Palace Circle

Rebecca Dean

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PART ONE

Delia

1911–1930

ONE

Sans Souci, Virginia, April 1911

The first rays of the rising sun filtered through the half-open shutters of the vast bedroom. Eighteen-year-old Delia Conisborough stirred slightly, her tumbled hair a glorious flame-red against the pristine whiteness of lace-edged bed linen.

The man beside her, snoring gently, didn't move and, much as she loved him, she did not want him to. This was the morning that, as a bride of four days, she was to leave her childhood home and embark on the long journey to England and a lifestyle very different to anything she had previously known. There were goodbyes to be said. Not to people. They would come later when the Chandler clan descended on Sans Souci to wave them off as they left by train for Richmond. From Richmond there would be a longer journey to New York and then, most exciting of all, the five-day Atlantic crossing aboard the *Mauretania*, the most luxurious liner afloat.

Still trying to come to terms with the realization that her surname was no longer Chandler but Conisborough and that she had a title, Viscountess Conisborough – though Ivor had explained to her she would generally be referred to as Lady

Conisborough – she swung her legs to the floor, her silk nightdress swirling about her ankles. It wasn't yet six o'clock and she had at least two hours in which to say private goodbyes to all her favourite horses and all her favourite places – as well as to Sans Souci itself.

The bedroom she had been sharing with Ivor for the last three nights was not the bedroom she still regarded as being hers. That bedroom lay in the opposite wing of the house and she padded barefoot along the corridor towards it, plaiting her hair into a single waist-length braid as she did so.

'Mornin', Miss Delia,' said Sam, one of the servants who had been at Sans Souci for as long as she could remember, as she passed him outside her father's room. 'Ah sure am sorry you be leavin' us.'

'I'm sorry too,' she said, not at all abashed at being clad only in her nightdress. 'But my husband has promised we'll be back for visits.'

She flashed Sam a dazzling smile and, if she had been dressed, would have hugged him. No one ever stood on ceremony at Sans Souci. The easy-going intimacy between family and servants was taken for granted, though Ivor had not been able to accept it.

'Great Scott, Delia!' he'd said disbelievingly when first witnessing the familiarity that existed between the Chandlers and their staff. 'You won't be able to behave like that towards household staff in England. They would think you had taken leave of your senses!'

Now in her old bedroom she smiled at the memory, pulling her nightdress over her head and then dragging her ankle-length riding skirt and her riding jacket from her closet.

Though she was only eighteen she had enough sense to know that it was her so-different American ways that had captivated her new husband. He certainly hadn't married her

for her money. A handful of other aristocratic Englishmen, those with vast estates and little money to maintain them, had married American heiresses, but Ivor Conisborough did not fall into that category. Twenty-two years her senior, he not only came from an exceedingly distinguished family, he was also distinguished in his own right, having been a financial advisor to King Edward VII, who had died a year ago, and now financial advisor to the about-to-be-crowned King George V. As a consequence of his position and his aristocratic family lineage he was very much a part of the royal circle. A royal circle of which she, as his wife, would also soon be a part.

Feelings of excitement and anticipation flooded through Delia as she pulled on her riding boots. Ivor's visit to Virginia – and his subsequent acquaintanceship with her father – had changed her entire future. As daughter of one of the leading families of Virginia she would, of course, have married well and always lived comfortably, but there could be no comparison between the life she had expected and the life she was now about to lead.

Chandlers rarely saw any reason to leave Virginia and it was a foregone conclusion that, if she hadn't married Ivor, her future husband would have been a distantly related Chandler cousin, perhaps Beau Chandler, who was a cousin twice or three times removed, she could never remember which. Beau was handsome enough to commit suicide for and fun into the bargain, but as his interests didn't extend much beyond drinking and gambling it was always fun of short duration. With Beau there would have been regular trips to White Sulphur Springs, a fashionable spa, and maybe even the occasional trip to Niagara, but there would have been no crossing of the Atlantic and none of the sophisticated social life that lay ahead of her in London. A social life that would, in a few weeks' time, include attending a coronation in Westminster Abbey.

In the stables she took her time saying goodbye to her father's horses. Her father had always been a keen horseman. A member of the Deep Run Hunt, he had taught her to ride before she could walk. When Ivor had asked her to marry him, it had been her only query. 'I shall still be able to ride?' she had asked, her heart slamming hard against her breastbone.

'You'll be able to ride every day in London,' he had said reassuringly in the clipped, cultured English accent that sent tingles down her spine. 'Many of my late wife's friends ride daily on Hyde Park's Rotten Row. It's a bridle path with stabling near by. And if you want to hunt—'

'I shan't,' she had said, before he could finish. 'Pa hunts. I never have.'

'You may change your mind when you find friends disappearing to Leicestershire every November,' he'd said drily. 'We'll wait and see. One thing is certain: once it is seen how you take a horse over a five-foot fence, no one will doubt what a superb rider you are.'

She had wanted to ask how far Shibden Hall, his family seat, was from Leicestershire. She knew it was in Norfolk but had no idea how far Norfolk was from Leicestershire or how far both counties were from London.

'But London is where we shall be spending most time,' she said now to her horse, Sultan, mounting him unaided.

Riding bareback, she cantered out of the cobbled yard and past the paddocks. It was a glorious spring morning, the air thick with the scent of heat to come and the grass still dew-wet. On mornings like these it seemed to her that the lush rolling Virginian countryside was as vast as all eternity. The softly rounded peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains were hazy in the distance and nearer were belts of thick woodland edging a swift-running river and half a dozen creeks. She knew the names of all the trees. Red maple, tulip,

blackgum, sassafras, hickory, dogwood and sourwood. In autumn their leaves were a blaze of colour. Now, in April, it was wildflowers that were at their best.

By the edge of the nearest creek she could glimpse the delicate pale mauve of wild geraniums and, beyond them, flashes of maroon-red trilliums and swathe after swathe of marsh marigolds, their deep-yellow petals glinting like gold.

She slowed Sultan to a walk, and with the reins slack in her hands she stared at the landscape she loved. The trouble was, she also loved Ivor and Ivor's life was in London – and not only London, for he was just as familiar with Paris and Rome and St Petersburg as he was with New York and Washington.

That she was the wife of such a distinguished cosmopolitan man thrilled her. The moment she had been introduced to him she had been bowled over; but he was of her parents' generation, not hers. Even when her father told her their visitor was a widower it had still not occurred to her that he might show romantic interest in her.

It had been her Aunt Rose, her mother's spinster sister, who had set out to catch his eye. Her mother, when Ivor had extended his stay in Virginia, had thought that perhaps Rose had a chance. Her father had always been far more perceptive.

'Lord Conisborough's marriage was childless,' he'd said when Delia had ever so casually brought up the subject of her Aunt Rose's hopes and aspirations. 'When Conisborough marries again it will be to a woman much younger than Rose. He'll want an heir and, because of his age, he'll want one fast. Poor Rose. I'm afraid she's going to be out of luck again.'

She had, indeed, been out of luck and when it became known that Lord Conisborough had asked for Delia's hand in marriage, Rose had been poleaxed – and she hadn't been the only one.

Delia, too, had hardly been able to believe it.

Her father had believed it, though, and had done so gleefully. 'An English viscount! A peer of the realm! Dammit, girl! I *told* you he'd be looking for a young wife! Wait until the *New York Times* gets hold of this! They'll have to describe us as Virginian aristocracy! The whole of Richmond will be bowing and scraping to us as if there's no tomorrow!'

Her mother had been far more restrained. 'He's been widowed for only such a short time, Delia,' she had said, seated beside her daughter on the edge of her bed and holding her hand. 'And he is so much older. I'd hate to think you were marrying because your head had been turned by the thought of an English title.'

'It hasn't,' she'd said adamantly. 'I'm marrying him because I'm in love with him. I'm marrying him because he's different to any other man I have ever met or, living in Virginia, am ever likely to meet. He's cultivated, sophisticated, intelligent – and *very* good-looking. Don't you think he is very good-looking?'

Her mother had thought of Ivor Conisborough's chiselled features, the aquiline nose, the faint hollows under the cheekbones, the well-shaped mouth that betrayed an arrogance that could never be wholly hidden, the dark blond hair, arrow-straight and silkily smooth, and had, with a marked lack of enthusiasm, agreed with her.

As she turned Sultan's head in the direction of Sans Souci, Delia thought her mother's lack of enthusiasm might have been because Ivor was such a complete opposite to her father. Always chewing on a plug of tobacco, her father was on the short side, no more than five foot eight or nine, but broad shouldered and barrel-chested. Most comfortable in shabby, well-worn riding clothes, he seldom wore anything else and wherever he went there was a ruckus of noise and laughter.

Ivor was tall, at least two inches over six foot, favoured

Cuban cigars and was accompanied on all his travels by a valet. His starched collars were higher than anyone in Virginia had ever seen and he always wore either a homburg or, in deference to the Virginian heat, a straw hat, with his fashionable lounge suits. Exquisitely tailored though they were, Delia privately thought he never looked quite at ease in them. He was a man who suited formal clothing. In the frock coat and top hat he wore whenever they visited Richmond, he looked superb.

Unlike her father, he never spoke unless he had something pertinent to say and there was something in his manner that commanded immediate respect. Even Beau, who had volubly declared he had no intention of fawning to English nobility, had referred to Ivor as 'Your Grace' on first being introduced to him.

By then Delia had been conversant enough with the way to address and introduce Ivor to know that Beau had made a social gaffe.

'Refer to me as Ivor or as Conisborough,' Ivor had said to him, tired of giving the instruction to Delia's army of relations. 'Only dukes are addressed as "Your Grace", and then only by servants or anyone with whom they are having non-social communication.'

Unused to Ivor's clipped way of speaking. Beau interpreted the remark as a put-down and, refusing to let Delia persuade him otherwise, had vowed he would never forgive it. When she had married Ivor a month later in Richmond's St James's Episcopal Church, Beau had been noticeable only by his absence.

Despite the sumptuousness of her silk and satin wedding gown, with its high bodice encrusted with seed pearls and its slim skirt and lavish train glittering with crystal beads, it hadn't been quite the extravaganza she had always imagined her wedding would be – or the wedding her mother had

always planned for her to have – because it had all been so sudden.

'It is impossible for me to return to England for the coronation and then travel back to Virginia for a winter or a spring wedding,' Ivor had said to her father in the tone of a man accustomed to getting his own way. 'And it would be highly inappropriate for Delia to travel back to England with me without doing so as my wife. Even if she were to do so, a wedding in England, without her family present, would cause comment and is not what she wants.'

It hadn't been what her father wanted either; hence the speedy wedding that had set tongues wagging all over Virginia.

As she neared the hill that gave a perfect view of Sans Souci, Delia urged Sultan into a canter, still thinking of her husband and the intimidating effect he had on people. Sometimes even she felt a little intimidated by him, but common sense told her that it was natural when her respect for him was boundless and when he was, in so many ways, still a stranger to her.

Cresting the hill, she reined Sultan to a halt. This was the view she most wanted to say a lingering goodbye to.

Set against a background of evergreen trees, Sans Souci lay cradled in a bowl of hills that were, in comparison to the blue haze of the distant mountains, lushly green. Near to the house were the paddocks and then, a little to one side, the stables and the barns: the yearling barn and the broodmare barn and the barn where all the winter foodstuffs were stored, and then, beyond the barns, the neat precision of the apple orchards.

And dominating everything was the house.

It was a three-storey brick-built colonnaded manor house, its elegant Georgian windows flanked by pale yellow shutters, a flight of stone steps leading up to its double front

doors. The sun shimmered on its slate roof and honeysuckle fragranced the porch where her father and his friends liked to sit in the evenings, frosted mint juleps conveniently to hand.

It was the only home she had ever known and suddenly the prospect of leaving it caught at her throat. Sans Souci meant, in French, 'without care', and her mother had ensured that since the day she had entered it as a young bride, it had lived up to its name.

Delia's hands tightened on Sultan's reins. Though Ivor had told her they would be spending most of their time in London, she was sure that Shibden Hall would begin to play a large part in their married life once she had given Ivor an heir, and she was determined to turn it into the kind of home her mother had created at Sans Souci. A home that, however impressively splendid, was also glowingly welcoming. A home with fresh flowers in every room. A home where everyone who entered it instantly felt at ease. Most of all, a home where Ivor would want to be whenever he could get away from London and his court commitments.

As she gazed in deep thought across the open meadowland towards Sans Souci, the double front doors opened. For a heart-stopping moment she hoped it would be Ivor's distinctively tall figure that would emerge. She had been gone for nearly two hours and he would be up and dressed by now and wondering where she was. The thought of him walking into the meadows to greet her, as impatient to be with her as she was to be with him, sent excitement singing along her veins.

In high elation she dug her heels into Sultan's flanks, but then saw that it wasn't Ivor stepping out onto the colonnaded porch: it was two of the servants hauling out black travelling trunks starred with Cunard passenger stickers.

Her disappointment was intense, but swiftly overcome.

Any moment now the luggage would be loaded into one of the many horse-drawn buggies that would accompany them when they left Sans Souci for the local train station. It meant she hadn't much time in which to bathe, breakfast and change into her travelling clothes. And though Ivor wasn't yet in sight, somewhere within Sans Souci he was waiting for her.

At full gallop she jumped the treacherously high split-log fence that marked the beginning of Chandler land, eager for the opportunity, aboard ship and away from the prurient eyes of her family, to get to know her husband better. Eager to embark on the new, exciting life awaiting her in England.