

# The Last Frontier

By Meagan Morel

Alaska, a sprawling and treacherous land, is known as the last frontier for many reasons, such as the harsh winters that bring below-freezing temperatures, the deadly animals that many fear, and the vast expanse of uncharted land that invites hundreds of explorers in hopes of being one of the few to conquer a part of the last frontier. These thoughts drifted through Ian's mind as he gazed out the little window of the seaplane that was taking him, along with four other adventurers, to their final spot to start the most dangerous and lethal trek in North America.

A pocket of turbulence shuttered the seaplane, which shook Ian from his trance, and his focus shifted to the four other passengers in the seaplane. Up in the first two seats near the pilot were Anya and Levi Petrov, the expedition trek leaders. Anya and Levi are a married couple who own a mountaineering and adventure company in Alaska. They have trekked and mountaineered all around the world and decided to make roots in Alaska and continue to pursue their passion through their mountaineering business.

The other two passengers on the plane were Aziza Krsna, a Nepalese native from a long lineage of Nepalese Sherpas. She had personally climbed Mount Everest 10 times, starting at the very young age of 17. Nate Williamson was the final passenger. He grew up in Alaska, in a remote village a few miles North of the Arctic Circle. Nate was very familiar with the Alaskan wilderness and the challenges that came with it.

The pilot turned his head toward the passengers and yelled, "We're starting our descent now; we'll be landing in about 10 minutes".

Cheers filled the air, and a new sense of energy was felt. Water splashed up around the plane as it touched down, and the roar of the engines came to an idle as the plane taxied to the edge of the lake with a rickety makeshift dock. From the front to the rear, we filed out, creating a

daisy chain to unload our gear, which was what we would survive on for the next two weeks. Levi did a final look through of the plane, ensuring nothing of life saving value would be left behind. The pilot wished us all luck, shaking our hands and saying we were all crazy to be attempting this trek. He untied the plane, hopped in the cockpit, fired up the engines, and with one final hand salute to the group, our last chance to back out was gone.

Anya and Levi gathered the group, instructing us to inspect our gear one final time. We'd be hiking approximately 10 miles to base camp for the night before starting the ascent to Mount Fortified the next morning. Aziza was done inspecting her expertly packed gear when she heard rustling in the brush about 250 feet away from the group.

"Oh crap!" she exclaimed in a slight panic.

We all snapped our heads up to see what had caused her alarm. Emerging from the forest with beady black eyes framed by a white face was a polar bear. Immediately, Nate started yipping loudly and waving his arms wide, trying to establish dominance. Levi, Anya, and I joined in the commotion. The polar bear retreated into the forest, seeming unaffected by our noise but not wanting to continue the hunt for fish in the lake near us.

"Summer is the prime hunting time for bears along rivers and lakes, so we need to ensure we are aware of bears anytime we are near water." Nate explained.

"Nothing like a polar bear sighting to start a trek off, am I right?" Aziza joked nervously.

We heaved our packs onto our backs and grabbed our trekking poles. Levi, taking the lead, shouted, "Let's hit the trail! We have a good amount of distance to cover before it starts getting dark!" One by one, we fell into a line and started on our journey.

We reached base camp with an hour of daylight to spare. Levi's pace was quick, but the group fell into a walking rhythm, and everyone was able to keep up, even Aziza with her 5-foot-2-inch stature. Anya instructed us to get our tents set up for the night, and to ensure we were not spread out, they had brought a quick-setup electric fence that would be around the tents to deter any animals.

Nate chuckled at this statement. "The only thing that'll do to a predator around these parts is give them a tickle before they walk right through it."

The group laughed and nodded in slight agreement; however, it was one extra precaution the group leaders had in place to make sure the trekkers could rest easy at night.

Once everyone's tents were situated, we gathered around the warmth and light of the crackling campfire. Water was boiling for tea, and our first and last hot meal of the trek was being heated up. While we waited for dinner, Levi pulled out a worn map with hand drawn lines and marked trails outlining each day's sections that would be covered and highlighting known hazards and danger areas along the route. We all knew the risks associated with this trek, but it was that healthy fear that kept everyone engaged and alert for any signs of danger.

After Levi had explained the plan and mileage to be covered the next day, we chatted around the campfire, sharing stories of the most extreme trails we had previously done and what insanity kept us coming back for more. With full and warm stomachs, we all turned in for the night in our tents, which were arranged in a circle around the fire. I was exhausted just from the first hike and knew I needed as much rest as possible; however, I was so excited for the adventure ahead that my mind would not rest. I closed my eyes, listening to the soothing sounds

of the crickets and the wind moving through the trees, not even realizing I was already heading for a deep sleep.

"Ahhhhh!" The nightmarish, hair-raising scream echoed in my head, slowly pulling me from the darkness of sleep. While the screaming continued, my brain was trying to process what I was hearing. It wasn't until Aziza's high-pitched scream outside my tent, which snatched me into reality, that I could hear the chaos ensuing outside. I struggled out of my sleeping bag, diving through the tent door and out into the cold night air to see what was occurring at the campsite.

It was dark; only the light of the full moon illuminated our surroundings. Moonlight reflected off the massive white figure on top of a tent in front of mine; it was Nate's tent. Those bloodcurdling screams were coming from Nate; he was being attacked by a polar bear. Levi and Anya were banging pots together, yelling at the top of their lungs, trying to get this beast off and away from Nate. Their uproar was futile; my vision tunneled directly onto the dark silhouette of Nate trying to fight against the overpowering strength of the bear.

I dove back into my tent, manically feeling around for the flare gun, wishing I had brought my actual rifle with me. I felt the firm, chilled plastic under my hand. Darting out of the tent once more, I aimed right above the white figure, which was backing into the forest, dragging Nate's limp body still firmly in its locked jaw. A loud POP and the whooshing of the flare startled the polar bear, and the blinding red glow illuminated the polar bear, Nate, and everyone's pale, fear-stricken faces.

We kept screaming at the top of our lungs, and the bear continued to retreat with Nate. I raised the gun again, this time aiming directly at the bear. Another pop and whoosh echoed

through the camp; the flare hit the bear directly in the face, causing it to growl, drop Nate's lifeless body from its mouth, and run off into the woods. I sprinted over to Nate, hearing deep, painful moans coming from his unconscious body. I grabbed him and dragged him back into camp.

Levi and Anya had turned on lanterns for better lighting, so I could see how badly injured Nate truly was. My EMT training kicked in, and Nate was still breathing, shakingly but with solid breaths. Nate's right arm was bleeding heavily and looked like it got the brunt of the attack. I yelled at Aziza to grab my medical kit from my tent. Nate's face was bleeding; I couldn't tell if it was coming from internal bleeding or external damage the bear had caused. Aziza threw the medical kit down as she came down with it and exclaimed, "What do you need? I can assist!"

"We need to control the bleeding from his arm and figure out where the blood on his head is coming from." I calmly explained.

I got to work on his arm as Aziza stabilized Nate's head and started cleaning his face.

About an hour later, Nate's wounds were dressed, and he was resting in my tent under the watchful eyes of Aziza. I walked over to Levi and Anya, who were pacing around the campsite, ensuring the bear was not coming back to claim its prey.

"He'll survive." I informed them. "There are some deep marks on his arm from where the bear had him and a couple claw marks on his face and other arm from the initial attack. He doesn't seem to have any internal damage or head trauma, which is good. He needs rest, and I need to make sure his wounds don't get infected."

They both sighed, a long-awaited breath of relief, one that had been unconsciously held throughout the entirety of this distressing ordeal.