

'I'll Do Anything For My Little Sister'

From the moment her baby sister Caitlin was born severely disabled following a stroke, Cheyenne McLaughlin has been there to help

Step into the McLaughlin household and it's clear who runs the show. Six-year-old Caitlin whirls around the living room to the jangling tune and flashing lights of the toy car that she's instructed her sister, Cheyenne, to play on repeat. 'She has me wrapped round her little finger!' says Cheyenne, 14.

'She's very much Cheyenne's girl, isn't she?' says mum Sharon, 35, as dad Shaun, 40, laughs from the sofa. 'When she was little she was daddy's girl,' he says. 'But if you asked her now, she'd definitely say she's Cheyenne's.'

Watching her dancing and playing with her sister, it's hard to believe the setbacks this bubbly little girl has already faced in her short life. Caitlin had a stroke before she was

born. As a result, she now suffers from hemiplegia (a form of cerebral palsy), epilepsy, learning and speech difficulties, and is severely visually impaired – indeed, she's registered blind.

'Caitlin's stroke had a huge impact on our lives,' says Sharon. 'Everything totally changed overnight – not least me having to leave my job to become her full-time carer. Her initial prognosis was bleak. Because of

'Through caring for Caitlin, Cheyenne has discovered her calling'

the extent of her brain damage, the doctors thought she'd never walk, talk or see.'

But Caitlin's progress surpassed everyone's greatest hopes. And the 'sunshine in the family,' as Sharon puts it, was the instant bond Cheyenne – who was eight at the time – formed with baby

Caitlin. While the couple's two sons – James, 16, and Lewis, 11 – have a good relationship with Caitlin, Sharon says they didn't 'click' with her in the way Cheyenne did. 'Cheyenne became mummy, really,' says Sharon. 'She wanted to do everything, help with everything. Change nappies, make her bottles, feed her, hold her all the time...'

'I'd always wanted a little sister. So when I finally got one I kept hold of her,' smiles Cheyenne.

The bond between the two girls held strong – a huge help to Sharon when Shaun went back to working night shifts at the airport and Sharon found herself at home with a new baby and three other young children.

When the family moved house, Cheyenne announced that she wanted a double bed to share with Caitlin. 'We were really touched,' says Sharon. 'Cheyenne said she wanted to be the first to know if Caitlin had an epileptic seizure during the night, so she'd be able to alert us and help look after her.'

Caitlin's epilepsy is unpredictable. She can go a fortnight without any seizures and then have up to 30 in one day, leaving her exhausted. But big sister Cheyenne is right



Cheyenne loves to play with Caitlin

there to alert her mum, stay with her during the seizure – putting her in the recovery position if necessary – and cuddle her afterwards. 'We just have to wait for her to ride it out,' Sharon says. 'The longer it goes on, the harder it is to watch. But Cheyenne always steps up to the mark.'

Cheyenne admits that caring for Caitlin is stressful at times – as Sharon says, Caitlin can be 'hard work'. 'It's frustrating if I'm trying to do homework and she just wants to play. But then I'll give her a piece of paper so she can join in. I know my parents appreciate the help so, even though it's annoying at times, I wouldn't change it. Caitlin's my little sister and I'd do anything for her.'

Her parents' appreciation is obvious. Shaun and Sharon agree that they are 'incredibly proud' of Cheyenne and



There were never such devoted sisters: Caitlin with Cheyenne

nominated her for the Stroke Association's Carer Award as a way of showing their gratitude. 'If Cheyenne weren't such a help, I'd have pulled all my hair out by now,' says Sharon. 'I'm so thrilled that she's won because we just wanted to show her that we do appreciate her and everything she does. We think it's really important that Caitlin has someone closer to her own age helping her out – it helps her to have a more normal life.'

Through caring for Caitlin, Cheyenne believes she has discovered her calling and now plans to become a special needs teacher when she's older. She already helps out at meet-ups

Woman's Weekly Real Life

organised by a charity for children with hemiplegia. 'She's a natural with the kids,' says Sharon. 'She just seems to get on their level straight away – it doesn't matter what their problems are, she's like a magnet to them. I don't think she sees the disability.'

Cheyenne agrees. 'Whether they've got Down's syndrome or learning difficulties, I just see them as little kids.' When I suggest that, if there's any 'silver lining' to Caitlin's situation, it's Cheyenne discovering this talent, she admits shyly, 'I was born to do it. And I might not have discovered that if it weren't for Caitlin. I suppose there's a reason for everything.'

For Caitlin, sadly, the future is less clear. 'We can't look too far ahead,' says Sharon. While the little girl has amazed doctors – and proved their initial prognosis wrong – her development is unpredictable.

'Sometimes she's doing so well that we expect her to make more progress and when she doesn't, it's heartbreaking. But then there are other times when we think she won't be able to do something and she surprises us. So we take things day by day.'

But what's certain is that Caitlin will always hold a special place in Cheyenne's heart. 'Of course I want to go off and do my own thing when I'm older,' she says. 'But no matter what, no matter where I am, I'll always be there for Caitlin.'



The whole family is 'incredibly proud' of Cheyenne (centre)

STROKE Facts

Roughly **152,000** people in the UK suffer a stroke every year

More than **200** babies suffer from strokes every year in the UK. While stroke is commonly associated with older people, it can happen to children and even unborn babies

For more information about strokes, and to find out how the Stroke Association can help both stroke survivors and their carers, visit stroke.org.uk

Stroke is the most common cause of complex disability in the world

More than **1.2** million people in this country are currently living with the after-effects of a stroke

If you think someone is having a stroke use the FAST test to help you recognise the signs:

FACIAL weakness: can the person smile? Has their mouth or eye drooped?

ARM weakness: can the person raise both arms?

SPEECH problems: can the person speak clearly and understand what you are saying?

TIME to call 999