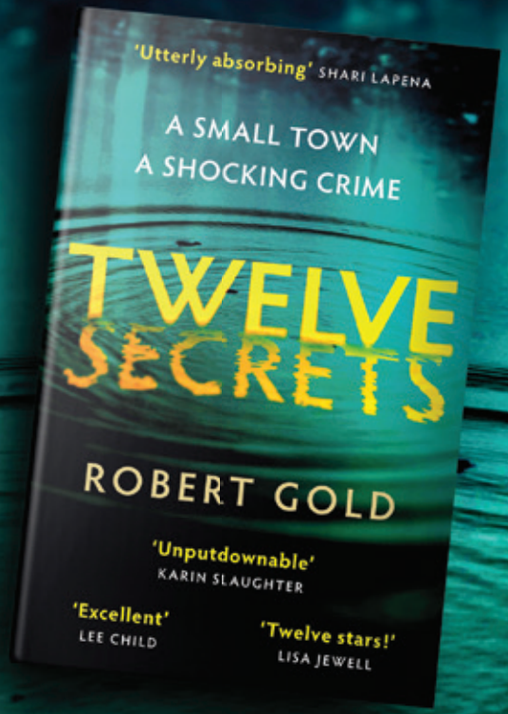


Ben Harper's life changed for ever the day his older brother Nick was murdered by two classmates. It was a crime that shocked the nation and catapulted Ben's family and their idyllic hometown, Haddley, into the spotlight.

Twenty years on, Ben is one of the best investigative journalists in the country and settled back in Haddley, thanks to the support of its close-knit community. But then a fresh murder case shines new light on his brother's death and throws suspicion on those closest to him.

Ben is about to discover that in Haddley no one is as they seem. Everyone has something to hide.

And someone will do anything to keep the truth buried . . .

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FREE CHAPTER SAMPLER

A SMALL TOWN
A SHOCKING CRIME

TWELVE SECRETS

ROBERT GOLD

'Unputdownable'
KARIN SLAUGHTER

'Excellent'
LEE CHILD

'Twelve stars!'
LISA JEWELL

Originally from Harrogate in North Yorkshire, Robert Gold began his career as an intern at the American broadcaster CNN, based in Washington DC. He returned to Yorkshire to work for the retailer ASDA, becoming the chain's nationwide book buyer. He now works in sales for a UK publishing company. Robert now lives in Putney and his new hometown served as the inspiration for the fictional town of Haddley in *Twelve Secrets*. In 2016, he co-authored three titles in James Patterson's Bookshots series.

TWELVE SECRETS

ROBERT GOLD

sphere

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SPHERE

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For my dad – the real Michael Noel

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One

'I never want to experience my own past again.'

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CHAPTER 1

The invitation to meet with Madeline landed in my inbox late morning. It came with no subject line but I knew immediately what it was about. Madeline is nothing if not persistent.

I've spent the afternoon killing time. I gave up on the idea of doing any actual work pretty quickly, unable to settle to anything. Drinking three cups of coffee in the past forty-five minutes hasn't helped. Mostly I've been reading the endless stream of celebrity stories on our twenty-four-hour news site.

'The royal family has a new ginger Labradoodle,' I say to Min, who sits opposite me in our open-plan newsroom. 'I'll give you even money they call it Harry.'

Min raises an eyebrow. I've tried repeatedly to engage her in conversation for the last hour, despite knowing she has a deadline to hit.

'Sorry,' I mouth silently, and return to my screen. Another Hollywood couple has announced their engagement, and a Premier League footballer has smashed his team-mate's head into a dressing-room locker. Nice.

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A diary reminder that I don't need appears in front of me. I glance across towards Madeline's goldfish-bowl office and see her gesticulating furiously at two marketing executives. Both shrink in her presence. I realised long ago that the only way to successfully work with Madeline is by standing up to her. It's a lesson many of my colleagues have yet to learn.

'You are going to be honest with her?' asks Min, as if she can read my thoughts.

'I always try to be,' I reply. But Madeline instilled in me her own determination to reach the heart of any good story. It's something we now share. And it's why I fear this conversation.

'You're the only person she will ever really listen to.'

'The problem is, on this one I don't think there's any middle ground.'

Min shoots me a sympathetic grimace before putting on her headphones. I glance across again to see the two marketers skulk away, summarily dismissed. Resolved, I close my screen and get to my feet.

Through her open door, I can see Madeline sitting in her white leather chair, her eyes fixed on the screen in front of her. Without looking up, she calls my name. 'Ben, don't linger.'

'There's no reason for us to fall out over this,' I say as I enter her corner office, floor-to-ceiling windows affording a direct view of Tower Bridge. Behind Madeline's curved glass desk hang three striking sunlit photographs, each one taken by Madeline herself, as she has told me countless times. The first is of the Houses of Parliament, the second of the

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White House, and the third is of her own home overlooking Richmond Park. She calls them 'the three houses of global power' and I think she is only half-joking.

'Twenty-nine point four million,' she says, still not looking up from her monitor. 'Down close to three per cent and those two clowns tell me not to worry. We're less than two million users ahead of *Mail Online*. We will not lose our number one spot on my watch.'

She's not expecting a response and I don't give her one. Instead, avoiding her vast boardroom table, I take the chair opposite her desk.

'And I'm not falling out with anyone,' she continues. 'I know this is a difficult time for you, Ben. With your mum's anniversary approaching, we will all find ourselves reflecting.'

There's a smoothness to her voice. She's rehearsed this, and I refuse to be drawn into it.

'Your mum would be so proud of what you've achieved. Ten years ago all our hearts broke. If only she could see you now. One of the best "true crime" writers in the country. It's been quite a journey, Ben, a real triumph over tragedy. It's your story to tell.'

'However many times we discuss this,' I reply, 'the answer is still no.'

'Ben!' she exclaims. 'You haven't even heard me out.'

'I know what you're after. And that's not me. I write investigative pieces, not tear-jerkers.'

'I'm not after some trashy sob story. This would be your truth – emotional, affecting, raw, and redemptive. The true

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story, told by the man everybody in this country holds so very close to their hearts.'

'Well, I'm not interested in that.'

'But millions of people are, Ben.' Madeline's voice has taken on the tone she uses when she's determined to get her own way, each word clearly enunciated. 'You underestimate how much people care about you. What happened to Nick, and then your mum's death . . . everybody remembers that. People know who you are, and believe they share a genuine connection with you.' She gets up and steps around her desk, perching on the corner next to me. 'I'm not saying a few of them aren't a tiny bit crazy, but, whether you like it or not, they imagine they shared in your grief. They want to support you, while being forever grateful it didn't happen to them. And now they want to read about it in your own words, as our world exclusive.'

Directness is not something Madeline ever shies away from. Her ruthless ability to get straight to the point is what makes her a great journalist. I simply shake my head.

'I've told you I'm not going to write it.'

'Ben, we both know you *are* going to write this. However painful it is, it's too good a story not to.'

'If I write the article you want, I'll spend the next year having people come up to me in the street asking me how I am and telling me I'm always in their prayers.'

'That doesn't sound all bad. Those people mean well, even the slightly peculiar ones.'

'It's a no, Madeline.'

'Ben.' She gets up suddenly, crosses to close the door and

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turns back to look at me. 'I'm going to level with you. Our numbers are under pressure. We really are being squeezed. We need a big story.'

'The answer is still no.'

Madeline has schooled me in her own relentless hunt for readers. Now however, I've quickly realised that when the hunt reaches your own door, your perspective changes.

'Nobody is more committed to the success of this site than me,' I reply. 'My stories bring in more new readers than any other articles. Then, for some reason, those readers stay to read the trashy gossip you call news.'

Madeline's eyes flash and for a moment I think we're done. Then her shoulders relax.

'You've said it yourself, I'm the best journalist you've got,' I say.

'One award does not make you my best journalist.'

'It's two, and they're the only awards the site has ever won.'

'We're not here for the awards, we're here for the readers,' she says. 'And we need more of them. Fast.'

I can feel myself losing patience. I take a deep breath. If I didn't know Madeline so well I'd find it hard to believe she was trying to bully me into this. Having grown up near to my home, she knows at first-hand how traumatic my brother Nick's death was, not just for my family but for our whole community. I've gone back and read the articles she wrote at the time. She understood the devastating impact on our whole town.

I turn my chair to face her as she crosses from the door to the window. 'I'm not doing it, Madeline. You need to accept

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that. You will never have any idea what it was like. Nick's face on every front page – my mum's, mine. I've no desire to publish the last slice of my life I was able to keep private.'

It's not the answer she wants, and I can see her irritation rising. She drums her fingers on the table. Tight-lipped, she goes back to her chair and begins rattling her keyboard. When she doesn't say anything further, I assume I'm dismissed and, relieved, I get up to go. But, just as I reach the door, she speaks.

'Ben, has it occurred to you that, if you don't write this, someone else might?'

I pause, not turning back to look at her.

'And, if they do, I can't control what they might say.'

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