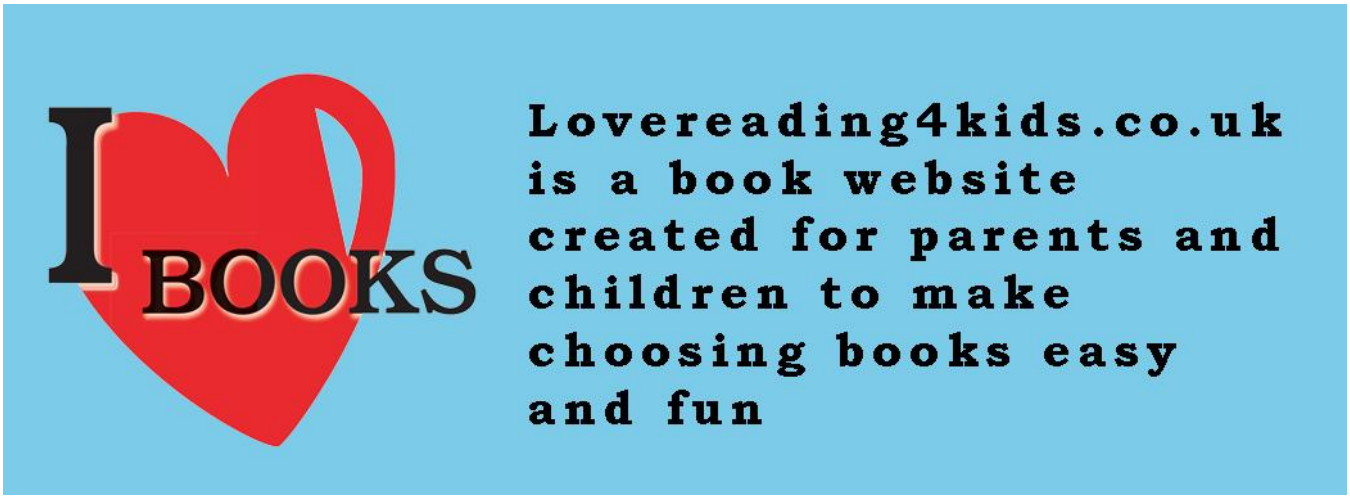


Opening extract from

The Deepest Cut

Written by

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In memory of Robert Knox
21st August 1989 – 24th May 2008

One

Polly found me on the landing at my dad's house, three months after my best friend Jake was murdered.

I was unconscious and lying in a puddle of my own sick.

I can't remember how many tablets I'd taken, or how much of my dad's whisky I'd washed them down with, as I hadn't bothered to keep count. I'd just kept going, downing them in threes and fours until I was too weak to lift my hand to my mouth.

I don't remember how I got from my bedroom to the landing and I don't remember throwing up, either.

All I can remember was wanting to be dead. My head had been spinning for months and I didn't know what else to do to stop it hurting. I just wanted to die.

Nobody would miss me. Jake's mum hadn't spoken to me since his funeral, and my dad only ever spoke to me to have a go at me and tell me to snap out of it. There was Polly, but I was sure she was getting fed up with me being the way I was.

When you decide you want to die, you stop thinking about anything else. You just think about that, and you wait and bide your time for the perfect chance. The day I took all the pills, my dad had left a note saying he'd buggered off away for a few days with his tart of a girlfriend, Jackie. I knew it was time. He was gone so there'd be no interruptions.

I screwed up the note and chucked it in the bin. I put the money he'd left for food in my back pocket. Then I put my duffel on and headed straight to town. The wind and rain battered me as I walked along the pavement with my hood up and head down. I felt a bit sick. I hadn't been into town since the night Jake was murdered. People would probably recognise me from the picture they'd printed of us in the papers. They might stop me and ask me questions. I knew they'd judge me.

They might even say it was my fault he died.

I went the long way round. I needed to avoid the park. The flowers people had left for Jake were long dead and put in the bin by some council street cleaner; who didn't even know him or care about him. Now there was just the bench. Our bench. Empty. It was another reminder. I didn't need to see it, not today. Not ever again.

In the second shop an old lady in the queue was staring at me. I looked the other way. She grabbed my arm with a tight grip and I tensed up.

'Are you OK, love?' She asked. 'You're shaking.'

I stayed perfectly still.

'You're poorly?' She asked. 'Got a fever? They'll sort you out,' she said, tapping the boxes of pills in my hand. 'Don't need anything fancy, just good old paracetamol.'

'Thank you,' I said quietly, with my head still down.

I paid for my pills, put them in my pocket and turned to walk out.

She grabbed my arm again. 'You feel better, lovey. Take plenty of fluids and keep warm.' She smiled then released her grip.

'Thanks,' I said. I walked away, out of the stuffy shop and back into the rain.

Why did she even care? I wanted to turn around and fling myself at her and fall into her

arms and tell her that my best friend died, but then she'd know. She'd know who I was, and what I'd done, and she would stop caring about me straight away, just like everyone else.

On my way back the rain and wind were behind me, pushing me along the pavement like they were telling me to get back quickly and get on with it.

As soon as I was through the front door I grabbed dad's bottle of whisky from the kitchen side, and rushed around closing the curtains and locking the doors. I wanted to make sure nobody could see or get in. I didn't want to be saved.

Up in my room, I checked my phone. I had seven missed calls and a text from Polly. The text read: *Are you OK? Been trying to get hold of you for two days and I'm really worried Xx.* I ignored it, pulled the battery out and chucked it all in the bin in the corner of my room. I wouldn't need it anymore.

I popped all the tablets out of the blisters into a pile on my bed and swept the boxes onto the floor. I picked up the notepad I used to write my songs from the floor next to my guitar. In my bedside drawer, among all the old Top Trumps, the condoms I'd never use, and the photo of us on Jake's tenth birthday that I'd shoved there because I couldn't bear to look at it anymore, I found a pencil.

Then I wrote my suicide note. When I was done, I folded it neatly and put it under my pillow.

I took a deep breath. I was ready.

My hands were shaking as I opened the whisky and started taking the pills, just like that with my brain turned off. I wouldn't allow myself to think about it anymore. I wouldn't let me talk myself out of it. It had to be done.

I wasn't scared of dying, I was scared of living.

Polly told me after that she was worried, especially when my phone started going straight to voicemail, so she came round and she banged on the door and shouted my name and disturbed the neighbours.

'Have you seen Adam?' She asked Mrs Henderson next door, who appeared with a face like thunder asking what all the bashing and crashing was about.

Mrs Henderson just snorted and went back inside. She knew about that night, and what had happened to Jake, and what I'd done. She hated me, just like everyone else hated me. She wasn't going to help Polly.

Polly climbed over the side gate, which she told me wasn't the easiest thing to do in heeled boots in the pissing rain. She said that when she saw all the curtains shut a gut instinct kicked in; she knew something was wrong. She said it was the sort of feeling that makes you panic in every cell in your body and then your adrenalin takes over.

She kicked the back door in. It took her ages and she made loads of noise.

It was Mrs Henderson who called the police – because of that. All we were to her was a bunch of reckless youths. She didn't know us, she judged us by what happened that night and by what she'd read about us in the papers afterwards. She didn't know us at all.

When Polly finally got the door in, she called my name, over and over again.

Downstairs was empty.

She ran up the stairs.

And there I was, lying there, unconscious.

Even her screaming didn't wake me up.

The police came quickly. Polly ran to the door, and pointed up the stairs. A female officer held her back as a male officer went to find me.

The ambulance came. Polly wasn't allowed to go with me. She had to stay and answer questions while some other officers secured my dad's back door.

I wasn't awake for any of this. I wasn't awake when the paramedics put me on a stretcher, when they put me in the back of the ambulance, while they put lines in and drew blood;

speeding through town with blue flashing lights and a screeching siren to the same hospital they took Jake to that night. I wasn't awake while they rushed me into A&E and the paramedics handed over, telling the doctors: 'Male, seventeen, suspected overdose …'

I woke up later.

It was the bright lights that hit me first. Blinding strip lights on the ceiling. I thought I was dead. I actually thought I'd managed it.

Then a gentle female voice said, 'Ah, there you are Adam, welcome back,' and touched my hand.

I pulled my hand back. Her voice rang over and over in my ears.

I was still alive.

I pulled my oxygen mask off, the stickers off my chest and the line out of my arm, and blood spurted everywhere. I fought against the hands that were now holding me down against the bed. I hit out at anything and everything, shouting, screaming for them to get off me, to leave me alone.

They had to sedate me.

Four of them held me down and one put a needle in my thigh. A sharp scratch, then pain as the fluid went into my muscle and straight away made me go weak. My screams turned to cries. I cried and cried and cried.

I'd had one aim; and that was to kill myself to get away from the pain of losing Jake and from the guilt of what I'd done. I wanted out of this life and I'd tried really, really hard to make it happen, but I'd failed.

As I lay there crying, all I could think about was how long it would be before they'd let me out so I was free to try again.

Two

It was the pain in my stomach that woke me up.

I drew my legs to my chest and screamed out.

There were two people in the cubicle with me but I didn't know who they were. I wanted one of them to be Jake's mum, desperately. I needed her there. She'd make it all OK again. She always made everything OK again.

'Is he alright?' It was my dad's voice.

He was the last person I wanted to see. He was going to go mental at me for this, I knew it.

A nurse came in and put some clear fluid in the thing in my hand. It was cold and it stung. 'There, that should help,' she said, patting my arm. 'Just try to stay calm, OK?' She left the cubicle.

'Medically, he's stable,' a woman's voice said.

I opened my eyes to see who she was. She was in a suit and had a name tag dangling round her neck. I tried to see what it said but my eyes couldn't focus on the writing.

The pain shot through me again. I curled up in a ball and tried to breathe it away.

'Are you sure about that?' My dad asked. 'Don't really look like it, does it?'

'It's the effect of the overdose. His doctor assures me that he's stable. They're keeping an eye on his liver function, but it looks like he was found and brought here in time. He will make a full recovery.'

'He's lucky then,' Dad said.

I wouldn't call it lucky. Lucky for me would have been him identifying me in the mortuary instead of standing over my sweaty, quivering body.

'We are concerned for his mental health, which is why we need to ask some questions so we can ascertain the best course of action for Adam, for when he's medically well enough to leave hospital.'

'Right,' Dad said.

I looked at him to try and see what he was thinking. He stood rigid with his arms folded over his chest and he didn't look at me.

'Do you want to take a seat?' She asked him.

'No, I'd prefer to stand.' He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

'It might take a while.'

'Nah, I'm alright.'

She took some papers out, clicked her pen and started writing. They went through the usual stuff: date of birth, weight, and all that. I let them get on with it while I tried to stop the pain in

my stomach. Then she asked the dreaded question.

'And where is Adam's mother? Are you–?'

'Deceased,' Dad said. One word. No emotion.

'When did–?'

'Three years ago.'

'Do you mind me asking how–?'

'Car accident.'

'And how has Adam been with–?'

'Fine.'

She raised her eyebrows at him and then turned her body to face me.

'Adam?'

I shrugged. There was no point trying to say how I felt with Dad standing there, because I wasn't allowed feelings. I was meant to be a man; take it on the chin, and get on with it.

'Adam, can you tell me what made you want to take an overdose?' Her voice was softer to me than it was to Dad.

I went to speak but couldn't. Even if Dad wasn't standing there glaring at me, and even if I could explain it all to her, there was no point. I didn't see the point in talking about it; or my mental health or anything else she wanted to talk about, because as soon as they let me out of there I was going to jump in front of a train, or off a cliff, or hang myself. Something, anything, as long as it would definitely kill me.

She was wasting her time.

She gave me some sort of look that was halfway between a sympathetic smile and a look of worry, then she touched my hand gently and turned to my dad.

'Mr–'

'Call me Chris,' Dad said. He was staring at me with one of his looks. A threatening one: *Say anything to make me look like a bad dad and I'm gonna kill you.*

'Could you possibly shed a little light?'

'Yeah, sure. His best friend died three months ago.'

He didn't die, he was murdered.

'That's tragic, Adam. You've obviously not been coping well with losing your friend. Do you feel you could tell me what happened?'

'He was stabbed,' Dad cut in.

'Yes I think I read about that in the papers, actually.' She stopped herself. She shouldn't have said that, I could tell by the way she just stopped talking. It didn't stop the panic coming back though, because if she knew who I was, she'd stop being nice to me, even if she was being paid to be nice to me.

'Chris, could we step outside for a moment?' She turned to me, 'Adam, I'd like to have a chat with your dad in private, if that's OK with you?'

She could take him down the pub for a pint for all I cared at that moment. I had the panic back to go with the pain in my stomach, and I just wanted them to go away. I turned over and put my arm over my eyes.

They came back after a bit and Dad was pale in the face. The woman looked serious.

'Adam, with your dad's permission, I am going to go away and speak to my senior and ask them to come down and try to have a chat with you. We're concerned about your state of mind and your inability to communicate with us. We think it would be best if, when you're well enough to leave here, we transfer you to another hospital where we can keep you safe for a while, until you're feeling less likely to harm yourself again.'

My dad was biting his nails. He wouldn't look at me. He'd given his permission, of course he had. I'd be out of his hair, and out of his way, and he wouldn't have to deal with me.

'How do you feel about that, Adam?' She asked. She gave me this intense look with her

head cocked to the side a bit.

I nodded.

I wasn't threatened by what she just said. All I had to do was talk to her senior when they came down and convince them I was OK and, bam, I'd be out of there.

'I think you're making the right decision, we can help make you better.' She clicked her pen and put it inside her jacket pocket. 'I'll be back shortly,' she said.

Dad stared at me. He sighed. Then he left the cubicle without saying another word.

Three

I was flicking through a three-day-old newspaper when my doctor, a new doctor, a nurse and my dad came through the ward doors, making a beeline for my bed.

I put the paper down and sat up straight.

'Morning, Adam,' my doctor said. 'How are you feeling?'

Something wasn't right. Dr Sanderson had been coming in to see me every morning, just him, only him. Why was there suddenly another doctor, a nurse and my bloody dad there?

'The nurse is just going to do your vitals while we chat,' Dr Sanderson said. I held out my arm for my blood pressure. I knew the drill.

'This is Dr Verma, Adam,' Dr Sanderson said, gesturing to the other doctor. 'He's a clinical psychotherapist, and he's been helping me to decide what's best for you now you're well enough to go home.'

Dr Verma stepped forward and perched himself on my bed. 'How are you feeling today, Adam?'

I wasn't going to answer that. I was going to do what I'd been doing for the past eight days and keep my mouth shut. If I said nothing, they couldn't twist my words and accuse me of still being suicidal.

'Adam? Are you still not talking?' Dr Verma asked.

The beeping of the blood pressure monitor cut through the silence.

Dr Verma and Dr Sanderson nodded at each other. Dr Verma leant towards me.

'Adam,' he said. His voice was soft, like he was speaking to a little child. 'We're going to transfer you to a place called The Meadows. It's a lovely place where you can go and take a rest for a while and …'

I didn't want to listen to anymore. I jumped up and pushed past them, dragging the blood pressure machine along with me. I ripped the cuff off my arm and threw it on the floor as Dad's arms went around my waist from behind. He was stronger than me. I struggled to get free of his grip.

'Come on now, Adam. This is for the best,' he whispered in my ear.

I elbowed him in the stomach as hard as I could and he let go.

'You little shit,' he said.

I shoved him in the chest and bolted out of the ward doors but he caught me. He grabbed me harder this time, and held me tight while the nurse caught up with us and stuck a needle in my leg.

They walked me back down the corridor, supporting me, as with every step I took I felt weaker and weaker. Whatever she'd just injected into me had the desired effect. I was now defenceless and I would have to do exactly what they said.

Back on the ward, all the other patients were staring.

Dr Sanderson drew the curtains around the bed. The cubicle was small as it was, without four more people in it. Dr Verma stared at me; Dr Sanderson at my notes. The nurse shoved a thermometer in my ear and my dad stood at the end of my bed, biting his nails and staring me

out.

My jaw was tight and my breathing shallow.

I was done for. It was over. I couldn't fight them on this.

I let my eyes close, heavy from the injection, while they did whatever it was they had to do to get me put away.

I was getting locked up in the nut house and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

They took me there in a minibus ambulance. I was strapped to a wheelchair, and off my face on a second injection they'd given me just before we left. I was on my own. Dad had done a runner as soon as all the paperwork was signed. He was probably standing outside the bookies drinking a Strongbow and telling all his mates how pathetic I was.

When we pulled up, a nurse unstrapped me from the wheelchair and helped me out the ambulance.

'Whoa there, lovey,' she said when my legs wobbled underneath me. She held me upright and waited until I was steady again before we moved on.

The place didn't look like a mental hospital. It wasn't tall, dark, and looming. There was no big, dramatic entrance. There were no crazies running naked around the gardens. There were no bright flashes of lightning, no dramatic crashes of thunder, no crows squawking, threatening to peck your brains out. The building was modern and bathed in sunshine; but it didn't matter how peaceful and inviting it was, I still didn't want to go in.

'Come on, Adam,' the nurse said. She put her hand on my shoulder and walked me up the path towards the door.

She put a key code in, the door beeped, she held it open for me and we went inside.

'Come on, up the stairs,' she said, putting her hand in the small of my back.

At the top of a few flights of stairs was a set of doors with another key code thing on. She put the code in and it beeped just like the one downstairs and then she led me in.

'This is Peacock Ward,' she said. 'I'm going to show you straight to your room so you can get some rest.'

She took me down a dark corridor with no windows. None of the rooms had doors on except the bathroom. It was as quiet and peaceful inside as it was outside. It was confusing. Maybe I was the only suspected mental person in the world.

My room was one off the hallway with no door. The walls were a disgusting mustard colour and some of the paint was peeling off the white ceiling. There was a small white sink in the corner, a built-in wardrobe and a single bed. Above the bed was a small window with bars on the outside.

'No bag with you, then?' The nurse asked. 'Let me find you something clean to wear.' She walked away, her shoes squeaking along the floor as she went.

I was trapped. I knew they wanted to make me better but they had no chance. The only thing that would make me better would be having Jake back, so unless they were God, or they had a time machine, it wasn't going to happen.

'Right, here we go.' The nurse and her squeaky shoes were back with a pair of grey joggers, a white T-shirt and a black sweater. 'They OK? I'm just going to pop and get your medication while you change,' she said.

I took off my old clothes. They stank. I'd been wearing them for the eight days I'd been in the other hospital. I put on the clean ones the nurse gave me; they were warm and comfortable.

'Pills,' she was back with a little white cup. It was the same as the ones McDonald's give you to fill up with ketchup, because they're too tight to give out packets anymore. It had two

tablets in. She also had a plastic cup of water.

She handed me the pills.

'I'd like you to take these,' she said. She put the cup of water in my other hand.

I looked at the tablets and back up at her.

'They're just to help you relax,' she said.

I put them in my mouth and took some water to swallow them back.

'Poke out your tongue,' she said. She took my chin in her hand and pushed it up, looking in my mouth as she did. 'Good lad,' she said.

I gave her a funny look.

'Just checking. Get some rest,' she said. Her shoes squeaked as she walked out of the room without looking back.

That was it? Just get some rest. Nothing else. No doctor coming to see me to tell me what they were going to do with me. No family to settle me in and give me a hug. And definitely no friends to take the mickey out of me for being in the loony bin.

I was sitting there staring at the stupid yellow wall for ages. The loneliness was suffocating. However many millions and billions of people on this earth and I was on a cold bed, in a room with bars on the windows, and I had nobody. The nurses were there, but only because they were paid to be there. They didn't know what it felt like to be me. They didn't know what it felt like to be there that night, and see what happened to Jake, and do what I did. They didn't care that I couldn't think about it, because when I did, I couldn't breathe. They didn't care that I still didn't understand how it happened, how in a split second, a moment of madness, everything was destroyed.

That was what it was, a moment of madness. One quick jab of the knife and everything came crashing down around us and would never be fixed.

If that knife had never gone in, everything would have been OK.