

The background of the cover is a misty forest of evergreen trees. A bright light source, possibly the sun, is positioned behind a cloud in the upper center, creating a soft glow and illuminating the scene. The overall color palette is cool, dominated by blues, greys, and greens.

CLOUD WARRIOR

Erin Fanning

MONARCH JUNGLE®

Art Seen

Instafamous

Avalanche

Lost in Time

Baby Mama

Summer Lake

Blurred Reality

The Throwaways

Cloud Warrior



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Chapter 1

Sun and Shadows

Ask me my favorite sport. I'd have to say kayaking. It's good exercise. And it's a mental workout too. There's something about facing the elements. It tests every part of you. Sunny weather is a bonus. But this is Saddle City. Chances of sun in the mountains are fifty-fifty.

It was just after sunrise. I rode with my dad. Two kayaks were in the back of his pickup. My best friend, Juan, was in his truck. He followed us to a fishing site. That's where he left his truck. Then we drove on to the launch site. From here, Juan and I would paddle back.

My dad helped us unload the kayaks. Then we slid them into the water and got in. Our 15-mile ride started now. We waved back at my dad and started paddling.

Juan and I had been here before. We knew Blackwater River well. It was broken up into sections. The upper part

was mostly flat. The water was calm. Earlier I'd checked the forecast. So far it was in my favor.

A few minutes had gone by. I looked up at the sky. There were a few gray patches. Though I was no expert, I knew clouds. These led to rain. So much for the forecast.

The rest of the sky was blue. We'd be fine, I told myself. But one thought nagged at me. Clouds don't lie.

"Let's pick up the pace." I pointed up with my paddle. "See those clouds? We need to get ahead of them."

Juan was eating an energy bar. "Wait, don't tell me. They spoke to you." He laughed so hard, bits of food flew from his mouth.

"Keep your mouth shut, fool. Remember who you're talking to."

"So sorry, Cloud Warrior. But I say you're wrong. Those clouds look harmless." Juan laughed.

"Go ahead. Laugh. I'll enjoy seeing that smirk wiped off your face."

Juan jabbed his middle finger at me. "Whatever." He took off paddling.

I surged toward him. "What's with you?"

"What do you mean? I'm being my usual charming self. It's why the babes drool over me."

"Rabid dogs drool over you."

"I have my admirers." A zit on his nose shone in the sun.

“Have you looked in a mirror? We’re not exactly sex symbols.”

“Speak for yourself,” Juan said.

I was. Most girls in my class towered over me. I wore glasses. My ears stuck out. And I was already losing my hair.

Our look was not high fashion. At school, we wore whatever was clean. On the water, we looked really sloppy. Wide-brimmed hats. Ragged shorts and T-shirts. Our life vests had some style. But we’d end up covered in mud anyway.

The kayaks didn’t look so good either. Mine had bird poop on it. It was baked on by the sun. Juan’s had oil splatters from working on his truck.

We weren’t cool. But we were prepared. Our dry bags carried supplies. Rope. Flashlights. First-aid kit. Extra clothes. Water and snacks.

Juan’s paddle sliced the water in rhythm with mine.

“It’s getting hot,” Juan said. He pushed up his sleeves.

Normally we wouldn’t be sweating this soon. But the air was so dry. Another sign of a storm. “It won’t last,” I told Juan. “We just have to get ahead of the weather.” I wasn’t going to let anything ruin this trip.

Chapter 2

Tangled

Juan and I paddled in silence. The water was calm. We leaned into the breeze.

Pine trees lined the shore. Hawks flew overhead. Fish jumped out of the water. It was a perfect day.

Just ahead was a dam. The river became a reservoir. It was called Cub Lake. Beyond that, the river picked up again. That's when the paddling really began.

Fast water made it a fun ride. And though still easy, some skill was needed. Mainly it was watching for obstacles. Rocks. Small logs. Tree limbs. The hardest part would be the waves. But even those were mild. All of it was a warm-up for later.

After a while, we paddled across Cub Lake. It was a great spot for fishing. Families camped here. It seemed odd that no one was around. There was only an eerie

quiet. Was it some kind of omen? Maybe they knew something I didn't.

I hadn't checked the dam's release schedule. Now I wished I had. The water level could rise with no warning. But it was too late to worry. Today was a holiday. No one was working. I wasn't even sure I could get a phone signal.

Suddenly there was a noise. It broke through the quiet. I couldn't quite make it out. But it wasn't from nature. "Hear that?"

Juan nodded. We slowed our paddling.

"Over there," I said.

There were three guys and a girl. The guys were yelling. The girl was sitting with her knees drawn up. Her arms were wrapped around her legs.

Juan froze. "Maria?"

I couldn't tell. The girl's hair blew across her face. It was a tangled mess. But I wasn't taking chances. I started paddling.

The wind had picked up. A wave sloshed over the bow of my kayak. I looked at the girl again. She moved her hair from her face. It *was* Maria.

The voices got louder. I continued to watch. One guy was doing most of the talking. He paced back and forth. His movements were frantic. Then I noticed his muscles. They were huge. If a fight broke out, the two smaller guys would lose.

Now their faces were visible. I knew them. One was Tyler. He was Maria's boyfriend. The other was Chris. He used to be my friend. Somewhere along the line, he turned into a loser. If he wasn't skipping school, he was busy scoring weed. This kid did not fit in with Maria and Tyler. They were popular. Chris was not cool at all.

The big guy looked older. At first I didn't recognize him. Then I remembered. He worked at Burger Bar. I hadn't been there in a while. But at that time, he had short hair. Now it was long and he had a beard. I wondered if he'd been fired.

Tyler stood next to Maria. Chris walked over to the edge of the woods. He stood in front of a campfire. Behind him was a tent.

"Hold on, Raul," Juan yelled.

Maria's head whipped around. Juan's voice must have carried to shore. I noticed the shadows under Maria's eyes. Her skin wasn't its normal brown. It looked gray.

Mr. Muscles had also heard Juan. Now he ran in our direction. Not sure what to do, I waved. I must have looked like a dork sitting there bobbing up and down.

"Don't call attention to us," Juan said. His kayak bumped into mine. "Let's keep going. We can pretend we don't see them."

"Something weird is going on. We can't leave Maria," I said.

“Yeah, well, she chose her friends a long time ago.”

“That’s harsh.”

Maria had dropped us for the cool kids. Juan had never forgiven her. I could forgive anything when it came to Maria.

Right now I wanted to fly across the water—with or without a kayak. I started paddling with long forward strokes.

“Easy, lover boy,” Juan said. “You don’t want to get too close. We can’t help Maria if those guys kill us.”

I slowed down. “You’re right. We’ll stay back.”

“And be cool.”

“That’s not easy for you and me.”

Juan laughed. “Not easy for you.”

Chapter 3

Danger

We were now close to shore. “Hi, Maria,” I called out. “Hey, Tyler.”

Tyler stood over Maria. A wide, creepy smile stretched across his face. It was straight out of a horror movie. Maria didn’t move or speak. Chris poked at the fire with a stick.

“How’s it going, Chris?” Juan asked.

“Great. Nice day, isn’t it?”

Tyler stepped forward. “Hey, Cloud Warrior.” Then he nodded at Juan. “How’s it going, Stinky Feet?”

Juan flinched. I rolled my eyes. These names were from fourth grade. I often wondered if anyone knew our real names.

My nickname came from a school assignment. It was

on family heritage. We had to give a report on our ancestors. Mine are from Peru. They lived during the time of the Incas. The Chachapoya. It means “Cloud people.” They had been fighters, called “Cloud warriors.” Kids started calling me that. But I didn’t mind back then. I loved clouds. I still do.

Juan got his nickname that same year. He had bad foot odor. It was so rank that kids in his PE class got sick. One boy even puked. Juan’s hygiene got a lot better. But no one would let him forget.

Maria’s eyes were wide. She blinked a few times. It was an attempt to tell me something. But what? Mr. Muscles whispered in her ear. Then he looked over at us. “Nice day for paddling,” he said. He squeezed Maria’s shoulder. She held up a limp hand. Her fingers fluttered in a sort of wave.

“I remember you from the burger place. You’re ...”

“Steve,” he said.

“Right. What are you guys doing out here? Fishing?”

“Oh my God,” Juan said in a low voice. “Is that the best you could come up with? Do you see any gear?”

“Yeah, you could say that,” Steve said. “We’re fishing. Right, Tyler?”

“Um, sure.” Tyler shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He forced the creepy smile again.

Maria squirmed under Steve's grip. He clamped down even harder. "Say hello to your friends, Mary."

When Maria joined the popular crowd, she gave up her Spanish name.

"Hi, Raul," she said.

"Want to go fishing with us?" Steve asked. "The more the merrier." He looked at Tyler and smiled. "Right?"

Tyler wobbled. He looked like he might fall over.

Chris stood against a tree. He was eating something. Then he coughed and waved his hands. I couldn't tell if he was choking or warning me.

Steve went over to Chris. "Let me help you," Steve said. He reached out and grabbed one of Chris's arms. The motion pulled Steve's T-shirt up. Something metallic glinted in the sun. It could have been a gun. Before I could tell, the shirt fell back into place.

"Sounds good," I said. "But I think we'll have to pass. Right, Juan?"

I looked around. Juan was already paddling toward the dam.

"See you later," I said.

"Hold on," Steve shouted.

I glanced over my shoulder. Chris held up a beer in a toasting gesture. Tyler wrapped an arm around Maria. She moved to get away from him.

“*Ayudame,*” she mouthed. It was Spanish for *help me*.

I took out my cell phone. No signal. When I glanced over, I saw Steve. He walked quickly along the shoreline. Juan and I would get around the dam before he reached it. Steve had a long way to go. I took off paddling.