they ever done to him?

She never understood, because she was a woman without vanity. It never crossed her mind that her strong, unadorned beauty had inflamed him, and that he was bitterly jealous of her marriage. For her, beauty was something she sold, rather than possessed herself.

And soon the whole episode was forgotten. For a few days later Ernestine's daughter Grace, who had been acting so strangely, drew her mother aside and told her that she was pregnant. The father was a taxi-driver who used to stop at her auntie's stall to eat her fried fish. He had promised to marry Grace but he was never seen again.

Poor Grace, so rigid and intransigent … and who, it transpired, didn't practise what she preached.

Part One

Pimlico, London

I'LL TELL YOU how the last one ended. I was watching the news and eating supper off a tray. There was an item about a methane explosion, somewhere in Lincolnshire. A barn full of cows had blown up, killing several animals and injuring a stockman. It's the farting, apparently.

I missed someone with me to laugh at this. To laugh, and shake our heads about factory farming. To share the bottle of wine I was steadily emptying. I wondered if Alan would ever move in. This was hard to imagine. What did he feel about factory farming? I hadn't a clue.

And then, there he was. On the TV screen. A reporter was standing outside the Eurostar terminal, something about an incident in the tunnel. Passengers were milling around behind him. Amongst them was Alan.

He was with a woman. Just a glimpse and he was gone.

I'm off to see me bruv down in Somerset. Look after yourself, love, see you Tuesday.

Just a glimpse but I checked later, on iPlayer. I reran the news and stopped it at that moment. Alan turning towards the woman and mouthing something at her. She was young, needless to say, much younger than me, and wearing a red padded jacket. Chavvy, his sort. Her stilled face, eyebrows raised. Then they were gone, swallowed up in the crowd.

See you Tuesday and I'll get that plastering done by the end of the week.

Don't fuck the help. For when it ends, and it will, you'll find yourself staring at a half-plastered wall with wires dangling like entrails and a heap of rubble in the corner. And he nicked my power drill.

Before him, and the others, I was married. I have two grown-up children but they live in Melbourne and Seattle, as far away as they could go. Of course there's scar tissue but I miss them with a physical pain of which they are hopefully unaware. Neediness is even more unattractive in the old than in the young. Their father has long since remarried. He has a corporate Japanese wife who thinks I'm a flake. Neurotic, needy, borderline alcoholic. I can see it in the swing of her shiny black hair. For obvious reasons, I keep my disastrous love-life to myself.

I'm thinking of buying a dog. It would gaze at me moistly, its eyes filled with unconditional love. This is what lonely women long for, as they turn sixty. I would die with my arms around a cocker spaniel, there are worse ways to go.

Three months have passed and Alan is a distant humiliation. I need to find another builder to finish off the work in the basement, then I can re-let it, but I'm seized with paralysis and can't bring myself to go down the stairs. I lived in it when I was young, you see, and just arrived in London. Years later I bought the house, and tenants downstairs have come and gone, but now the flat has been stripped bare those early years are suddenly vivid. I can remember it like yesterday, the tights drying in front of the gas fire, the sex and smoking, the laughter. To descend now into that chilly tomb, with its dust and debris – I don't have the energy.

Now I sound like a depressive but I'm not. I'm just a woman longing for love. I'm tired of being put in the back seat of the car when I go out with a couple. I'm tired of internet dates with balding men who talk about golf – *golf*. I'm tired of coming home to silent rooms, everything as I left it, the *Marie Celeste* of the solitary female. Was Alan the last man I shall ever lie with, naked in my arms?

This is how I am, at this moment. Darkness has fallen. In the windows of the flats opposite, faces are illuminated by their laptops. I have the feeling that we are all fixed here, at

this point in time, as motionless as the Bonnard lady in the print on my wall. Something must jolt me out of this stupor, it’s too pathetic for words. In front of me is a bowl of Bombay mix; I’ve worked my way through it. Nothing’s left but the peanuts, my least favourite.

I want to stand in the street and howl at the moon.

White Springs, Texas

LORRIE WAS A woman of generous proportions. She liked to eat, who doesn’t? Nor was she alone. Most of her girlfriends were super-size, they had ballooned in girth over the years, their jaws were always working. They joked, ‘It ain’t got no calories if you eat by the light of the refrigerator.’ Her husband didn’t mind, he said he didn’t mind, he said there was more of her to love. He served in the army and their marriage was one of partings and homecomings. She ate for solace during the long months when he was a blurred face on Skype, and she cooked up a storm when he was home. Between this lay the tricky period of readjustment, this could take a week or more, when their strangeness to each other drained away and they rediscovered their old companionship. She found herself snacking heavily then, just as, long ago, during stressful times, she had smoked.

So she had put on the pounds. It was hard to believe that she had once been a skinny kid, but then there were few of them around nowadays. Children were heavier, it was a national tragedy, many of them were downright obese. Her own two kids were big for their age, it broke her heart to see them rolling from side to side as they walked, like drunken sailors. Just the other day, when she had to fetch Dean early from school, she had seen him struggle from his chair and lift the desk with him. His face, pink with shame!

Junk food was to blame. Apparently it was all to do with the presidential elections. Her neighbour’s son, Tyler, was studying chemistry at college. He said the swing votes were in the corn belt, in the Mid-West, so the farmers were wooed by big subsidies, which meant over-production of corn and