

Tamar Valkenier

# FULL-TIME ADVENTURER

A Fascinating Story about  
Leaving Everything Behind and  
the Search for Ultimate Freedom



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## Seriously Wrong

Suddenly, I feel a hard tug on the rope, a force I have never felt from my reliable and ever-composed companion Izgi. He lets out a cry as he rears onto his hind legs, and before I can react, he takes off at full gallop.

Attached to him is Tor, our innocent and wide-eyed follower, who immediately responds to his mentor's dramatic change of temperament and, with a similarly startled leap, he also runs. Caught between them, in an instant I am thrown headfirst into the dust by the rope that connects the two.

I scramble to my feet to make sense of what just happened and, to my horror, I watch my horses — now frantically trying to shed their loads — running toward the horizon. I clutch my head, and I begin to feel the warm sensation of blood trickling down my face and into my eye. As I wipe the mixture of blood and grit from my vision, I notice my dog Tetti giving chase, likely convinced this is all a game.

And just like that, I am alone...

“No! No! No! Izgi! Tor! Tetti! Come back!” I fall to my knees as the gravity of the situation hits me. How can this be happening? Over the past four months I've traveled roughly 1,600 kilometers with these animals. Through the remote Altai Mountains of Mongolia. Immersing ourselves in the ancient culture of Kazakh nomads. I've taken good care of them, just as they have of me. We've trudged through boggy swamps, forded glacial rivers, and crossed precarious mountain passes. Together we visited places I could never access without them. Today was supposed to be an easy day, the battle all but over. A flat trail would lead us to a small eagle festival in the village of Sagsai Sum. There I hoped

to meet Mr. Dalaikhan and, like a proud mother, return my animals to him and end my journey. But at the last moment, everything has gone wrong. Seriously wrong.

I can feel my heart pounding in my skull, and I start to feel dizzy. What do I do now? I just watched everything I own disappear along with my horses, and the closest town is still kilometers away. I take a deep breath in an attempt to compose myself when I hear the gentle squeal of a motorbike braking behind me. Two men step off to investigate the situation. Upon seeing the blood on my face, they both begin to speak to me in hurried Kazakh. Confused, I look from one man to the other and back to the first. Somewhere in the cacophony of sounds I'm fairly sure I recognize the words "doctor?" and "hospital?"

Flustered, I shake my head, and in my best Kazakh, I tell them, "No, me okay. Over there. Two horses.

Please!" The men nod, jump back on the bike, and race off. Hopefully they understand that I asked them to find my horses... and more importantly, if they do, they'll bring them back!

Shortly afterward, a second motorbike stops and another concerned voice asks, "Doctor? Hospital?" This time I climb on the back, and we ride toward the village. The road is bumpy, and every jolt shoots intense pain through my head. I hold on tight and try to ignore it. I focus on small goals.

Just get to that ridge, just get past that boulder, hang on till that corner; but the longer it goes on, the more both the road and my condition seem to deteriorate.

Just as I'm about to beg my driver to stop, we pull up in front of a small building.

"Hospital," he says, though it doesn't look much like a hospital to me. The door is closed, the building looks empty, paint is peeling from the walls, even the windows are broken. I see no sign suggesting this is any kind of medical facility. My driver

knocks on every door and talks to a couple of people in the street. After a few phone calls, someone finally opens a door. A short woman in a floral headscarf takes one look at the clotted blood in my hair and motions me to follow.

We walk down a dimly lit corridor until we reach a small room. She wastes no words and points to a dusty bench in the corner. “Öter.” Sit. She proceeds to take a pair of latex gloves out of the sink and, in shock, I watch her wipe off bloodstains from a previous patient. Outside I hear my driver’s engine start; he begins to take off, and the sound slowly fades away. I take a deep breath with the realization that I am now at the mercy of this woman. She picks up a small bottle marked “disinfectant” from the table — two years past its shelf date — and puts a few drops on a dirty piece of gauze. Dumbstruck, I let her dab it on my head. I barely feel the sting: the combination of dirt, dried blood, and matted hair stuck to my wound makes this a pointless gesture. How did I end up in this nightmare? I just want to wake up now. Wake up at home, sitting at the kitchen table with my dad.

Suddenly the door swings open. A stocky man walks in wearing a pair of riding boots and a long, traditional Mongolian coat. He shakes my hand with muddy fingers and introduces himself as the doctor.

He takes a rough look at my injury, scribbles something on a pad, then informs me with obvious hand gestures that he intends to give me stitches.

I look at him; my eyes widen. Excuse me? Stitches? Absolutely not! I know enough First Aid to understand that if you stitch up a dirty wound there is a high chance of infection. So close to my brain and being far from proper care, this seems like a terrible idea. The wound would need to be thoroughly cleaned, but between the dirt on his hands and the state of the room, I’m not filled with confidence.

I take my phone out of my pocket and start to type on a trans-

lator. "No stitches. Bandage. Can I buy?" The doctor objects and repeats his treatment plan, but I won't be convinced. Besides, I have to get out of here and find my animals. I overpay him for the expired disinfectant, and the nurse helps me apply a bandage. "*Rachmet*," I say, thank you, and after an hour in the "hospital," I'm back on the street.

It is eerily quiet. A stray dog digs through a pile of garbage; paper swirls in the light breeze. My bare feet feel the chill, and I wish the autumn sun would break through the clouds and warm me. I sit down on the sidewalk, shaky and overwhelmed. What do I do now? My head is throbbing, and my neck has become so stiff I can hardly move it. Do I have a concussion? Should I call someone? Who? And what would be the point? How I wish we were still together...

PART 1

**FREE**



*Without new experiences,  
something inside us sleeps.  
The sleeper must awaken.*

– FRANK HERBERT

# EUROPE 9 MONTHS 10,000 KILOMETERS



HAARLEM



It is November 2014. I stare out the window, motionless. Outside, there is a strong wind blowing, but here inside, I don't notice it at all. I've been sitting in the same position for hours. Day after day I watch the sun come up and wait for it to go down, my plastered leg resting on the coffee table in front of me.

Two weeks ago I broke my foot in a skydiving accident, and I've been confined to my dad's couch ever since. That is where I sit now, by myself, just staring. I hear a creak as he walks down the stairs in his bathrobe. "Good morning," I say, despite the fact that it's 1 pm. He pretends he doesn't hear it, lowers himself into his favorite chair, and picks up the newspaper.

A few minutes pass in silence before he notices my dead gaze and puts the paper down. "What are you staring at?" he asks.

I shrug my shoulders. "I'm watching the time tick by."

My dad is sixty-five. I'm twenty-seven. I ask him whether he experiences time the same way I do.

"No, of course not," he answers, as if it were a stupid question. "You've got your whole life ahead of you. You can still change trains, or just get off at another station whenever you like. I'm getting close to my last stop."

I let his words sink in. Last stop? This is not an unfamiliar concept, but today these words seem to hold more weight. In fact, the very thought makes me feel anxious. Over the past weeks, while staring at the wall, I have found myself giving thought to the true value of time. I ask myself questions about the life I have been living, my dreams, my responsibilities, my fears, and my regrets. For perhaps the first time, I start to question the path I've chosen. Ordinarily, my days are filled with activity, distracting me from such topics, but since my accident

I have nothing but time. My legs are restless, but there's nowhere to go. Held hostage by my broken foot while the clock mocks me from the wall.

Where have these questions and doubts come from? I really should have nothing to worry about. I live a comfortable life, full of opportunities. Opportunities I have always made the most of. I wouldn't consider myself overly ambitious by nature. However, when I find things I am genuinely interested in, excitement takes over and I tend to excel. When I was fifteen, I set out to get my first real job. Motivated solely by the money, I took a position in the kitchen at a small tapas restaurant near my home in Haarlem in the Netherlands. To my surprise, I developed a real passion for cooking. Then one night, at sixteen, some friends of mine took me out to a particularly fancy restaurant and, for the first time, my eyes were opened to the world of fine dining. I had never seen or tasted anything like it, and I decided on the spot I had to learn this craft. I walked straight to the kitchen and asked the chef for a job. By some miracle, a vacancy had just become available. Our kitchen would eventually receive a Michelin star, and I continued to work in high-class restaurants for years to come.

While cooking, I was also working through two university degrees and, at the age of twenty-four, after years with my nose glued to more books than I care to remember, I graduated cum laude both as a psychologist and a criminologist. I even landed my dream job as an investigative psychologist with the Dutch National Police. Three years later, I still spend my days engrossed in cases of murder, sex offence, and stalking. Intrigued not only by "whodunnit" but by the ever-complex process. How can you tell a true statement from a false one? What do you do when your prime witness is mentally ill? Or perhaps a child? How to determine the value of an alibi? And how to present questions without influencing the answer?

Not everyone understands the appeal of a job like this, and with good reason, as it always operates in the darkest corners of

society, but that's exactly what appeals to me. I'm fascinated by the extremes of human behavior and captivated by every case that pours over my desk, each requiring an approach as unique as the individuals involved.

### **Is This All There Is?**

Six months ago, I moved back in with my dad with the intention of saving money to buy a house — a process I've actually been through before. At nineteen, I bought an apartment with my then partner. I remember the feelings of pride and success. We lived the dream, fixing leaking pipes, laying floors, fitting curtains, and hosting many dinner parties. However, after around six years, we parted amicably. We decided he would take the mortgage himself, and I continued to focus on my studies.

Now, at the age of twenty-seven, I'm looking at buying a house again. My dad and I have looked at a few different places for sale around his neighborhood. With a thriving career this seems like the next logical step but, this time, it doesn't seem to evoke the same feelings. Something is different. Something I can't yet explain. I'm starting to wonder if I might just be going through the motions?

It has been three weeks now since I broke my foot, and the pace of life remains at a literal standstill. I continue to think, deeply. Not only about the choices I've made in life but about my motivations for making them. Why was I compelled so strongly to go to university in the first place? And immediately after graduating, begin a full-time career? Was it entirely my choice, or was it simply an expectation of society? Perhaps my family? Or other outside influences? I wonder if I just swam with the flow without considering other options or lifestyles. Lifestyles I may not even know of.

Buying the house provokes the same questions. I'm assured by the people in my life that it is a financially responsible decision.

PART 3

**LOVE**

*Though we travel the world over  
to find the beautiful, we must carry it  
with us or we find it not*

– RALPH WALDO EMERSON

# JORDAN

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6 WEEKS  
600 KILOMETERS





Jordan? Isn't that in the Middle East? Sounds dangerous! What if it's full of Muslim terrorists? Are you sure it's not just one massive sandbox?

There's no shortage of prejudices when I tell people I want to hike the Jordan Trail, a 650-kilometer-long route that traverses the country north to south, passing world-famous landmarks like Petra and Wadi Rum.

I never considered hiking an established route until Miriam inspired me with stories about her thru-hike of New Zealand. "The longer and slower you walk, the stronger your connection to the land becomes," she said to me back in Bulgaria, sparking my curiosity. Scouring the Internet for a long-distance trail where few feet have trod before me, I found the Jordan Trail. It has only recently opened up, so it seems like the perfect fit.

Weeks of thorough research teach me not to take people's concerns about Jordan at face value. Although the country borders Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, it's known as "an oasis of stability." Even the desert heat is nothing to worry about this year. This winter has been exceptionally cold and wet. There's even snow in Petra! Ready for my next adventure, I board the plane on March 1, 2019, excited to explore a region that is completely unfamiliar to me.

### **Your Bag?**

The only upside about the twenty-five-hour flight to Jordan is that it offers ample time to reflect on my expedition in New Zealand and the emotional farewells with Miriam and Dave. While

I'm lost in thought, the endless deserts of Saudi Arabia suddenly come into view below me. "Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seat belts. We are about to start our descent into Amman."

Stepping out onto the tarmac fills me with excitement: a whole new world awaits! However, my enthusiasm quickly wanes as a customs officer directs me to a dimly lit room, where a fluorescent light illuminates my luggage. "Your bag?" he questions, adjusting his red-and-white-checkered headdress.

"Yes, is there a problem?" I wonder if the lingering smell of dead animals could've sparked suspicion...

With a dismissive flick of his hand, he commands me to empty my bag. Does he *have* to be so rude? Why can't he just tell me what's going on? Soon, it looks like a bomb went off: my things are scattered absolutely everywhere. How on earth did all this stuff fit into my pack? And how will I manage to put it all back in there once this ordeal is over?!

The officer leans forward on both fists, looks me in the eye, and asks me why I've come to Jordan. What will I do, with whom, for how long, and where am I staying? "In my tent," I mutter nervously. "I want to hike the Jordan Trail." Without flinching, he repeats the questions. Slightly louder this time and stressing every word: "Why. Are. You. Here?" He has never heard of the trail, and the notion of a woman trekking solo through the desert clearly strikes him as preposterous.

"Google it," I try. But instead of verifying my story, he calls in a few colleagues who fire the same questions at me. No matter what I say, my answers only seem to evoke more hostility. What could this possibly be about?! When will they let me go? Will they let me go?

## A Warm Welcome

Two agonizing hours later, I'm in the arrivals hall, clutching my luggage. Still a bit shaken, I attempt to call Dave. I'm desperate to hear a friendly voice, but he doesn't pick up. Luckily, my dad does. "Let me guess? Everything's *amazing*?" He expects to hear the usual positive update, but this time, I have a different tale to tell. I brief him on the warm welcome I just received. "I had binoculars in my bag, Dad. Binoculars! Apparently, that's very suspicious. I kept telling them they're for birdwatching, but they sure didn't like to hear the truth. I'm so relieved they finally let me go!"

Outside the terminal, I stick out my thumb, hoping for a quick ride to the city center. Thirty minutes pass, and all I accomplish is making my cheeks ache from smiling politely. Not a single car stops. What's going on? Hitching a ride usually doesn't take me that long...

"Hitchhiking is forbidden, miss," a cab driver courteously states, only to then offer me a ride for an exorbitant sum of money.

"Thanks, but no thanks," I reply just as kindly. I'd rather walk to town, even if it takes me all day.

Long and busy roads lead me through depressing industrial areas. I walk past a donkey cart with pressed sugarcane stems and a roadside bookstall that sells copies of *Mein Kampf* in five languages. Every other car seems to have a sticker on it that reads "I love Saddam Hussein."

It all seems a bit bleak until I reach downtown. There, the atmosphere suddenly changes. This place has been a melting pot for millennia, and it shows, its Arab grandeur blending seamlessly with Western, Roman, and Greek influences. I pass quaint, steep alleyways with sand-colored apartment buildings and stroll through the vibrant heart of the city, full of colorful cafés, shops, terraces, fresh pomegranate juice, and roasted chestnuts. Everywhere I turn, smiling faces greet me with "Welcome to Jordan!"

# A FASCINATING STORY ABOUT LEAVING EVERYTHING BEHIND AND THE SEARCH FOR ULTIMATE FREEDOM

At 28, Tamar Valkenier, an investigative psychologist with the Dutch National Police, stands at a crossroads. Despite a successful career she deeply yearns for more. She makes the daring decision to leave everything behind and embrace a nomadic existence.

Tamar embarks on a transformative cycling journey from her hometown in the Netherlands to Istanbul, where she pushes her physical and emotional limits. Along the way, she gains confidence and discovers a fulfillment that exceeds her wildest dreams.

From a journey of 1,600 kilometers on horseback in Mongolia to hiking the Jordan Trail with her trusted donkey, and surviving solely on hunting and fishing in New Zealand's Southern Alps alongside fellow nomad Miriam Lancewood, Tamar's myriad adventures serve as evidence to the power of personal growth, and the rewards it brings.

More than a mere chronicle of Tamar's experiences, *Full-Time Adventurer* is a powerful testament to her transformation from a conventional life to an extraordinary one. It's a captivating narrative of personal growth and courage that continues to inspire many others.

***"Tamar thrives in extreme situations due to her hunger for adventure and desire to explore the unknown, both psychologically and physically."***

— MIRIAM LANCEWOOD,  
AUTHOR OF *WOMAN IN THE WILDERNESS*



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