

LIFE-OR-DEATH CHOICE

HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO
TO SAVE YOUR FRIEND?

BY KRISTEN LEWIS



Simon Yates was freezing to death. He had been clinging to the side of a mountain for an hour and a half, while a ferocious storm battered him relentlessly. It was 80 degrees below zero. He was severely dehydrated. His fingertips were black with frostbite. “I am going to die,” Simon thought.

As Good as Dead

The day before, Simon, 21, and his climbing partner, Joe Simpson, 25, had been on top of the world—literally. The year was 1985, and they had just become the first mountaineers in history to climb the west face of Siula Grande, a notoriously treacherous peak in the Andes Mountains of Peru. Standing at 21,000 feet, Simon and Joe were treated to breathtaking views of snowcapped mountains glistening beneath an endless blue sky.

Their adventure, however, was about to take a terrifying turn.

During their climb back down the mountain, Joe lost his grip and slid 15 feet onto a rocky ledge. On impact, his shinbone was driven through his kneecap into his thigh. The pain was blinding.

Joe tried to put weight on his leg, but it was unbearable. He could feel the bones in his leg knocking against each other. There was no way he could climb.

I’m as good as dead, he thought. Rescue would be impossible—their location was too remote. He and Simon still had 3,000 feet of mountain to descend. Worse, they were out of food and gas for their stove, so they could not melt snow into water. They needed to get down the mountain and back to their campsite as soon as possible, or they would die of dehydration.

Will Simon leave me here? Joe wondered. *Or will he stay and risk his own life?*

Trembling Fingers

As Joe writhed in agony, Simon made the decision to stay with his friend. They came up with a plan. They would tie themselves together, and Simon would lower Joe down the steep mountain slope one rope-length at a time.

At first, the plan seemed to be working, but by early evening, Simon was completely drained.

Things only got worse.

At nightfall, a blizzard hit, plunging them into total darkness and deadly cold. Still, they pressed on, driven by





thirst and hunger. They fantasized about the warm tent and hot dinner that awaited them at their campsite.

But neither man would get off the mountain that night.

In the midst of the storm, Simon unknowingly lowered Joe over the edge of a cliff. Joe was left dangling helplessly in midair at the end of the rope. It was a deadly 100-foot drop to the glacier below. Joe shouted up to Simon, but the thundering wind drowned out his cries.

Meanwhile, Simon, to his horror, felt himself being dragged down the slope by Joe's weight. He had no idea what was happening—it was too dark to see the cliff.

Had Joe passed out? Was he dead? For 90 excruciating minutes, Simon tried desperately to hold his position. Flying ice ripped at his face, shredding his skin. His arms felt like jelly. His body grew dangerously cold.

"Joe!" he screamed. "Joe!"

All he heard was wind. All he saw was blackness.

Simon made a decision. He reached into his pack and pulled out a knife. With trembling fingers, he cut the rope.

Freed from Joe's weight, Simon was able to dig a snow cave and take shelter from the storm.

A Faint Voice

The next morning, Simon awoke to a bright and sunny day. *Maybe Joe made it*, he thought hopefully as he crawled out of his cave. But when he saw the cliff, he realized what had happened and his heart sank. By cutting the rope, he had surely sent Joe plummeting to his death.

That afternoon, Simon made it down the mountain and back to camp, where he was consumed by guilt and grief. *What am I going to tell Joe's family and friends?* he wondered. Days went by. Simon couldn't seem to muster the will to pack up camp and go home.

Three nights after his return to the campsite, Simon was jolted awake by a faint voice on the wind.

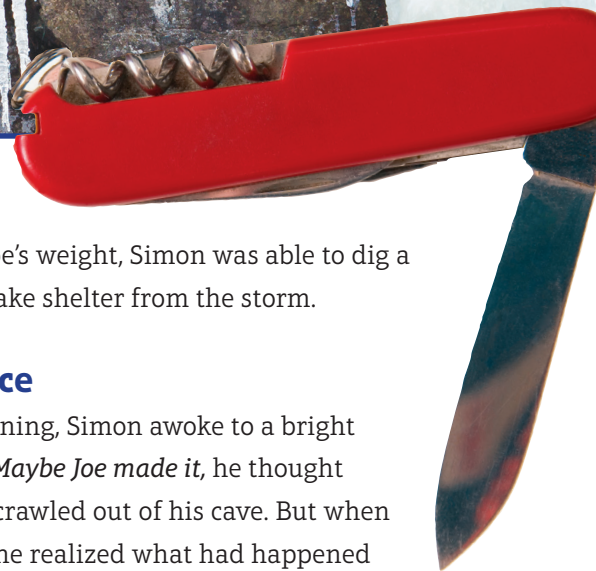
"Simon!" the voice called.

Simon strained to hear.

"Simon!" the voice wailed.

Simon bolted out of his tent.

He could not believe his eyes. There, collapsed on the frosty ground, was Joe.





That Sacred Bond

When Simon cut the rope, Joe had fallen 160 feet into a crack in the ice called a crevasse. After a few delirious hours, Joe had realized he'd been left for dead. So for the next three days, he had hopped and crawled, inch by agonizing inch, out of the crevasse and down the mountain, dragging his broken leg behind him. It was an unspeakably horrific ordeal, marked by excruciating pain, starvation, loneliness, and delirium. In the end, he lost more than a pint of blood and a third of his bodyweight.

"I didn't crawl because I thought I would survive," Joe said later. "I crawled because I wanted to be with somebody when I died."

Today, Joe's incredible story is part of mountaineering lore. Not only did he survive, but two years and six surgeries later, Joe returned to climbing.

Though Joe has said publicly that Simon did the right thing by cutting the rope—that he would have done the same in Simon's situation—their friendship was never the same. In the years since the climb, Simon has been criticized harshly by many in the climbing community for severing that sacred bond—the rope that binds climbing partners together.

Still, the first thing Joe said to Simon when he crawled into camp that night was *thank you*. In spite of all he'd been through, Joe was thankful that Simon had helped him as far down the mountain as he did.

"I've got you," Simon replied, tucking Joe into a warm sleeping bag. "You're safe now."

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