

Chapter 1: Astonishing News

Saint Helena Island, South Atlantic

October 12, 1815

Charlotte was in the kitchen bottling peaches with her mother and her aunt Emelia when she heard the news. The messenger was her eldest brother, John, a strapping loudmouthed Yamstock, as the islanders were called, who arrived with a great clatter in the farm's courtyard, froth on his horse's mouth.

"Boney!" he yelled, wheeling the animal around. "Boney's coming! He's coming to get you! Reelly, reelly, reelly!"

Brother John had the brains of a sparrow, and when he got excited he spoke with an accent as thick as his skull. He often said silly things that didn't make sense. "Hush or Boney will get you!" was a dire warning that mothers everywhere in the Empire used to frighten their children to sleep. Had John been drinking prickly pear *tungi*, and it not yet noon?

Charlotte's mother, long-faced and short-tempered, launched herself into a question with a busy pump of her elbows. "What you mean, John?" Her nerves were acting up because John was shouting and waving his hat and spurring his horse to rear, although the poor animal was clearly near dropping after the steep uphill ride from Jamestown, which wasn't a town at all, hardly even a village, and the only one for a thousand watery miles in any direction.

"Just what I said!" shouted John, hitching his horse. "Wellington done beat Boney at someplace called Waterloo, and they're done gorn sent him 'ere! Him and his whole fancy court! Hundreds of Frenchies! Counts and countesses in them white wigs, I bet! Enough generals to make up an army! All coming here day after tomorrow or the next day, depending on the wind. Five ships full of rich aristos loaded with livres. The whole island will be swarming with hungry redcoats to guard 'em. Can you believe our luck?"

Charlotte couldn't. Tiny Saint Helena was a speck in the vast South Atlantic, the loneliest island in the world. How could it suddenly become the center of the universe?

"Where's he going to stay?" asked Aunt Emelia, a pleasantly plump, kind-faced woman who sat on a stool, quite happy to see her restless, rawboned sister-in-law do all the work.

"Them say at Longwood, you know, on Deadwood Plain," said John.

This convinced Charlotte that John's news was nothing more than a preposterous rumor that John didn't have the wit to distinguish from the truth. "There's no house there, idiot!" she called out to him through the window. "Only a few drafty sheds!"

John threw open the back door, plucked off his hat, and burned his mouth on half a peach, still hot from the syrup. "Shows how much you know," he said through the peach. "It's been fixed up as a summer cottage for years. Now they're in a tearing hurry to fix it up some more."

"Who told you all this?" Charlotte shot back, making no effort to hide her skepticism, because she didn't have much time for fools and brother John was definitely one of those.

"The whole town is shouting about it. I got it from your very own best friend, Mary Porteous, who is shouting louder than anyone else because they're putting him up at Porteous House until Longwood's ready. I bet old man Porteous will wear his kilt every day instead of just Sundays. Not often you have an emperor as a lodger!"

John's mother and aunt stared at him in disbelief. Charlotte flushed with wild excitement. Napoleon! The man her Daniel raved about in his letters. Hero of ordinary people everywhere! Nemesis of kings and emperors who kept attacking him because they were afraid of what he stood for. Napoleon, suddenly thrust into her life! What would Daniel say when he heard he was coming to Saint Helena? But of course he would know already. How infuriated he must be, stuck in London, while everything was happening in his backwater home! It was all so impossible. A fairy story.

"Napoleon!" Charlotte said just to taste the flavor of the word. It conjured up images of cannons and cavalry charges and a picture she'd seen of him being crowned emperor by the pope.

"At last someone good enough for you!" said her mother, whose tongue was as sharp as a shard of glass.

"Rubbish! Daniel is more than good enough for me!"

"Because he writes you all them letters stuffed with nonsense about liberty and equality and revolution," crowed John. "Don't think I haven't read them. You leave them all over the house like your smelly underwear!"

"That's disgusting! I leave them in a box under my bed, where you have no business sticking your snout!"

“I can stick me nose wherever I like!” said John, attacking another hot peach. “Since Dad’s no longer with us, I’m the head of the family!”

Charlotte’s mother weighed in, trying to sound like the voice of reason. “Charlotte, you’re a young woman of nineteen. High time you had a house of your own. But no one is good enough. Our local young men are nothing but yams to you! You dote on a bastard gypsy boy, and I’m sure that’s only because you haven’t seen him for five years and—”

“It’s not his fault his parents weren’t married! Daniel’s brilliant, and he’s hardworking. Why do you think Uncle Samuel supports him at Kew Gardens? He’s going to come back a botanist and a gentleman, not common dirt like some of us!”

John ignored the insult. “And none of the local lads want to walk out with you because all you want to talk about is your silly liberty!” he said. “I don’t know why you don’t emigrate yourself to America.”

“All we’re asking is for everyone to get the same chance,” said Charlotte. “I can’t work except in my own house. I can’t get a husband because I don’t have a dowry! What am I supposed to do? At least you inherited the farm, although you’re too lazy to farm it!”

“What’s all the excitement?” It was Uncle Samuel, closest Charlotte had for a father since hers passed away ten years ago, limping in on his walking stick. Samuel Knipe was the richest planter on the poverty-stricken little island—that’s why he could afford to keep Daniel at Kew, although only just. He suffered from gout and shortness of breath. He didn’t look like a man who would see many more summers, not that there was much difference between summer and winter on this, the leeward side.

John, relishing his opportunity to shine in front of his wealthy uncle, did a silly bow so deep that his hat swept the floorboards and then tried his best to speak proper. “Uncle Samuel, I am pleased to announce that Wellington beat the French and that we are about to be honored by the presence of no less a personage than Emperor Napoleon himself. He is to take up indefinite residence on this island, courtesy of His Majesty’s government!”

Samuel searched John’s excited face for the lie but didn’t find it. “Bully for my man Wellington!” he said on the basis of bumping into the general a few times during Wellington’s short visit to the island ten years ago on his way back from India. “So he’s caught the cockerel at last! I wager they’ll not let him flee the coop a second time. That’s why they’re sending him here, of course!” Samuel sighed. He was a sharp trader, but he was also a kind man. “Poor devil.

I think in many ways he meant well. Imagine being banished all the way from the golden throne of Europe to this pimple on the backside of nowhere!”