

CLOUD WARRIOR

Erin Fanning



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.”

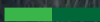
Juan laughed. “Not easy for you.”

CLOUD WARRIOR

For a kid who can predict weather, Raul really messed up. As he and his friend Juan head out in their kayaks, storm clouds fill the sky. Raul isn't too worried. For him, there's nothing like facing nature. Bad weather. Raging water. Wild animals. He'll take it all on. But then he sees Maria, the one girl he cares about. Why is she here? And will Raul be ready to face a different kind of danger? The human kind.



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BILLIE EILISH

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

Early Life	4
------------------	---

CHAPTER 2

Intro to Music	16
----------------------	----

CHAPTER 3

Rise to Success	28
-----------------------	----

CHAPTER 4

Stardom	40
---------------	----

CHAPTER 5

Influences and Collaborations	52
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CHAPTER 1

EARLY LIFE

WHO IS HALSEY?

Halsey is a singer and songwriter. Her given name is Ashley Nicolette Frangipane. She was born on September 29, 1994, in Clark, New Jersey. The star still visits her home state. New Jersey is “like a little sister or a little brother that’s annoying . . . but I love you still,” the singer told Business Insider.



WHO IS BILLIE EILISH?

Singer and songwriter Billie Eilish was born on December 18, 2001. Her parents named her Billie Eilish Pirate Baird O'Connell. The singer was named after her grandfather Bill. "Pirate was going to be my middle name," she told the BBC in 2017. "But then my uncle had a problem with it because pirates are bad. Then Baird is my mother's name." Billie was born in Los Angeles, California.





Nicole Frangipane

THE FRANGIPANE FAMILY

Halsey's parents are Nicole and Chris. They had her very young. Both dropped out of college to raise their child. Nicole worked security at a hospital. Chris managed a car dealership. Halsey's mother is Italian and Hungarian. Her father is African American and Irish.

THE BAIRD O'CONNELL FAMILY

Billie's parents are Maggie Baird and Patrick O'Connell. They are both of Irish and Scottish descent. While working as actors in a play, the two met and fell in love. Maggie was in a famous comedy group called the Groundlings. Billie's parents were older than Halsey's parents when they had children. At that point, they stopped focusing on acting. Both did voice-over work, and Maggie taught trapeze classes. Patrick also worked at Mattel. He built displays for selling Barbie dolls.



Maggie Baird

WORKING-CLASS NEW JERSEY GIRL



Nicole and Chris changed jobs often when Halsey was a child. They sometimes had to work two jobs each. The family moved from town to town for work. “I grew up in a really chaotic household,” Halsey told *Rolling Stone*. She changed schools nearly every year until the age of 13.

An aerial photograph of a suburban neighborhood in Edison, New Jersey. The image shows a grid of residential streets lined with various houses, many with large trees in their yards. Several cars are parked along the streets. A blue rounded rectangle with the text 'Edison, New Jersey' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Edison, New Jersey

A BOHEMIAN FAMILY

Billie is from an artistic family. Like Halsey, her childhood was not privileged.

She was raised in Highland Park, Los Angeles. The singer says it was too dangerous to go outside after dark. “Automatically, people think you’re from Beverly Hills. . . . Not at all. I grew up with no money at all. . . . I had one pair of shoes and a shirt,” the star told the *Guardian*. Her parents still sleep in the living room of their two-bedroom bungalow.





SCHOOL DAYS

Halsey went to Warren Hills Regional High School. This is in Washington, New Jersey. It is a small town. The teenager took advanced placement (AP) classes and was a good student. However, she did not fit in. Halsey was more artistic than many of her classmates. Painting was a hobby. She designed the school yearbook too. At 14, Halsey was posting her paintings and other work on MySpace. The teen also worked at a music venue. There, she helped to book bands. In 2012, the future star graduated high school.

HOMESCHOOL



While Halsey went to many different schools, the Baird O'Connell children were homeschooled. Creativity and self-expression were important. Maggie explained to *Vogue*, "We homeschooled in a way that was interest-led and experiential. Nothing had a higher value than the other." Billie and her brother took art classes. They also went to museums. Her parents taught them math through cooking. Billie earned her GED when she was 15.

HOMESCHOOLED STARS

Homeschooled students are often academic high achievers. Many stars have been homeschooled. Some began homeschooling after they became stars, and others long before. Stars who were homeschooled include Justin Bieber, Emma Watson, Venus and Serena Williams, the Jonas Brothers, Christina Aguilera, and Ryan Gosling. Demi Lovato and Selena Gomez were even homeschooled together.

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