

# Chloe

**Chloe** sat at her desk alone in her bedroom. It was a spartanly decorated room with white curtains, a flowered bedspread and a single picture of her family on the wall. A crucifix was secured directly above her headboard. Chloe was twelve and a sturdily-built brunette like her mother, wearing a green shirt and hand-me-down blue jeans. She was working on her homework, algebra to be exact, and it was not going well. Though she would be on the honor roll if not for the subject, she struggled just to maintain a C average in the class. She preferred English Literature as she loved to read. Reading brought her into new worlds and other lives far better than the one she was living.

Chloe Caniff was born both deaf and without the use of her vocal cords. It was terribly difficult for her to make any vocal sound whatsoever; a grunt or any forced noise was rare—not that she could hear it anyway. Chloe, along with her mother, went to special schools early to learn to sign. Sign language was the only way she could communicate with her parents unless she wanted to carry around a notebook all of the time.

Chloe's father, Michael, never really learned the language of sign. He was a self-proclaimed 'man's man,' which meant little to Chloe. He worked at a manufacturing plant in the town's industrial park for over twenty years and played golf on the side, drank at the VFW a couple nights a week and occasionally went bowling with his buddies. His salary was good, but it never seemed to be enough for a family of four; money was often at a premium. Though Michael learned certain sign words or phrases, he could never be bothered to go to any class and learn the skill outright. Chloe had a love/hate relationship with her father. He had moments when he was tender but, most of the time, he was gruff and aloof. Her father chose to spend most of his time fawning over Chloe's older brother, Brian. Brian was not deaf and could speak, Brian was an athlete in high school, Brian was normal—whatever that was.

Brian, like their father, only knew certain words and phrases in sign. It was enough to get by, maybe ask to pass the butter or something like that, but it was sadly lacking in the sharing of ideas, emotions and the like. It was Chloe's mother, Brenda, who was her confidant and sidekick. Brenda was a stocky woman passing forty; she dressed plainly but was always smiling and outwardly happy. Her mother—she liked to be called 'Momma'—seemed to admire the pretty things, but it was always at a distance. It was Brenda that named her Chloe because it was a beautiful name and it sounded French. Brenda always wanted a daughter to share things with and was over the moon when little Chloe was born. The doctors telling them about their little girl's afflictions let very little air out of that balloon for Brenda. Michael was harder to read; he returned to life as it was, leaving the child rearing almost exclusively to his wife.

Friends were hard to come by, though there had been few. Chloe met several young people like her in school or church. Chloe and Brenda went to church every Sunday and rarely missed; Michael and Brian rarely went, except for maybe Christmas or Easter so they could all go to dinner afterwards. Chloe's closest friend was Nicole, a deaf girl from two towns away that went to her church. They often emailed each other and huddled together during mass, their fingers flying in conversation. Chloe sighed as she thought of her friend; she would email her again as soon as her homework was done.

The other thing that Chloe was born with was something that no one knew about. Not that she kept it a secret; she often told her mother about it, but her mother either had a hard time understanding or did not believe her. It was frustrating, but soon Chloe felt that there would be a breakthrough. She had been working so hard all of her life on this and she may have strengthened herself to reach the next level.

Chloe could hear other people talking in her head.

These were not make-believe people, mind you; they were people in close proximity to her. Usually she heard her family, or the neighbors or passers-by. She heard their voices and she was convinced it was what they would sound like to her if she could hear them at all, speaking to themselves like an inner monologue of sorts. It was like a radio broadcast would be; voices (some faint, some stronger) fighting for air time. Most of the things people thought about were silly or funny but, sometimes, they were disgustingly dirty or really scary.

She knew that her father was not really in love with her mother but he was really proud of her brother, Brian. Sometimes her father thought of other women, including the waitress at the bowling alley/pool hall/pub. They flirted with each other, though it never went any further than that. It was scary and a little sad how empty her father seemed to her.

Brian thought of girls a lot and was incredibly gross; since he entered high school, he'd had a lot of crazy ideas about girls and things that he wanted to do with them. Though he had a couple of girlfriends over the years, they were never serious and his fantasies remained unrealized. Brian was a little happier than her father; he loved his mom and dad and, also, loved Chloe. At least, in a way that Brian could love a sister. She was annoying and a pain, but he still felt love and, sometimes, pity for her. That hurt her a little, but what hurt her more was that most of the time, Brian simply ignored her. It was frustrating.

Her mother was a little sad as well. She wanted a good life for Chloe and tried to overcompensate for her afflictions. She showered Chloe with attention and that was wonderful, but her thoughts were sometimes of how sad her own life was. Homemaker, housewife, cleaning woman, chef, chauffer, and a lot of other duties wore down on Brenda; she felt that she had so much more to experience in life. She would do so, Chloe learned, when the kids were grown and gone from the house. She would travel then and see exotic places, she would go back to college and finish her degree—she would spend more of her attention on herself

and her husband, if he was still interested. Even if Michael did not want to travel or do those other things, Brenda was determined to make it happen. Chloe was happy about that.

The other thing was that Chloe was unable to fully open up to her mother about her gift. She tried many times but Brenda did not seem to understand, even when Chloe mentioned (in sign language) specific things Brenda was thinking about. In response, Brenda often said that she must have overheard her talking to Chloe's father or brother or that she simply knew her mother so well that it was easy to figure out what she was thinking. This would change soon; Chloe felt it in her heart.

Not only was she a receiver but Chloe found that she could now transmit thoughts and possibly images as well.

It was difficult sometimes shutting out all of the voices. As she grew older, Chloe's abilities strengthened exponentially; so much so that there could be dozens of voices in her head all at once. She learned how to control the voices, to quiet them and to shut them off altogether. It took a little focus but, with practice, she became better and better at it. She need not struggle at school as she could hear the teachers' thoughts about the subjects, quizzes and tests in their minds. It would be very easy to simply eavesdrop and get most, if not all, of the answers and ace every subject. Chloe was determined, however, to not do that, to earn her own way. It was an education that she needed and taking the answers would not do her any good. She was a very disciplined young lady.

Then, there was the deer in the back yard.

It was not too long ago during the summertime and Chloe was by herself in the backyard. They lived in the suburbs and there were woods in her neighborhood; also, there were animals. Turkeys, fox, coyote and deer as well as squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, skunks, raccoons and many types of birds lived in the area. The animals in the area had been coming by more frequently because she could call them. She had been trying for years and, slowly, it seemed to be working. She could feel an animal's presence; feel what it was thinking. They spoke no language but there were images and feelings emanating from the animals. Chloe reached out to them.

*Come here.*

Some would come closer; a bird would land on a nearby branch or a rabbit would appear from the bush. A fox once walked along the sidewalk right in front of their home before darting back into the trees in the neighbor's yard. Squirrels and chipmunks went about the place paying her no attention. Day after day, she tried. It was a late August day with the sun setting behind the trees and painting the sky red that Chloe was standing in the center of the backyard. In her hand was a carrot she had taken from the refrigerator only a few minutes before.

*Come here.*

A deer stepped from the tree line and into the open.

*I won't hurt you.*

The deer slowly stepped closer to Chloe. It was a doe, maybe a year old or so.

*You're so beautiful.*

The deer was only five feet or so away. Chloe held out the carrot.

*Would you like a carrot?*

The deer stepped up to her and took a bite of the carrot. It watched her closely as it chewed. It took another bite and Chloe reached out with her other hand and gently pet it on the head.

*Take it.*

The deer took the rest of the carrot from Chloe's hand but remained, as if uncertain what to do next.

*Go now, be safe.*

The doe backed away from Chloe and slowly retreated into the trees. Chloe watched her go for some time until she could not see it any longer.

Now it was time to try to talk to Momma.

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Chloe sat on the corner of the coffee table in the living room looking out of the picture window at the scenery. Her house sat in the middle of a typical suburban street; generous-sized treed lots with tidy homes, most with pools or garages (usually both). Her street was Oak and it was a cut through from the main road leading out of town, into Sheridan, to the other main road that leads to Eaton. Sandwiched in between were several blocks of trees and homes, side roads, dead ends and cul de sacs. Chloe liked her street even if there was more traffic than on some of the dead ends or other neighborhood roads where the only people that travelled there probably lived there. It was the generously preserved areas of trees on her street that Chloe appreciated the most, for that was where the animals lived.

Chloe loved the animals and, now that she could communicate with them, they seemed to like her. They travelled from the neighbors' yards into the woods and back again, all in search of something; food, companionship, or even a mate. She wasn't sure why the wooded areas had not been developed but she was glad that they were not. Her father often thought that, if he owned some of that land, he would sell it off to a builder for a nice sum of money. Her father was often thinking about money, not just the waitress at the bowling alley, it seemed.

She was still honing her skills, planning on showing her momma how she could finally speak with her without using her hands. She had summoned the same doe that she had met with the previous evening and it emerged from the woods, hearing Chloe's mind-call and hoping for more treats. Chloe had no food, but just wanted to say hello. The doe was a bit disappointed but said hello back.

*Will you have more treats soon?* the doe thought.

*Yes, I will get you some and leave it out for you and your friends,* Chloe's mind answered.

*Thank you.*

*You're welcome.*

*Who is the big person standing behind you?* The doe asked. It broke Chloe's concentration as she turned in time to see her father standing directly behind her and peering out of the window over her shoulder.

"Hey, that's a doe!" he said. Chloe froze with fear and the doe sensed it from her. The doe took off into the tree line and was gone in a moment.

"Did you see that?" he asked her. Chloe only stared at him; though she could read his lips and hear his thoughts, she did not respond. Her father looked her in the face and sighed, raised his hand and began to spell out deer in sign language.

"Did you see the deer?" he asked again. Chloe shook her head 'yes.'

"Was that what you were looking at?" he said aloud, not bothering to sign. He knew that she had some skill as a lip-reader. Chloe shook her head again, 'yes.'

"Too bad it wasn't a buck. Too bad I didn't have my shotgun...I might have shot it anyway," he said, turning back to the picture window. Chloe was frightened for the deer; she felt a bolt of anger towards her father that passed as soon as it had arrived. Her father turned back to her and smiled.

"Let me know if you see a buck outside...the ones with antlers," he said, holding his fingers out from his head in an attempt to mimic antlers. Chloe only stared at him, no emotion showing on her face.

"OK, kiddo...good talk," he said, and left her then. He went to the kitchen to forage for food, leaving Chloe and her thoughts. Though she would try to talk to her mother very soon now, she could not imagine trying to talk to her father with her mind. She was not sure that he would be able to receive her and, even if he did, that he would be able to understand anything that she was trying to say. She believed him to be a Neanderthal of sorts and wondered often why her mother married him in the first place.

Chloe rose and followed her father into the kitchen; he had his hand in a bag of potato chips and was loitering around her mother, who appeared to be in the middle of baking brownies. She was pouring the batter into a dish, slapping her father's hand away when he tried to dip his finger into the bowl. Her mother spotted her entering the kitchen and motioned for her to sit at the table. Her father patted off to another part of the house, taking the bag of chips with him.

"I saw the deer," her mother said, scraping the remainder of the batter out with a wooden spoon. She put the bowl down then pointed to the kitchen window and signed to Chloe about the deer. Chloe shook her head 'yes.' She watched her mother carefully, wanting

so very badly to start speaking with her using her mind. She gently reached out, like a person increasing the volume on a radio one tiny fraction at a time.

“Did you hear your father? Some mighty hunter...he hasn’t bagged any deer in years,” her mother said. Chloe smiled as her mother smiled, still reaching a little more and then a little more than that. Her mother took the dish to the heated oven and placed it on the rack. She returned to the table, grabbed the dishtowel and began cleaning up. Chloe ever so slightly continued reaching for her mother. She watched her closely, hoping to see the moment when her mother began to receive her.

*Mother?* Chloe asked with her mind. Brenda continued to wipe down the kitchen table, careful to get all of the powdered flour from every nook and cranny.

*Mother?* Chloe’s mind reached again. Her mother should hear her now; she was at the same volume that could summon the doe to the front yard. Still nothing. Chloe decided to increase the volume more.

*Mother!* Chloe’s mind yelled. It wasn’t the loudest yell she could make but Chloe felt that it should have enough punch to make anyone pay attention.

“What?” Brenda said as she continued wiping. Was she answering Chloe? Could she finally hear her daughter’s voice after a lifetime of silence? Even if it was not a sound made with her vocal cords, it would possibly be the biggest day they have ever shared together. Brenda finished wiping the table and tossed the dishtowel towards the sink. She put her hands on her hips and regarded her daughter with a look of confusion.

“You know, I thought I heard someone calling me,” Brenda said, apparently to herself. Chloe read her lips and shook her head ‘yes.’ Brenda looked to the living room to see if Michael or Brian were there. Chloe’s heart was hammering in her chest. Her mother finally heard her! It was nothing short of miraculous! She almost felt like crying.

“I must be hearing things,” Brenda said. She went to the refrigerator, opened the door and began rummaging around for something. Chloe felt that she had better go full volume; that seemed to be the only way her mother would hear her clearly. Chloe focused for a moment as if drawing in energy.

*MOTHER!* Chloe’s mind screamed.

“Wha!!!” was all Brenda could get out. She jumped back from the refrigerator as if struck by an electric shock. She stopped and turned to Chloe with eyes so large that they almost looked cartoonish.

*Hello, mamma.*

“Chloe...is that you?” Brenda asked. Chloe shook her head ‘yes.’

*I’ve been wanting to talk to you all my life*

“Your lips aren’t moving...but I can hear your voice...in my head.”

*Yes.*

“And you’re doing this?”

Yes.

“Oh my God,” Brenda said. She put her hand to her mouth, her eyes squinted with what looked like pain.

*Please don't be scared.*

“I'm not scared, baby...I'm trying not to cry,” Brenda said. She went to Chloe then and put her arms around her, squeezing her tightly.

*I love you, momma.*

“I love you too, baby girl.”

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Brenda and Chloe sat face to face at the kitchen table. It was a Saturday and the house was empty. Michael and Brian were at the High School getting ready for the baseball game. Brian was a catcher on the team and was pretty good at it; he split duties with Jared Koll, who wasn't as good defensively but had a slightly better batting average. With Brian, it was a homerun or bust – every at bat was an attempt to hit the ball out of the park. This made him strike out the most on the team but, every so often, he would connect and the ball would fly as if launched into space. It was exciting, but not the way his coaches wanted him to play.

Brenda and Chloe were to show up at the game later. Brenda came up with the idea that she wanted to start a big dinner for everyone and that she and Chloe would catch up to them. The big dinner would be a turkey that was now roasting in the oven; all of the sides in pots and pans decorated the stove top. The real idea behind it all was that Brenda wanted some alone time with Chloe, especially after the previous day's epiphany. Brenda wanted to 'talk' with Chloe some more and simply could not wait any longer.

They had not told the boys as of yet about Chloe's special talent. Brenda was not sure when, or even if, she would share that information. At least, not until Chloe was comfortable with telling them. Chloe was excited as well; she always wanted to speak without her hands to her mother. She had dreamed of this since she was a small child and was feeling terrible about having no voice and no way to hear the sounds of the world around her. Life was a constant silent movie where she could interact with the characters only if she could get their attention. Chloe began slowly, not certain what her mother would be able to send or receive.

*I think this is how your voice would sound if I could hear it.*

“And this is how you would sound?” Brenda asked, aloud. Though she was speaking with her mouth, the words were transmitted to Chloe's mind like a radio broadcast. Since they were in such close proximity, her momma was loud and clear.

*Yes. I can hear Daddy and Brian sometimes, too.*

“You haven't spoken to them yet...like this...have you?”

No.

“Good, because I’m not sure that your brother or your Daddy are ready for this.”

*They will have to be ready sometime.*

“Yes, baby, but not just yet,” Brenda said. She reached out and stroked a tuft of hair from Chloe’s face and smiled.

*I know, Mamma.*

“Still, you can hear them with your mind?”

*Sometimes.*

“And they don’t know?”

*No, they aren’t aware.*

“What’s it like? Can you see pictures, too?”

*I don’t see pictures often, mostly I just hear words. I guess it would be more like a radio show where I am the receiver. Not so much like a television.*

“But you see pictures sometimes?”

*Yes.*

“Do you hear everyone’s thoughts all at once?” Brenda asked, her face showing a trace of worry.

*If I let it. I can block out some or even all of it if I want. I can focus on one person or a couple, too.*

“Kind of like finding a channel on the radio or TV, I guess.”

*Yes.*

“Doesn’t it get to be too much? Confusing...all of those voices...”

*If I let it.*

“Well, be careful reading a man’s mind. It’s not the same as ours...they are brutes, all of them,” Brenda said. She leaned forward and touched her arm as if to emphasize her statement.

*I know...Brian is kinda gross sometimes.*

“And Daddy?” Brenda asked, her eyebrows shooting upward.

*Momma, I really try not to listen to either of them.*

Chloe looked down at the floor as if embarrassed; Brenda sighed and thought of what she’d say next for a moment.

“It’s probably best,” Brenda finally said.

*Daddy loves you, loves us all, it’s just...it’s just in his own way. I feel bad for him sometimes.*

“Why do you say that?”

*Sometimes he’s Daddy; he feels good and...confident...like he’s in charge and knows what to do. Other times, he feels small, like a little boy lost and afraid. I think that’s why he acts like a little boy sometimes, yelling and all that.*

That was something Brenda did not expect at all.

“And Brian?” she asked.



*He's a lot like Daddy but, sometimes, he's like you.*

"Oh?"

*He wants to be strong and confident but he also feels small sometimes. That's when I can feel him thinking about you and how you comfort him.*

"That's so sweet," Brenda said, feeling as if she could cry. She had to look away, at the ceiling, for a moment to let it pass. Then she looked to Chloe and asked, "What do they feel about you?"

Chloe sighed but smiled the slightest bit.

*Daddy loves me but he still doesn't know what to do with me. Not only am I a girl, something he really does not understand, but I have this...affliction. Not being able to hear or speak has been trying on him.*

"How does that make you feel?"

*Good. I love Daddy, even when he's poopy sometimes.*

"What about Brian?"

*Brian loves me but, just like Daddy, he has no idea how to deal with this.*

Chloe gestured around the room and Brenda understood. Chloe was her little angel but had grown so quickly, matured more than her years. How difficult had it been for her? More than Brenda could ever know. Now, with this newly developed gift, maybe she can finally communicate more with those she loved. Maybe it would help her going forward, help them all.

"We should continue to speak together, alone like this, when we get a chance," Brenda said.

*Yes, please...I love it!*

"Good...me too. And please don't read too much into your brother or your father...for my sake. They may have unclean ideas," Brenda said.

*Yes, Momma.*

"One more thing, baby girl; let's not start talking with your father or brother just yet," Brenda said, then smiled. Though she was smiling, was that worry in her eyes? Chloe could feel conflicting thoughts coming from her mother.

*OK...I guess so.*

"Good. I don't think that they are really ready for that. Do you?"

*No, probably not.*

"That's my girl. I love you, Chloe."

*Love you too, Momma.*

"You're so sweet. Look at the time; we should get ready to go to your brother's game," Brenda said. She leaned forward and hugged Chloe then; Chloe returned the hug tightly. For the first time in a long while, the two ladies felt better about themselves and their family. Maybe this was just the thing that would make them all close again. Brenda was hopeful and

Chloe could feel that hope emanating from her like the glow of a candle. Would Chloe like to help Momma with the family?

*Yes, Momma.*