

DION LEONARD

FINDING GOBI

THE AMAZING
TRUE STORY

A LITTLE DOG WITH
A VERY BIG HEART



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DION LEONARD

WITH CRAIG BORLASE



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Finding Gobi

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This is a work of nonfiction. The events and experiences detailed herein are all true and have been faithfully rendered as remembered by the author, to the best of his ability, or as they were told to the author by people who were present. Others have read the manuscript and confirmed its rendering of events. However, in certain instances names of individuals have been changed.

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For my wife, Lucja.

*Without your endless support, dedication, and
love, this never would have been possible.*

PROLOGUE

THE CAMERA CREW FINISHED UP LAST NIGHT.

Someone from the publisher arrives tomorrow. I can still feel the jet lag and other side effects of forty-one hours of travel in my body. So Lucja and I have already decided to make this, our first run of the year, an easy one. Besides, it's not just the two of us we need to think about. There's Gobi to consider.

We take it easy as we pass the pub, drop down beside Holyrood Palace, and see the clear blue sky give way to the grassy mountain that dominates Edinburgh's skyline. Arthur's Seat. I've run up there more times than I can remember, and I know it can be brutal. The wind can be so strong in your face that it pushes you back. The hail can bite into your skin like knives. On days like those, I crave the 120-degree heat of the desert.

But today there's no wind or hail. There's nothing brutal about the air as we climb, as if the mountain wants to show itself off in all its cloudless glory.

As soon as we hit the grass, Gobi is transformed. This dog that's small enough for me to carry under one arm is turned into a raging lion as she pulls forward up the slope.

PROLOGUE

“Wow!” says Lucja. “Look at her energy!”

Before I can say anything, Gobi turns around, tongue lolling out, eyes bright, ears forward, chest puffed. It’s as if she understands exactly what Lucja’s said.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” I say, pushing the pace up a bit in an attempt to loosen the strain on the leash. “She was just like this back in the mountains.”

We push farther up, closer to the summit. I’m thinking how, even though I named her after a desert, I first saw Gobi on the cold, rugged slopes of the Tian Shan. She’s a true climber, and with every step we take, she comes more and more alive. Soon her tail is wagging so fast it blurs, her whole body bouncing and pulsing with pure joy. When she looks back again, I swear she’s grinning. *Come on!* she says. *Let’s go!*

At the top, I soak in all the familiar sights. The whole of Edinburgh is spread out beneath us, and beyond it is the Forth Bridge, the hills of Lomond, and the West Highland Way, every one of whose ninety-six miles I have run. I can see North Berwick too, a full marathon distance away. I love the run along the beach, even on the tough days when the wind is trying to batter me down and every mile feels like a battle all its own.

It’s been more than four months since I’ve been here. While it’s all familiar, there’s something different about it as well.

Gobi.

She decides it’s time to descend and drags me down the hill. Not down the path, but straight down. I leap over tufts of grass and rocks the size of suitcases, Lucja keeping pace beside me. Gobi navigates them all with skill. Lucja and I look at each other and laugh, enjoying the moment we have longed for, to be a family and finally able to run together.

Running isn't usually this fun. In fact, for me, running is never fun. Rewarding and satisfying, maybe, but not laugh-out-loud fun. Not like it is now.

Gobi wants to keep running, so we let her lead. She takes us wherever she wants to go, sometimes back up the mountain, sometimes down. There's no training plan and no premapped route. There are no worries either. No concerns. It's a carefree moment, and for that and so much more, I'm grateful.

After the last six months, I feel like I need it.

I've faced things I never thought I'd face, all because of this little blur of brown fur that's pulling my arm out of its socket. I've faced fear like I've never known before. I've felt despair as well, the sort that turns the air around you stale and lifeless. I've faced death.

But that's not the whole story. There's so much more.

The truth is that this little dog has changed me in ways I think I'm only just beginning to understand. Maybe I'll never fully understand it all.

Yet I do know this: finding Gobi was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life.

But being found by her—that was one of the best things.

5

THE YURT HAD BEEN SO HOT I'D BARELY BEEN able to sleep all night, but as I walked out the next morning, the air was cold enough to make me shiver. The ground was wet, and the Tian Shan up ahead appeared to be covered in low dark clouds that were surely going to dump more rain on us.

With a few minutes to go before the eight o'clock start, I took my place on the start line at the front of the pack. After coming in third yesterday, I felt as though I belonged there.

People were a lot less nervous than before. I could even hear some of them laughing, though I tried my best to block out all distractions and focus on the challenge ahead. I knew we'd face mile after mile of ascent as we headed up into the mountains, followed by some dangerous descents. We were already at an altitude of seven thousand feet, and I guessed that some runners would already be struggling with the lack of oxygen. Today was going to make things harder by taking us up to more than nine thousand feet.

My concentration was broken by the sound of more laughter and a little cheering behind me.

"It's the dog!"

"How cute!"

I looked down and saw the same dog from last night. It was standing by my feet, staring at the bright yellow gaiters covering my shoes. It was transfixed for a while, its tail wagging constantly. Then it did the strangest thing. It looked up, its dark black eyes taking in my legs first, then my yellow-shirted torso, and finally my face. It looked right into my eyes, and I couldn't look away.

"You're cute," I said under my breath, "but you'd better be fast if you're not planning to get trodden by one hundred runners chasing after you."

I looked about to see if anyone was going to come and claim the dog and get it out of the way before the runners took off. A few other runners caught my eye, smiled, and nodded at the dog, but none of the locals or the race staff seemed to notice.

"Does anyone know whose dog this is?" I asked, but nobody did. They were all too focused on the ten-second countdown to the race start.

"Nine . . . eight . . . seven . . ."

I looked down. The dog was still at my feet, only now it had stopped staring at me and was sniffing my gaiters.

"You'd better get away little doggie, or else you're going to get squashed."

"Five . . . four . . ."

"Go on," I said, trying to get it to move. It was no use. It took a playful bite of the gaiter, then jumped back and crouched on the ground before diving in for another sniff and a chew.

The race began, and as I set off, the dog came with me. The gaiters game was even more fun now that the gaiters moved, and the dog danced around my feet as if it was the best fun ever.

It seemed to me that the cute moment could become annoying if it carried on for too long. The last thing I wanted was to trip over the little pooch and cause injury to it or myself. Then again, I knew there was a long stretch of single track coming up in which it would be hard to overtake a lot of the slower runners, so I wanted to keep up the pace and not lose my position with the front runner.

I was thankful when, after a quarter mile, I looked back down and saw that the dog wasn't there. *Probably gone back to its owner at the camp*, I thought.

The track narrowed, and we entered a flat forest section that lasted a few miles. I was in second, a few feet behind a Chinese guy I'd not seen before. Every once in a while he'd miss a marker—a pink paper square about the size of a CD case attached to a thin metal spike in the ground. They were hard to miss, and in the forest sections there was one of them every ten or twenty feet.

"Hey!" I'd shout on the couple of occasions that he took a wrong turn and headed off into the forest. I'd wait for him to track back, then fall in again behind him. I guess I could have let him keep going or shouted my warning and then carried on running, but multi-stage runners have a certain way of doing things. If we're going to beat someone, we want it to be because we're faster and stronger, not because we've tricked them or refused to help when we could. After all, pushing our bodies as hard as we do, everyone makes mistakes from time to time. You never know when you're going to need someone to help you out.

The forest fell away as the path started its climb into the mountains. I kept up the six-minute-mile pace, concentrating on keeping my stride short and my feet quick. My body remembered the hours I'd spent with my coach standing beside the treadmill, beating out the rapid cadence to which he wanted me to run. His shouts of

“one-two-three-one-two-three” were like torture at first, but after a few sessions of spending a whole hour running like that, three minutes on then one minute off, my legs finally got the message. If I wanted to run fast and not feel the crippling pain anymore, I had no choice but to learn how to run this way.

I saw something move out of the corner of my eye and forced myself to look down for a fraction of a second. It was the dog again. It wasn't interested in my gaiters this time but, instead, seemed happy just to trot along beside me.

Weird, I thought. What's it doing here?

I pressed on and attacked the incline. Zeng, the Chinese guy who was leading, is an accomplished ultrarunner and had pulled away from me a little. I couldn't hear anyone behind me. It was just me and the dog, side by side, tearing into the switchbacks. The path was interrupted by a man-made culvert. It was only three feet wide, and I didn't think anything of it, leaping over the fast-flowing water without breaking stride.

I could tell the dog had stayed behind. It started barking, then making a strange whimpering sound. I didn't turn back to look. I never do. Instead, I kept my head in the race and pushed on. As far as I knew, the dog belonged to someone back near the camp. The little thing had had a pretty good workout for the day, conned some runners out of some high-calorie food, and now it was time to head home.

I was fifteen when I told my mom I was leaving the dingy basement and moving in with a friend. She barely said anything. It seemed to me she didn't care. I guess since I'd already been staying with friends whenever I could—and the fact that when I was

around, Mom and I fought endlessly, trading insults like boxers at a weigh-in—it couldn't have come as much of a surprise. In fact, it was probably a relief.

I moved in with a guy named Deon. "Dion and Deon?" said the woman who ran the hostel when Deon introduced me. "You're kidding, right?"

"No," said Deon. "Straight up."

She snorted and turned away mumbling. "I've heard it all now."

Deon was a year older than me, had left school already, and was an apprentice bricklayer. He'd had his own troubles at home.

Even though we were both finally free from the struggles at home, neither of us was too excited about life in the hostel. The walls were paper-thin, and everyone else living there was older and freaked us out. The hostel was filled with homeless people, travelers, and drunks. Food was always going missing from the communal areas, and barely a night went by without the whole hostel waking up to the sound of a fight breaking out.

While I was still at school, I also took a part-time job pumping gas at the servo. It brought a little bit of money in but not enough, and I had to rely on Deon to help with the shortfall each week.

I only just managed to keep up with my schoolwork, but none of my teachers showed any sign of caring about where I was living or how I was coping with life away from home. In fact, I don't think any of them knew about my new living arrangements, and I wanted to keep it that way. I was embarrassed to go back to the hostel and tried to hide the truth from my classmates with their perfect, loving family homes.

Deon was the kind of guy who could charm the birds from the trees. We'd sneak into the pub on a Friday or Saturday night, have a few beers, and try to chat up some girls. I'd let Deon do

the talking, much like I'd let him do the dancing. Aussie blokes from towns like mine didn't dance in those days, and it was almost inevitable that when he finally came off the dance floor, Deon would take a mouthful of abuse and a few thrown punches. He'd just laugh them off.

One Sunday afternoon as we lay on our bunks wasting time, we heard shouting in the corridor outside. Someone was calling Deon's name, saying he was going to kill him for sleeping with his girlfriend.

The two of us froze. I stared at Deon, who looked for the first time ever, genuinely scared for his life. We both tried to act tough when we were in the hostel, but we were just kids—who at that moment were terrified we were about to get our heads kicked in. Luckily the blokes didn't know which room we were in, and they kept moving up and down the corridor until they eventually left. That was enough of a shock to get us to move out of the hostel as soon as possible.

The Grand Hotel was a step up from the hostel, but it wasn't much of a hotel. It was just a pub with a few rented rooms at the top. Instead of addicts, drunks, and homeless blokes, the Grand was home to guys who worked on the railroad or in the local meat-packing plant. One was an ex-pro pool player who had once beaten the national champion but had drunk all his talent away. Another was a traveler who had run out of money and simply decided to make Warwick his home. I liked listening to him talk. "Any place can be all right," he'd say, "as long as you accept what's wrong with it."

I felt much happier at the Grand than I did at the hostel. I liked being in the company of the kind of people who had chosen their lot and were happy with it, even if it meant not having the

perfect wife, the perfect house, and the perfect family. I felt free living among them, and for the first time in years, it seemed to me that all the things my mom had said that made me feel worthless and unwanted, an unlovable screwup and a disappointment, might not necessarily be true. Maybe I could learn to get by after all.

The barking and whimpering continued until I was twenty feet past the culvert. Then there was silence. I had a moment of hoping the dog hadn't fallen into the water, but before I could think about it much more, there was a familiar flash of brown beside me. The dog was back by my side again.

You're a determined little thing, aren't you?

Soon the track became even steeper as the temperature dropped lower. The cold air had numbed my face and fingers, but I was sweating. The increase in altitude made my breathing tight and my head a little dizzy. If I was going to run without stopping all the way up the mountain, I knew I'd have to dig in even more than usual.

I hate mountain running. Even though I live in Edinburgh and am surrounded by the beauty of the Scottish Highlands, I avoid running outside and up hills whenever possible. Especially when it's wet, cold, and windy. But give me a desert baked in 110-degree heat, and I'll be as happy as any runner out there.

People often ask me why I like running in the heat so much. The answer is simple: I've always felt the most freedom when I'm running beneath a blazing sun.

It started when I was a kid. After Garry died, I turned to sport in the hope of finding refuge from the troubles at home. I'd spend hours outside playing cricket or hockey. Time would stop when I was outside, and the more I ran and pushed myself, the heavier my

breathing became, and the louder my heart beat, the quieter the sadness and sorrow grew within me.

Maybe you could say that running in the heat was a form of escape. What I do know for sure is that as I ran in the Gobi Desert, I was no longer running to get away from my past. I was running toward my future. I was running with hope, not sorrow.

My pace slowed as every step became its own battle. There was snow all around, and at one point the track ran alongside a glacier. At other times the mountain would drop away at the side. I guessed there were some pretty dramatic views this high up, but I was thankful the cloud was so low that it was impossible to see anything more than a thick wall of gray mist. The experience was surreal, and I couldn't wait for it to be over.

The checkpoint finally came into view, and I heard people call out the usual encouragement. Once they saw the dog, they shouted a little louder.

"There's that dog again!"

I'd almost forgotten the little dog at my side. All the time that I'd been struggling up the hill, the dog had kept pace with me, skipping along as if running 2,500 feet up into the sky was the most natural thing in the world.

Once I was at the checkpoint, I faced the usual range of questions about how I was feeling and whether I had been drinking my water. Checkpoints are there to give runners an opportunity to refill their water bottles, but they're also a chance for the race team to check us over and make sure we are fit to carry on.

This time, however, it was the dog who got far more attention than me. A couple of volunteers took some photos as the dog sniffed

about the checkpoint tent. As soon as my bottles were full and I was ready to go, I moved out, half expecting this might be the point when the dog decided to leave me in favor of a better meal ticket.

But when I and my yellow gaiters started running out, the dog joined me straightaway.

If the climb to the top of the mountain had been tough, then the descent was its own unique sort of pain. For more than five miles the route took me straight down a path covered in rocks and loose stones. It was brutal on the joints, but like any runner, I knew that if I ran at anything less than 100 percent, I'd get caught by whoever was behind me.

And that's exactly what happened. I was feeling sluggish and struggled to hit anything close to my maximum pace on the descent, and soon enough Tommy glided past me, quickly followed by Julian.

I was annoyed with myself for giving too much on the ascent. I'd made a basic error, the kind I knew better not to make.

I checked myself. Getting annoyed could lead me to make another basic error. At times in the past, I'd let myself obsess about a mistake I'd made. Over the course of a few miles, the frustration would build and build until I'd lose all interest in the race and bail out.

I tried to distract myself by concentrating on the view. Coming down from the mountain at one point, I thought I saw a giant lake ahead of us, stretched out wide and dark beneath the gray skies. The closer I got, the more it became clear that it wasn't a lake but a huge expanse of dark sand and gravel.

As the path flattened, I settled into a steady six-and-a-half-minute-per-mile pace, bursting through the final checkpoint, not

bothering to stop for water. I saw Tommy, Zeng, and Julian up ahead and found they hadn't opened up the gap as much as I had feared. They were racing one another hard, and with less than a mile to go, there was no way for me to catch them. But I didn't mind so much. I felt good to be finishing strong without any hint of pain in my leg. I could hear the drums that played every time a runner crossed the finish line, and I knew that finishing a close fourth for the day would hopefully be enough to keep me in third overall.

Just as at each of the day's checkpoints, the dog was the focus of attention at the finish. People were taking pictures and filming, cheering for the little brown mutt as it crossed the line. The dog seemed to like the attention, and I could swear it was playing to the crowd by wagging its tail even faster.

Tommy had got in a minute or two before me, and he joined in the applause. "That dog, man! It's been following you all day!"

"Has it had any water?" asked one of the volunteers.

"I have no idea," I said. "Maybe it drank at some of the streams on the way." I felt a little bad about it. I didn't like the idea of its being thirsty or hungry.

Someone found a small bucket and gave the dog some water. It lapped it up, obviously thirsty.

I stepped back, wanting to leave the dog to it and get away from the crowds a little. Again I thought it might wander off and go find someone else to follow, but it didn't. As soon as it finished drinking, it looked up, locked eyes on my yellow gaiters, and trotted over to my side, following me wherever I went.

It was hot in the camp, and I was glad we'd left all that horrible alpine cold up in the mountains. From now on the race was going to be about coping with the heat, not struggling through the cold. From tomorrow onward we'd be in the Gobi Desert. I couldn't wait.

As soon as I sat down in the tent, the dog curled up next to me—and I started thinking about germs and diseases. It's crucial during a weeklong race to keep as clean as possible because without any access to showers or wash basins, it's easy to get sick from anything you touch. The dog was looking right into my eyes, just as it had earlier that morning. I had a few hours before my six-thirty meal, so I pulled out one of the packs of nuts and biltong. The dog's stare was unbreakable.

With a piece of meat midway to my mouth, it struck me that I hadn't seen the dog eat a thing all day. It had run the best part of a marathon, and still it wasn't trying to beg or steal any of the food I had in front of me.

"Here you go," I said, tossing half the meat down onto the tarpaulin in front of it, instinct telling me that feeding by hand wasn't a risk I wanted to take. The dog chewed, swallowed, spun around a few times, and lay down. Within seconds it was snoring, then twitching, then whimpering as it drifted deeper and deeper into sleep.

I woke up to the sound of grown men cooing like school kids.

"Ah, how cute is that?"

"Isn't that the dog from last night? Did you hear she followed him all day?"

She. The dog had run with me all day, and I'd never thought to check what sex it was.

I opened my eyes. The dog was staring right at me, looking deeper into my eyes than I would have thought possible. I checked. They were right. It wasn't an it. It was a she.

"Yeah," I said to Richard and the rest of the guys. "She stuck with me all day. She's got a good little motor on her."

Some of the guys fed her, and again she took whatever she was given, but gently. It was almost as though she knew she was getting a good deal here and she needed to be on her best behavior.

I told the guys I'd been wondering where she came from and that I'd guessed she'd belonged to whoever owned the yurts we'd stayed in the previous night.

"I don't think so," said Richard. "I heard some of the other runners say she joined them out on the dune yesterday."

That meant she had put in almost fifty miles in two days. I was staggered.

It also meant she didn't belong to the people back at the previous camp or to one of the race organizers.

"You know what you've got to do now, don't you?" said Richard.

"What?"

"You've got to give her a name."

Acknowledgments

CHINA HAS BROUGHT SO MUCH GOOD TO MY life, and I am grateful to have spent so long a time there. In a country of more than one billion souls, I have met some of the most generous, thoughtful, and kind people I could ever hope to meet.

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I still smile when I think of the times I spent with the Urumqi boys from Lvbaihui Tribes Barbecue restaurant (especially when I remember the firewater they gave me. *Ganbei Maotai!*).

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The Chinese media showed support and dedication for our story and the love within.

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The media has played such an important part in this story. Jonathan Brown from the *Daily Mirror* was the first reporter to bring the story to press, Judy Tait brought the story to BBC Radio 5 Live, and host Phil Williams supported us from the start. They saw the story in ways that I did not, and they led the way in sharing it with others.

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who covered the story, I am thankful for your help in sharing our journey.

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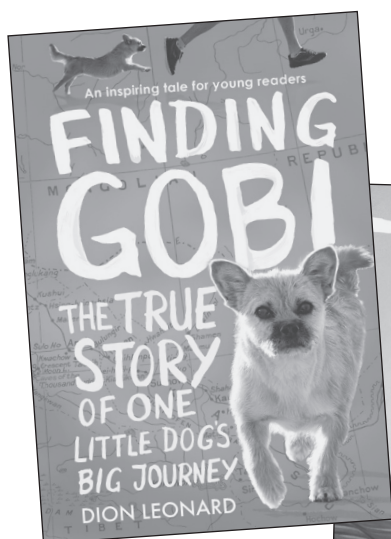
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About the Author

DION LEONARD, A FORTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD Australian, lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, with his wife, Lucja. Dion has not only completed but also competed for the top prize in some of the toughest ultramarathons across the planet's most inhospitable landscapes: the brutal Moroccan Sahara Desert, twice in the 155-mile Marathon des Sables, and twice across South Africa's Kalahari Desert, also 155 miles.

During Dion's 155-mile race across the Gobi Desert in China, he fell in love with a stray dog (later named Gobi) who followed him during the week and changed both of their lives forever.

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