

The
Great Chattanooga
BICYCLE RACE

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“A close study of the southern newspapers fails to show that the bloomer craze has gained any decided hold south of the Mason and Dixon line. Indeed, the bicycle is a new thing, and the women who ride are as fearful of criticism as a woman in tight knickerbockers would be in some Northern places. . . . South of Virginia the real southern women do not ride the bicycle much. The climate is against the exercise. . . . A Tennessee paper so late as last week was wondering if any woman would have the temerity to introduce bloomers in that region. If any did it said, they would surely bring on themselves such notoriety as must be exceedingly unpleasant to modest, womanly women. . . . Some few women in New Orleans wear bloomers, but in almost every southern newspaper the appearance of a pair of bloomers is treated almost as would be the coming ashore of the sea serpent.”

—*Los Angeles Herald*, Sept. 15, 1895



Chapter One



Brooklyn, New York
June 1895

SHE IMAGINED THE inscription on her tombstone: Here lies Anna Gaines, age nineteen. She died while riding a bicycle.

Her hands gripped the handlebars so tight that her knuckles turned white and began to tingle. The initial excitement at mastering the nation's new favorite pastime gave way to deep anxiety. An unrelenting panic threw her back in time, when instead of handlebars, her fists gripped the reins of her beloved Appaloosa, Longstreet. She couldn't stop the memory of the terror that had surged up within her just before he bucked her to the ground. Five years of training, gone in an instant . . . and a whole life of dreams. The tumble had reset the trajectory of her life. The broken leg eventually healed, but the limp remained.

Nothing would be the same.

Outgoing by nature, she turned inward. Months in bed caused her to miss out on the fun of her youth. Later, the thought of men being interested in her seemed unimaginable. The obvious disability didn't help.

Beads of sweat coalesced and found pathways to trickle down her cheeks, despite mild temperatures that created the perfect day for a ride in the city. Wiping the droplets on the back of her hand, she pictured her life back in Chattanooga, where she was captive behind block walls.

With an ache in her chest, she thought of her overprotective mama. Ever since the accident, Mama had hovered like a fearful nurse. And then, there was the town she lived in, with all its rules, scrutiny, and expectations. To make matters worse, some of her prison time was self-imposed. A lack of confidence had long held her back from expanding her borders. She inhaled and slowly released. Could she break away by cycling with this slew of bloomer-clad ladies?

She glanced around at the determined riders, many of them women, ready for this challenge. Then she realized that she wasn't like them. She couldn't do this. At least not now. Maybe never. What if she crashed into another unsuspecting cyclist, and both of them fell headlong onto the hard, crushed limestone surface of the new Coney Island cycle path? Death might be an overreaction, but the possibility of a collision existed nonetheless, and the prospect frightened her.

"Auntie Harriet?" Her voice trembled with the rest of her body, causing her words to crack. "I can't do this. I'm not a practiced enough cyclist after one week."

Harriet cast an all too familiar glance. "You overcame a terrible injury, so you can tackle this challenge. Either shrink away or overcome." A predictable response. She'd been called to account by Aunt Harriet so many times before. Tackle this challenge. Easy to say, hard to do . . . at least for her.

"Perhaps we should turn around," Anna said.

"Don't worry, dear. All will be fine." Harriet turned to the cyclist on her left and asked about the woman's bicycle.

Under normal circumstances, Anna admired her aunt's single-minded focus on the person with whom she conversed, especially when

Anna was the object of Harriet's rapt attention. Everyone around them would freeze in time, like an old ambrotype of people whose voices had long since been stilled. But these were not normal circumstances, and she needed Aunt Harriet's assistance. Rather than appear rude, she muttered her concerns below her breath.

Not a minute later, Anna's moment with destiny arrived.

The last speaker concluded his remarks, and the marching band launched into a rousing John Philip Sousa tune. The music stirred the multitudes, but the blaring trumpets drowned out her mental review of the rules of riding. Like Anna and her aunt, excited riders from all walks of life gathered to make history by cycling the nation's first dedicated bicycle pathway. The lane started in Brooklyn's Prospect Park and ran parallel to Ocean Parkway for almost six miles.

The path whispered to her, *Come ride me*. Anna whispered back. "Please. Not today."

The cyclists around her champed at the bit like Longstreet had on that fateful day. One scorcher in a hurry to reach Coney Island or a meek rider who jerked his or her handlebar the wrong way, and down she would go, like the day she had turned thirteen. The country's Independence Day, and her birthday, came and went that year without incident for most people in Chattanooga. For Anna, many days of dependence followed.

What did Aunt Harriet talk her into, and what about her aunt's scandalous outfit?

Discreditable—by Chattanooga's standards anyway. Many females in the crowd donned the same risqué costume. Bloomers, according to what she had read over the last few days, opened up the world of cycling to women. Her new hero, Annie Londonderry, wore them on her cycling trip around the world. Still, to see women dressed this way in public would take some getting used to.

She tried to picture herself on the corner of Market and Ninth Streets in Chattanooga, wearing this garb that her aunt said represented the new woman emerging all across America. The lens shattered, and the image dissolved. Someone else, but not her. Sometime in the future, maybe . . . but not yet.

Chattanooga and New York existed on different planets. The winds of social change may be blowing across America, but a dissimilar breeze swished through Chattanooga, one bound to turn into a gale with the mere mention of women in bloomers. Unable to attract Aunt Harriet's attention, Anna caught the notice of an adolescent girl on her right side.

Anna asked, "What does your mama make of your bloomer outfit? I mean, showing all that . . ."

"Much of my body?" The girl, amused by the question, brought her hand to her mouth in a gracious attempt to hide her giggle. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"That obvious?"

The young girl pointed to a middle-aged female rider wearing bloomers, one bicycle up and over to the right from her.

"Don't tell me—that's your mama?"

Anna shook her head in disbelief. The picture of her own mama on a wheel, by her side and half naked, came and vanished in almost the same instant. Inconceivable. The twinkle from the young lady's eyes caused Anna to focus on her rather than the riding garb and what Mama's reaction would be. As she opened her mouth to ask about the proper way to mount the wheel, the young cyclist beat her to the punch.

"What you're wearing today is lovely. Earlier I admired your skirt. Very fashionable, falling to the top of your boots, and so complemented by the cutaway jacket. I love your straw hat. Very new woman-ish."

"Why, thank you."

“Someday you should try riding in bloomers. So much easier and freeing. Enjoy your ride.” The girl walked her bike forward to get closer to her mother.

Anna wiped her sweaty hands on her skirt, part of the spicy new outfit Aunt Harriet had bought her for their memorable ride. A distant cry from the minimal covering of bloomers on a lady, even this alternative gave her pause. After all, as the girl pointed out, the skirt stopped above her ankles, revealing more of her legs than ever before. The looming eyes of her mama somehow reached from Chattanooga to Brooklyn, demanding she change into the hooped dress of a proper Southern woman.

“Aunt Harriet, are you ignoring me?”

Her aunt faced her. “Trust yourself.”

“I’m scared out of my wits. I can’t remember how to mount.”

“You and your wheel will become as one person. Mounting is straightforward and simple.”

“Perhaps for you, but . . .”

The riders ahead of her climbed aboard their wheels. The moment of truth had arrived. Her heart thumped. The familiar odd tingling from head to toe told her danger lay ahead, and she experienced an overwhelming instinct to flee. Escape no longer an option, Anna began to pedal, her balance wobbly for a few seconds. She fought through her discomfort until the recent lessons kicked in and then shot out like a bullet from a gun.

Ten yards turned into fifty, and a hundred. By some miracle, she still sat upright, the uncertainty about launching moments ago fading like a distant memory. As she pedaled harder, the wheels rotated faster, advancing her speed. The thrill set her senses ablaze. The marching band grew faint in the distance, the rhythmical oompahs from the tubas being the last brass sound hanging onto the wind.

She leaned into the bars, invigorated by a mild breeze. A newfound freedom washed over her—mobility unleashed by the pedals and chain

that turned the back wheel with every revolution of her legs. As she breathed in the bouquet of late spring, tinged with the grit of New York's city streets in summer, she burst into peals of laughter. The riders on both sides caught her giddiness, smiling as she passed through.

The shady trees lining the lane almost hypnotized her. She gazed over at the pleasure carriages, horse-drawn wagons, and electric rail cars that filled the adjacent street. Citizens walked on sidewalks to their destinations. As she experienced big city life from a bicycle seat, she concluded that the wheel had rightfully taken its place among these varied forms of transportation.

Authorities had set a speed limit of twelve miles per hour on the path. One policeman along the way reminded the riders to avoid speeding. "You will regret the penalty if you're caught scorching down the path."

The cyclists rode on, Anna imagining her wheel lifting off the ground, climbing up into a blue sky, the backdrop for some silky clouds, thin and wispy. Rays of sunlight warmed her face. She pictured the aerial view of thousands of cyclists stretching for miles down the new cycling path below. Coney Island waited beyond. Birds of varying species, sizes, and colors winged their way home for the summer, sharing her airspace, unperturbed by her presence.

Something outside herself warned of danger, causing the dreamy vision to blow away like smoke, much to her disappointment. A flash beside Anna made her jerk the handlebar to the left, narrowly averting a collision with a racer on wheels. She shifted the bar back to the right to compensate and stabilize, avoiding a nasty tumble into Aunt Harriet's bicycle.

Her aunt didn't flinch. "Perfect recovery."

She cried out, "Oh, Aunt Harriet, I'm in love."



She searched for the perfect one-word description of their day at Coney. Enchanting. A time that left an indelible impression and a motto she pledged to never forget: People are never too old to enjoy life in a childlike manner. The ride on the new path back to Prospect Park capped an extraordinary time with her aunt.

As they neared Prospect Park, Anna's joyous mood turned somber. "Oh, Auntie . . . will I ever ride a wheel again?"

"If that's what you truly want, then yes."

"What about the shunning sure to befall a woman cyclist on the streets of Chattanooga? I'm not sure I have the courage to endure the community outrage . . . or Mama's disdain."

Southern ladies didn't engage in activities meant for men.

