

Fear coursed through her body. Her emerald-green eyes stared unblinkingly at the snarling animal. She saw the razor-sharp, decayed yellow teeth glinting reflectively in the scorching sunlight. She saw the twitching pink nose, the gleaming golden fur, and the cold, black eyes. Killer eyes. She clung desperately to Anne's sweaty hand, her fingers fumbling for the silver ring her friend always wore. She watched as the monster silently took a step towards them, growling menacingly, never taking those killer eyes off them. Zoe Jackson had never felt this afraid.

When the mountain lion pounced, Zoe blurted out a piercing shriek that shattered the tense silence. Everything seemed to be going in slow motion. She saw the big cat spring wildly into the air, and she felt the rough claws seizing her shoulder with crushing strength, pulling her to the ground. She saw Anne's horrified face as the monster landed on top of her, pinning her down, its face so close she could smell its acrid breath and see its pointed yellow teeth. Zoe looked down at the warm, scarlet paint covering her shirt. But was it paint? No. It was blood, drawn by the animal's painful claws on her shoulder. She had never seen so much blood, at least not on herself. It terrified her. She stared into the merciless killer eyes of the mountain lion, and then screamed as it leaned forward to sink its teeth into her neck.

She squeezed her eyes shut and waited for the pain, but it didn't come. Instead, she felt the crushing weight suddenly disappearing as strong hands roughly shoved the monster aside, sending it tumbling off Zoe. She cautiously opened her eyes, fearing she would find herself dying, but she saw herself lying in a slowly expanding puddle of warm, dark blood that covered her upper body and soaked her shirt. As her world faded into blackness, she heard the enraged mountain lion roar furiously, mingling with Anne's petrified shriek. Then, her world went black.

When she awoke, she found herself sprawled on a stretcher carried by blurry, unsmiling doctors in elaborate white coats. Her vision was odd and unclear, and her world seemed to be all creamy white. Where was she? Why didn't she remember anything? Her journey on the stretcher consisted of frowning faces, white walls, anxious doctors, hospital gowns. She felt herself being gently placed in a soft white bed, but then her world faded once more.

When Zoe awoke again, she felt a stinging pain coursing through her tired body, and when she stared groggily down at herself, she found a bandage wrapped around each of her shoulders. Her aching fingers tightly gripped a fluffy blanket that covered her body, and her head nestled comfortably in a soft pillow. She forcefully shoved herself into a sitting position on the bed and glanced around curiously,

confused. Where was she? The last thing she remembered . . . she attempted desperately to think. Cold, midnight-black eyes that had stared viciously into her own, a familiar, horrified scream, lots of crimson paint soaking her shirt, being carried on a stretcher by anxious doctors The wild images appeared fuzzy in her mind, the sounds distinct and unclear. Her brain didn't seem to function quite well, and her bushy golden eyebrows slumped thoughtfully over her eyes in a puzzled frown.

"Are you feeling alright?" An anxious nurse stood next to the bed, her penetrating sapphire-blue eyes cautiously staring into Zoe's own. "It's okay, dear. I'd better call your parents to come visit you."

Exhausted, Zoe slumped awkwardly onto the cushiony pillow, her tangled golden curls of hair tumbling wildly over her painful shoulders. Those merciless black killer eyes kept dramatically flashing in her mind, with a piercing shriek echoing shrilly in the background. She felt like she was missing an important detail but she couldn't quite recall what. Suddenly, she remembered: Anne! Zoe frantically wondered if her best friend was okay. What if she was seriously injured or worse?

Suddenly, a familiar, tender hand was tightly clutching Zoe's sweaty fingers, and Zoe's anxious thoughts immediately cleared from her mind. She recognized the warm, gentle feel of that hand, and she instinctively fumbled with the silver ring she knew so well. She closed her eyes. She didn't have to look to whom that hand belonged to; she already knew its affectionate touch by heart.

"Anne," she whispered breathlessly. Her eyelids fluttered open and she stared into Anne's penetrating emerald-green eyes, those unique eyes she had thought she had lost forever. "I missed you."

"I missed you too, Zoe." The words were soft, but strong and meaningful. "I thought you wouldn't make it. The mountain lion scratched you badly, and the wounds were deep. You had to have twenty stitches in total."

Suddenly the horrifying memories of the mountain lion encounter overwhelmingly flooded Zoe's mind, the black killer eyes most memorable of all. The awful scene vigorously replayed itself again and again, the huge unsheathed claws scratching viciously at her and raking mercilessly through her shoulders, drawing more blood than Zoe had ever seen and soaking her shirt. Then she remembered strong hands shoving the monster aside, causing it to roll off Zoe. "Who saved me?" Anne demanded.

Anne smiled modestly. "Me," she whispered. "I pushed the mountain lion and ran for help."

“Anne . . .” Zoe’s voice faded. “You saved my life.”

Anne squeezed her best friend’s hand, her narrow lips stretched tightly across her freckled face and revealing her perfect pearl-white teeth in a tender smile. “It was nothing, Zoe. What are best friends for, anyway?”

A few days later, Zoe’s stitches were removed and she returned home to her welcoming family. She would never forget this exciting mountain lion encounter.