LIMITLESS

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Some of the names of those involved in Mimi's adventures have been altered for this book.

LIMITLESS

AN ULTRARUNNER'S STORY OF PAIN, PERSEVERANCE AND THE PURSUIT OF SUCCESS

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MIMI ANDERSON

WITH LUCY WATERLOW

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PROLOGUE

June 2019

I woke up on race day full of dread. My stomach was churning with butterflies and my heart was pounding. Eating breakfast was definitely out of the question as I felt so nervous. All I could manage was a coffee – most unlike me ahead of a physical challenge.

I had already laid out the kit I would wear the night before, and had packed everything else I would need into my bag (double-checking it was all there more than once throughout the evening). All I needed to do was get dressed and go, but I kept checking everything again which was delaying my departure. My husband, Tim, kept looking at his watch wondering why it was taking me so long to leave.

"Shouldn't you have left by now?" he asked.

He has always been fully supportive of my sporting endeavours – no matter how ambitious. And this challenge was arguably one of my most outlandish. A sprint triathlon. I have made a name for myself as a Guinness World

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Record breaking ultrarunner. "Sprint" is not usually in my vocabulary. I had so many doubts swirling around my mind.

I can't go, I thought. *I'm not ready, and I don't know if I ever will be. I don't think I can do this.*

I'm not usually one to be so defeatist before I've even tried something. In the past, I have thrived on proving to myself and others that I can do things that seem impossible. But at that moment, I didn't feel like the formidable sportswoman I once was. I had been through a lot in the previous two years that had knocked me down both physically and mentally. I now didn't know if I had the strength or ability to become a triathlete.

If you want something you have never had, then you have to try something you have never done, I thought to try to psych myself up. This was the mantra that had led me to sign up for the Cranbrook Triathlon in Kent, held in June 2019, in the first place. It entailed a 300 m (328 yd) pool swim, 21 km (13 mile) bike ride and 5 km (3.1 mile) run. Out of the three disciplines, there wasn't one I felt fully confident about. I was a nervous swimmer, an apprentice cyclist, and a runner returning from injury. Then there were the transitions. The thought of them was especially daunting. Some say triathlon is actually a four-discipline sport, not three, because of everything you need to do and remember in transitions between the swim, cycle and run. Races can be won or lost based on how quickly you can go through them without incurring any penalties. There was a lot to

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think about, much more so than doing an ultramarathon race, which is often just about getting from A to B. In ultras where I had a crew, I never had to think about anything other than running. They planned and provided everything for me, from helping me change my kit when needed, to plying me with snacks and drinks. In the triathlon, I would be on my own.

I kept telling myself it didn't matter how messy and amateurish my transitions were, or how slow my bike ride and run were. All that mattered was finishing, never mind the time it took. And then I had another thought – I could be worrying myself over the transitions needlessly, as I might not even make it that far to do them. In order to cycle and run, first I would have to swim. And this was my greatest fear of all. The thought of swimming in a competitive environment was absolutely terrifying. I was worried about being able to control my breathing while doing front crawl – a technique I had only recently learnt. I was petrified of the other swimmers who would be splashing and bumping into me as they swam with all their might to go as fast as they could. But most of all, I was worried about simply being in the water. This wasn't just usual pre-race nerves, it was a debilitating anxiety. It stemmed from a childhood incident where I witnessed my younger sister, Jacqui, almost drown in an icy river. She survived unscathed but the experience scarred me for life. Being near or in water immediately makes me recall the horror and helplessness I felt that day.

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They say you have to face your fears to truly defeat them, and that's why I had entered the triathlon race to try to do just that. I was now 56 years old. I had avoided it for long enough. It was time to dive in and finally overcome my phobia. So, I picked up my kit bag and told Tim I was off, even though I wanted to stay at home. He gave me a hug and wished me luck, then came to help me put my stuff into the car.

Come on Mimi, you can do this, I told myself as I headed out the door. When I put my mind to a long-distance running goal, I was determined to see it through. I now had to apply that same determination to triathlon. I racked up my bike on the car as Tim put my bags on the front seat. All I needed to do now was get myself in and go, but as I went to open the car door, my resolve wobbled again.

"I can't go," I told Tim.

"Really?" he said with surprise. "You're not going to try?"

He knew I had been preparing for this for weeks, and I wasn't usually a quitter. I thought about it some more. I really didn't want to do it. But at the same time, I knew how disappointed I would be with myself if I didn't. If I stayed at home, I would be kicking myself for the rest of the day, and only end up entering another triathlon. Not only that, my friends from Weald Triathlon Club, that I had joined the year before, were expecting to see me there. Others who followed me online were also waiting to hear how I got on, as I had been sharing my triathlon journey on social media.

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How could I tell everyone that I didn't do it because I was too scared? I had even chosen a triathlon with the easier option of a swim in a leisure centre pool over a scarier open water one, but to me it was still just as intimidating. I felt so nervous even thinking about being in the water again, I thought I was going to be sick right there on our driveway. I was on the verge of bursting into tears. How had it come to this? I had once won ultramarathons in the desert and the Arctic, and set world records for running across Britain and Ireland. Now I was ready to back out of a race before even making it to the start line. Petrified, fearful, unsure of myself and what my body was capable of. Could I overcome my fears and become a triathlete?

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PART ONE:

RUNNING AMERICA FOR A WORLD RECORD

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CHAPTER ONE

THE AMERICAN DREAM

If you had told me in 2016 that becoming a triathlete would be a huge target of mine, I would have thought you were bonkers. I had my long-standing fear of water and was happy to keep avoiding it; I barely rode a bike; and running 5 km (3.1 miles) wasn't challenging for me then. At that time, I was fully ensconced in the ultrarunning world and preparing to take on my biggest challenge yet – attempting to set a new Guinness World Record running across America in the fastest time for a woman. I would start at City Hall in L.A. and finish on the steps of City Hall in New York, running 2,850 miles (4,587 km) in between. I had been working towards this goal for a long time but to say it had always been a dream of mine would be untrue.

I only started running in my thirties and began by barely being able to run a mile on the treadmill. I wouldn't have been able to run across a small park, let alone the third largest continent in the world. Back then I was a stay-at-

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home mother of three who had only taken up running because I wanted to have slimmer and more toned legs. I never expected running to become such a big part of my life and identity. It was when friends I had made at the gym encouraged me to step off the treadmill and run with them outside that I discovered my passion for running. When running through a forest or along a scenic path surrounded by countryside, I had never felt more free. It made me feel alive and it gave me freedom and space away from being a wife and mum. It also helped me banish an eating disorder that could have killed me in my twenties. Running taught me that food is fuel, not something to fear or avoid. If I wanted to run well, I had to eat well. It also changed my attitude towards my body image. I started caring less about how my body looked and more about what it could do. And what it could do continued to amaze me.

I never thought I would be able to run far but in 2000 I completed my first half marathon, the Hastings Half Marathon. I then ran my first ultramarathon in 2001 – the 54 mile (87 km) Thames Meander. It was a training run for my main goal at that time – the Marathon des Sables. This is a 155-mile (250-km) self-sufficiency race over six days in the Sahara Desert. I thought it would be a great adventure with my newly made running friends, even though I had no experience of running such a long distance in extreme heat. It nearly broke me, but I absolutely loved it. It was there that my love of ultrarunning and pushing myself out of my

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comfort zone was born. I didn't look back after that, I kept finding myself new challenges.

The seed was sown in my mind to run across America in 2011. I had achieved two Guinness World Records by then. The first was becoming the fastest female to run the length of Great Britain (John o'Groats to Land's End, or JOGLE), running 840 miles (1,352 km) in 12 days, 15 hours and 46 minutes in 2008. Then in 2010, I ran 403.81 miles (649.87 km) on a treadmill in seven days, a Guinness World Record for the greatest distance run on a treadmill in one week by a woman at the time. In both of these challenges, I had loved the whole process of making and then executing a plan to achieve my goal. Of course, there were times when I was in extreme pain, and low moments where I questioned whether I could do it, but the hardship made the feeling of accomplishment when I did succeed even sweeter. The pride, joy and relief at pushing myself beyond my perceived limits to gain a new world record felt like nothing else. I was keen to see what else I could achieve on a global scale.

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I had been following the progress of a fellow ultrarunner and friend called James Adams who had been taking part in the LA–NY (Los Angeles to New York) Footrace. As I followed the highs and lows of his journey via his blog, I thought it sounded fantastic. It ignited a flame inside me, and I knew that one day I would tackle my own journey across America. The goal had been set. It would be the ultimate test of my running ability. But having decided that

was my goal, it was another six years before I was ready to do it. These sorts of challenges need a huge amount of planning, preparation and fundraising, not to mention the training, and there were setbacks getting my body into the best condition to face such an arduous run.

The time to beat

The record I was aiming to beat had been unbroken for decades. It was set by South African Mavis Hutchison, who ran coast to coast in 69 days and 2 hours in 1979. My aim was to try to run it in 50 days. (I worked out this would mean running about 57 miles / 92 km per day. That's nearly 399 miles / 642 km per week for just over seven weeks.) But I told the world via social media that I was aiming to do it in 53 days, as I thought this would take the pressure off, and give me room for manoeuvre in case of any unexpected hold-ups. This might sound like crazy mileage, but it wasn't an unrealistic goal for me given my previous endurance feats. I had gained a third Guinness World Record in 2012 with the fastest crossing of Ireland on foot, where I ran a total of 345 miles (555 km) in three days, 15 hours, 36 minutes.

On top of the world record challenges, I had also completed many of the world's toughest ultras as doubles. This involved taking part in the organized race with the other competitors. Then after having a very short break at the finish, I would turn around and do the entire course again in reverse, just me and my support crew. In 2009, I was the first female to

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do the double at Comrades, South Africa, a total of 112 miles (180 km); in 2011, I completed double Badwater in California's Death Valley, a total of 292 miles (470 km); in 2013 I became the first person to run the double at the Grand Union Canal Race between Birmingham and London (having previously broken the female course record in 2010), a distance of 290 miles (467 km); and in 2015, I was the first female to complete the double Spartathlon, Greece, a total of 306 miles (492 km). The furthest I had ever run in a challenge was in 2014, when I ran 1,223 miles (1968 km) in 32 days along the Freedom Trail in South Africa from Pietermaritzburg to Cape Town. I knew I would have to draw on all my previous experiences to get me through the run across America, and I was confident in my ability to do it. Completing endurance events in extreme conditions had become my speciality.

People often ask me, why America? Why not another country or a different world record? It is largely because crossing America is so iconic in endurance sports. It is known as one of the toughest challenges an ultrarunner or long-distance cyclist can take on – and many try and fail. I also loved the idea of running coast to coast, something I had enjoyed when I ran from the top to the bottom of the UK, and across Ireland. You simply can't beat touring a country on foot. It is a unique opportunity to really see places you might otherwise never visit and meet people whose paths you would never cross in everyday life.

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Another part of the appeal is that the country is so vast, with changing terrain and extremes of weather as you go through the various states. I could expect to face blistering heat, strong winds and heavy rain along my way. There is also a risk of snow, but this is less likely if you attempt the crossing in spring or autumn. I had run ultras in mountain ranges, deserts, jungles and the Arctic before, so I felt prepared for whatever altitudes and temperatures lay ahead. In a way, I felt as though everything I had done before had been building up to running across America. On a lighter note, I would often joke to my friends that I have always wanted to go to New York but Tim wouldn't take me, so I would just have to run there instead!

The route

The most intricate aspect of the preparation lay in plotting the fastest possible route across an entire continent that contains mountain ranges, canyons, gigantic lakes and protected National Parks. My plan had always been to start at City Hall in L.A. and finish on the steps of City Hall in New York. There are a few ultrarunning enthusiasts in America who like to call this the "easy" route (actually, they have another name for it but that's too rude to write here!) as it is shorter than running from San Francisco to New York. It also involves less elevation (although the route I chose would still rise to over 10,000 feet / 3,048 m above sea level).

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