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Opening extract from

Whisper

Written by

Chrissie Keighery

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Chrissie Keighery

Whisper

There's no point wishing
what happened didn't happen.



Praise for



'The character of Demi is beautifully realised as she struggles to establish her identity as a profoundly deaf person living in the world of 'hearies'.'
Good Reading

'*Whisper* is a profoundly moving, thought-provoking, realistic novel. Being hearing-impaired myself for most of my life I completely related to the roller-coaster ride of losing one's hearing. This book is a must read for all and will truly open up a world that is louder, deeper and even more resonant than before.'
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'*Whisper* is one of those gems that come your way when you least expect it… This is a great story, not just about being hearing-impaired, but about resilience, staying positive, never losing sight of personal goals.'
goodreads.com

To Melissa Thurgood, the truest person I know.
My bestie by osmosis.

A TEMPLAR BOOK

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Whisper

Chrissie Keighery



templar

chapter 1

Making wishes is for kids – and idiots. I should be able to stop myself, since I'm not a kid any more. Or an idiot.

But I can't help it. I make wishes, even though it's a bit like bungee jumping. You've got to be crazy to jump off a bridge. Crazy enough to believe that a rubber band will save you even though you are hurtling towards the rocks below.

I've decided I can't keep doing it to myself. So here I am.

I take a deep breath as I get on the tram. Someone stands up to get out at the next stop. I try not to blink as I make my way through the crowd towards that spare seat. There's a wild element to the tram's swaying. A possibility of derailing.

I force the thought out of my head. I will control myself. *Focus*.

I don't realise until I sink into the seat that I've been holding my breath. I breathe out shakily.

My seat faces backwards and it's too far away from the door. But I can't think about it. Maybe if I distract myself by looking at the other passengers I won't freak out.

There are rows of arms reaching up to swaying handles hung from the steel rail. I can see the open pores on an old man's nose. The square of a wallet in a boy's drooping back pocket.

At each stop the tram adds more passengers than it subtracts. Three schoolgirls get on. They look about my age. Their blazers are purple and so are the ribbons in their hair.

One girl's hair reminds me of a horse's mane. It falls in a ponytailed clump, and looks like it would be coarse to the touch. Her face is long too. I imagine how her voice might sound, though her lips are sealed in a no-seats-available pout. Maybe she would whinny? Bray?

She looks me up and down, sees the new uniform I am wearing. She knows where I'm going.

I meet her eyes when they're at the final stages of checking me out. My heartbeat quickens. I look away. I wouldn't have done that before. I would have met that stare, and held it. I would have checked *her* out the same way she's checking me out.

Now I let it go. Anything not to draw attention

to myself. Anything not to let the panic take over.

Her friends have their iPods out. I squeeze my eyes shut, blocking out the memories. I loved my iPod. I used to scroll through mine for the perfect song for any given moment.

Unless Nadia has updated it, my music will be completely out of date now. But what do I care?

When I open my eyes again, I'm glad to see the girls have moved down the tram, away from me.

A man in a grey pin-striped suit stands in front of me. The tram's crowded, but I'm not sure he needs to be that close. The fabric of his suit makes contact with my knee and lingers there. I move my legs away sharply.

He looks down at me. The smile he gives is an embarrassed one. It's an apology, and I can see he hopes I know it was just circumstance. That he hadn't meant to be sleazy. His eyebrows lean together and the creases around his eyes soften as his lips mouth sorry.

It's easier to cut through all the crap, all the mixed messages, when people have wrinkles around their eyes. Jules told me that, and he was right as always. It's other teenagers that are the hardest to read.

I feel bad about jerking my knees away. I should have waited, should have read his intentions on his face,

in his posture. Jules has taught me well and I'm getting pretty good at it. It must be the nerves.

My phone vibrates. I realise I've been clutching it the whole time, like a lifeline. It's a text from Nadia.

2day is the 1st day of the rest of yr life.
☺ Good luck xx.

My throat closes up, even as I roll my eyes. Normally I hate that type of platitude. The smiley face should be enough to make me puke.

But there's nothing to puke. There's a giant, hollow space in my guts and it's not just because I couldn't eat breakfast.

I stare at Nadia's message. I won't delete it. We've been through so much together. She's forgiven me. I think I've forgiven her. I don't think she would ever suspect that she's on my private list of reasons. The list of reasons that led to me being on this tram, going backwards or forwards or wherever the hell I am going.

I text back.

Thnx nads.

It takes me a while, but I add two kisses. And then two more: xxxx. She'll be surprised by that. It's almost like the row of kisses is a link between the life I am leaving behind and the unknown ahead.

I have a sudden urge to get up, to jump off the tram and run back. To forget this whole idea. Even though my life was going wrong, at least it was a wrong I knew.

My breathing has become shallow and fast again, but I won't let the panic take control.

It's my stubbornness that keeps me seated. Or maybe it's because Horse Girl and co. are blocking the door and I don't trust my legs to get me past them. I want to send my legs a message, to warn them that I need them to be strong.

My phone jumps in my hand again.

> Just be your beautiful self, Demi. And remember, nothing is irreversible xx Mum.

She's good, Mum. She seems to be able to get on board my doubts even when she's not with me.

The message almost makes me laugh. She's still having a go, even now, after the decision has been made! At least I know where my stubbornness comes from.

I look out the window. I force myself to reply.

Ta mum. I'll be fine.

As my thumb hovers over the send button, I feel flimsy, unsure. I have a silly hope that writing the words might actually make them true. I don't add any kisses. Mum can turn a lifeline into a chain.

I look back at her text. It's not true, what Mum's written – some things *are* irreversible. And there's no point wishing what happened didn't happen.

I learned that a year and a half ago. When I went deaf.

chapter 2

You never think, when you're fourteen and a half, that something like this might happen. I was sick, sure. It was a terrible flu, yeah, but it was just the flu. Then my temperature went mad.

I lay in my sweat-soaked sheets, too weak to move. My head hurt so much that I couldn't speak, and anyway I was too tired to call out. Why was the sliver of light coming through the gap in the curtains so bright it stung my eyes? When Mum came to check on me, her face was ragged with worry.

I remember lying in the back seat of the car, though I'm not sure how I got there. I remember wondering why my mum, usually such a control freak, was letting me loll around without a seat belt. But most of all I wondered why the bones in my skull felt like they were pushing on my brain.

Then I was on a stretcher, being wheeled along a corridor. But it was like it was happening to someone else.

Like I was watching TV and the patient looked a bit like me. I remember wondering if Dr McDreamy would soon be feeling my forehead. But there was no Dr McDreamy, only an old doctor with a bad comb-over. Before I slipped out of consciousness there was a little surge of disappointment about that.

I dreamed Mum and I were in the car and we were sinking into quicksand. I was struggling to open a door, a window, anything, to get out. But the quicksand was all around and nothing would open. I felt the panic overwhelm me as I realised we would die. While I gasped for air Mum turned around to me in the back seat.

"Calm down, Demi," she said in her no-nonsense voice. "We *will* get out."

But there was no way out and the quicksand was rising.

Then I was free, somehow, flying in the air and breathing again and when I looked down there was a string that led from my body down to Dad, a tiny dot on the ground. It was as though I was a kite he was flying. He pulled me towards him and I landed in the narrow hospital bed.

I was pretty sure I wasn't still dreaming because Flawless was sitting beside me, looking perfect as always. I wanted to ask her where the boys were, my beautiful little nephews.

I wanted them there. But just the effort of opening my eyes exhausted me and made my head hurt even more and I fell back asleep.

The next time I woke I'd been turned on my side and there was something being pushed into my spine. A needle, maybe. Dad was holding my hands, as though he were trying to grab hold of my pain, to take it on himself. His eyes were liquid.

I wanted to yell at him to wipe away the tears because dads don't cry. And anyway, I needed to see his eyes properly. I thought they might have the answers to what on earth was going on. But still I couldn't speak. Even his hands holding mine couldn't keep me there, and I drifted away again.

It was five days, Mum told me later. Nearly a week of not knowing if I would survive. My head was still throbbing when I woke up. My neck felt rubbery, like there was no bone in it any more.

Dr McBaldy and Mum stood at the end of my bed. They were talking without making a sound. I couldn't even hear them whispering. I thought they were being pretty stupid. If they didn't want to wake me, why didn't they talk in the corridor?

Out of the corner of my eye I saw two men in hospital

blue racing past the open door, a stretcher between them. I could see their mouths moving. I could see the wheels under the stretcher turning. Shouldn't all that be loud? And where were the beeps of the machines, all the other hospital sounds? How was it possible to mute a whole hospital scene? And *why?*

The skirt of my new uniform is navy, criss-crossed with lines of red and grey. Identifying colours. I stand up and sling my backpack over my shoulder. My stop is next. I keep my eyes on the door.

Horse Girl and co. get off at my stop. I hang back, wait for them to clear out. But once I'm off the tram we're stuck on the traffic island together. I'm glad the girls don't look back at me. They cross the road when a gap in the traffic appears.

I wait for the green man to tell me when to cross. Cars and motorbikes can appear out of nowhere, and as everyone keeps reminding me, I won't hear them coming.

The three girls move off, sticking their earphones in as they go. They are choosing to block out the sounds of the world. It's a choice I used to make without thinking.

I coach myself on my breathing, trying to calm the nasty doubts that flip around the edges of my mind. I've already decided. It's too late for old doubts to come in and start messing things up.

I watch as the girls reach their school gate. It's only a couple of hundred metres from the gate I'm standing in front of now.

As I walk through the wrought-iron gate I feel like I'm passing through a portal. Like everything inside is going to be weird and magical. But the gravel on the other side of the gate just feels like normal gravel.

I walk past a little girl hanging upside down on the monkey bars. Two boys chase each other, one tossing a handful of woodchip at the other's back.

The gravel path leads to the office. I walk inside.

The office lady looks busy. She bustles up to the window.

I wonder if I should talk or sign.

"I'm new," I say. "D-e-m-i V-a-l-e-n-t-i-n-o." I spell out my name in sign as I speak to cover my bases.

She nods, breathing out through her nose as she does. She checks something on the computer and then points me in the direction of my new form room.

I go through the quadrangle, which is a large square of green. There's a boy sitting alone on a bench. A girl

rifling through her school bag. There are trees and pigeons. It's like they're trying to make the school seem normal, natural. I watch as a flock of birds flies up to the roof.

A red light flashes and spins up there. I know there's no emergency but it still makes me think of ambulances and police cars and disasters.

There's a sudden flurry of students now, summoned by the flashing light.

In the classroom I'm relieved that the desk closest to the door is free. It means that I don't have to walk past anybody. It also means that I can get out quickly if I have to. I sit down. I keep my head still and let my eyes wander. There are already some kids at their desks, and two more have just walked in. Now there are eight, including me.

At first glance, they don't *look* that different. Not their faces anyway. But there's something kind of overblown, over the top, about the way they're acting. Waving hands everywhere. And their expressions are exaggerated. Not quite right. NQR, as we used to say at my old school.

I feel a thump and jump as my desk wobbles. When it happens again, I can see the table-thumper is on the other side of the room, near the window. He has bad skin, but good eyes. His eyes are sky blue and fringed by long, dark

lashes. He is writing something in his notebook. Then he waves his hand right in front of the blonde guy next to him, showing him the note.

That would drive me crazy, such an invasion of personal space. But the blonde guy doesn't seem to mind. He reads the note and slowly turns to look out the window. But I think they are both looking at my reflection even though they're pretending to look out the window. I get the distinct feeling that the note is about me and I don't like it.

I give them one of my looks. The don't-mess-with-me. Nadia reckons that look could kill.

The table-thumper looks amused and for a second I want to point this out to Nadia and roll my eyes. I actually forget that she's not beside me, to point anything out to any more.

The blonde guy gives me an apologetic smile, like he's got the message. It's the second apologetic smile I've got today, and again I feel like I might have misread something. But it's just weird and rude and wrong, teenagers thumping tables and waving their hands like that. I switch my focus to someone else.

There are a few empty seats next to me. Further along there are two girls laughing together. They are signing so fast that it's like their conversation is some kind of race.

Their hands swish through the air and I miss most of what they are saying. I get "hot" and "boy" before one of them catches me looking. She turns away slightly and I'm blocked out.

There are another three kids sitting in front of me. Two girls and a guy in the middle. I can only see their backs. It's a relief that I can't see their faces and hands. I feel like I'm on overload, that this is all too strange, these people are all too strange.

But as I stare at the guy's back I remind myself I don't have to like it here. I just have to focus and study, so that somehow there might be a future for me after all. There might even be the future I'd planned for, before.

I push that thought away. Another hopeless wish.

Everyone continues what they're doing when the teacher walks in. She's curvy and she's wearing a great dress. It's very sixties, with a geometric print in yellows and blues. She looks like a normal teacher, except prettier.

I notice a pendant thing round her neck. It's the only thing about her that isn't pretty. I think it's a streamer. I saw a leaflet about them at one of my millions of appointments with specialists. It explained how a streamer connects someone's hearing aids to their mobile phone or iPod or whatever via Bluetooth.

I feel a stab of jealousy. The teacher must have enough hearing for it to work for her.

The teacher walks to the front of the room, puts her laptop down and stands in front of her desk.

With no warning, she starts drumming her ballet flats on the wooden floor, as though she's in one of those dance movies where it's perfectly normal to break into dance every so often. I feel the vibrations in the soles of my school shoes and give a snort of disbelief. *What the—?*

I was obviously wrong about her seeming normal.

Everyone in class looks up, not like the teacher's off her head, just like she's got their attention.

I realise suddenly that everyone seems too happy for a Monday. Too happy to be at school at the beginning of a new year. And year eleven, when everything matters so much.

I wonder for the millionth time whether I will ever be happy again.

"A big welcome," the teacher says, with her mouth and her hands, "to D-e-m-i."

She finger-spells my name, letter by letter. Her thumbs are outstretched, her palms and fingers working in front of her chest.

The other students have gone back to their conversations.

The teacher drums her feet again, and throws her hands in the air. I almost expect her to tap-dance across the floorboards. But it's a cue, obviously. My face flushes red as a classroom of hands welcomes me. The three sitting in front welcome me without turning round.

The teacher wags a finger at them, mock disapproval on her face, before she smiles at me. She has a nice smile. Then she turns around and writes her name on the board. Helena. It suits her.

She passes out a timetable to each of us. The school letterhead is printed in bold. The logo is the same as the one on my blazer pocket.

COLLEGE FOR THE DEAF



Chrissie Keighery is the author of many successful books for young readers, including stories in the *Go Girl* series and a novel for young adults, *Outside In*.

Chrissie lives in Melbourne, Australia with her husband and three children. She has spent time as a high-school English teacher, and credits this as the reason she started to write for children and young adults.

When she writes, Chrissie tucks herself away in a room with black-out blinds. She finds that she needs a cocoon like this to dive deep inside her characters, to bring to life the physical and emotional ups and downs of teen life.