

## *A Rock Amidst the Stormy Sea*

A Short Story by Dana Carlisle

Victoria Paige Chancellor looked at her reflection in the mirror and smiled. She looked absolutely fabulous for her first day at Beckenham, an exclusive boarding school outside of Washington D.C. She had been enrolled in Lancaster, another exclusive boarding school in Connecticut, but had been asked to leave. The Board of Directors considered her a risk. Her parents had not been upset, or even surprised. They had simply had asked one of their personal assistants to find another school for Tori, her fifth in the last four years alone, and jetted off to Europe.

Tori had been a mistake. She knew it. Her parents knew it and didn't even try to hide the fact. Matthew and Claire Chancellor were spoiled little kids who grew up to be spoiled adults. They were determined not to let something so inconsequential as a baby ruin their fun and freedom. As a result, Tori had been raised by nannies, governesses, boarding schools, and summer camps.

Tori had every material thing she could possibly want, and some she didn't, but she did not have the most important thing in the world. Tori had tricked herself long ago into believing that it was not important. Something that deep down inside she craved, whether she knew it or not. Victoria Chancellor had never known love.

But all of this was far from Tori's mind. She was busy thinking of her senior year and how she was going to make it the best year ever. She checked the glossy French braid in her beautiful golden-brown hair. Her jade green eyes sparkled and her tan face glowed. She was going to leave high school with a bang.



Meanwhile, a very different girl faced her mirror in one of the dorm rooms down the hall. It was her senior year at a school she had attended for six years, but her seventh year would be her first as a boarding student.

Sierra Delauney had grown up all over Europe and the Middle East. Her father was in the Foreign Service and her family had done various tours of duty until she was eight. It was then that her family was able to settle down in the United States, near Washington D.C. But last spring, Sierra's father had been called to do one final tour of duty, this time in Malaysia.

Sierra's older sister Mallory started her junior year at Stanford University, life as usual. Her brother Joshua had started his sophomore year at Princeton, life as usual. It seemed to Sierra that her life was the only one uprooted.

The Delauney family was close-knit. Nothing was more important to them as family. Already, Sierra missed them like crazy, even Mallory and Josh, whom she was used to being away from. Going to Beckenham as a boarding student would be much different than going as a day student, Sierra knew. Her three best friends, Lisa, Kristyne, and Samantha were day students. Sierra Delauney felt alone in the world.

Sierra broke out of her reverie and finally noticed her reflection in the mirror. Her black eyes didn't sparkle in anticipation of the coming year. Her light olive skin did not glow. Her black hair fell around her shoulders, framing her pretty face.

She sighed, but quickly put on a smile as Lisa, Kristi, and Sam burst into her room.

"Hey, Babes! It is Babes, isn't it?" The outgoing Kristi bubbled.

"How ya' holding up?" The sensitive Lisa inquired.

"Let's cruise, guys, we're late!" The dependable Sam reminded them.

Sierra's smile widened and turned real. She had wonderful friends. On many occasions in the last seven years she had considered them family. She would survive with them behind her. Yes, she would survive.



Sierra was already in her seat when she noticed a strikingly beautiful girl slide casually into the room just as the final bell rang. Sierra noted that she looked confident, self-assured, and downright cocky. Sierra could tell she was spoiled, but there was a fragile aura about the girl that drew Sierra to her. Normally she stayed away from girls like this, but the vulnerability that the girl exuded made her seem not quite so untouchable. Sierra's eyes followed the girl as she sat down next to her.

As Tori entered the room she looked around. She noticed several pretty girls sitting and chatting about their summer. None of the girls were in her league, but pretty, nonetheless. She was glad that there was an open seat next to the girl with the long dark hair and serious eyes. The girl looked solid and secure and Tori needed that.

Victoria knew she was beautiful. She knew she would be just as popular at this school as she was in all of her past schools. She was the epitome of confidence, but underneath the brave façade, she knew lay a little girl. She'd be lying to herself if she dared think her world was stable or secure. She needed a rock, and Tori thought this girl could provide that. Of course, Tori would never let the girl know that; the girl would be one up on her and Tori liked to be on top of things.

Mrs. Morgan called the class to order. Tori was new to Beckenham, but Sierra wasn't. She knew why Mrs. Morgan's nickname was "The Dragon Lady." Mrs. Morgan knew, too; she was the one who made it up and fostered it.

Sierra had found Mrs. Morgan's good-natured side last year in her speech and debate class. She was model student and teachers adored her, Mrs. Morgan was no exception. Unfortunately, this was not true of Tori. She loathed teachers like Morgan, and teachers like Morgan always seemed to return the feelings.

Victoria shifted positions endlessly during Mrs. Morgan's speech about her expectations for the coming year. She was fighting a losing battle with her drooping eyelids when the teacher started to seat them alphabetically.

"Leslie Adams...Suzanne Ashby..."

"Suzy," a short, bubbly blonde cheerleader called. Mrs. Morgan made a note in her book.

"Gwendolyn Burton..."

"Wendy," a tall black girl said as she slid into her seat. Another nod. Another note.

"Victoria Chamberlain..."

"Tori," the new girl pronounced. Sierra mentally took note with Mrs. Morgan.

"Sierra Delauney," Mrs. Morgan looked up long enough to smile at Sierra as she took her place behind Tori. Tori smiled to herself in satisfaction at the fact that Delauney came right after Chamberlain in this class. Sierra found herself equally glad to be near Tori, though she didn't know why. Each girl ventured a smile toward the other.

After everyone was seated, Mrs. Morgan gave them the last few minutes to talk. Tori immediately turned to Sierra.

"Hi. Tori," were her two words of introduction.

"Hi, my name's Sierra."

"I know."

Sierra was taken aback by this beautiful girl. She had always prided herself on her straightforwardness, but even at her worst she never had Tori's brashness. Silence enveloped them despite the chatter and laughter around them.

"Been here long?" Tori finally asked.

"This is my seventh year at Beckenham, but my first as a boarding student."

"Really? This is my sixth boarding school. I've been in 'em since I was nine," Tori returned confidently, her blasé attitude constituting the protective armor she wore.

Sierra politely asked her when she got to see her family.

Tori smiled inwardly. Her act was working like a charm. "What family? I was raised by nannies and governesses. When I grew out of them, it was off to boarding school and camps. Sometimes I see my parents at their house in Long Island when I'm between school and camp, but it's been about two years since I've seen 'em. No biggy," Tori laid it on thick to show how independent she was. She knew it had impressed everyone in the past, and she assumed it would impress Sierra. But Sierra was not the usual boarding school student.

No biggy? Sierra stared incredulously. Not seeing her parents was no biggy? Sierra was already trying to picture Thanksgiving without her family. No fragrant kitchen bustling with her loud relatives trying to snatch tasty tid-bits from her mother's cooking area. She could not imagine seeing them only briefly, haphazardly. And to act so nonchalant!

"You don't care?" A stunned Sierra managed to say after various memories of her family flitted through her mind quickly, but still crystal clear.

Tori knew at once she had made a mistake from the startled look in Sierra's eyes. Never before had anyone questioned Tori Chancellor. She lead, people followed. That's the way she liked it.

"You don't miss what you never had," Tori couldn't quite pull off a blasé air.

"That's awful. I already miss just the everyday things about my family. Dinners, friendly arguing, people to confide in..." Sierra drifted off as she thought of the love she always felt at home. She wished that she could describe it to Tori, so that Tori wouldn't be so callous. But hearing about it wasn't good enough, it was a matter of feeling, Sierra knew.

The bell sounded, cutting off the questions forming in each girl's mind. *Why are you here? Who are you? What makes you tick? Why am I drawn to you?*

Questions unknowingly duplicated in each girl's mind remained unanswered as each girl muttered a stunned good-bye and went their separate ways.



Sierra drifted through her next few classes in a daze, her mind filled with thoughts of her distant family and Tori. She had pieced Tori's story together fairly easily; she had seen many cases like Tori's in her years at Beckenham. Spoiled parents who did not want to be straddled with the responsibility of a child placed her in the nearest rescue facility - a boarding school. Tori realized the truth behind her placement early on and learned to be independent and act as though she was in control of everything, but Sierra knew that she was not. The act had worked on everyone except Sierra so far, including on Tori herself.

Tori, also lost in her thoughts that day, could not even begin to fathom Sierra's situation. A loving home? *Was* there such a thing? Why was a rare product from a loving home stuck in a boarding school? Why wasn't she with her family? A million questions raced through Tori's mind. And she was dying for answers.

Tori and Sierra's paths crossed once again Mme. St. Croix's French class. It was a demanding class, but both of the girls' backgrounds assured success. Sierra had taken French since she as a small child because of her father's constant duties abroad and his desire for his children to be at least bilingual. Tori's first governess had introduced her to the language thinking she would need the knowledge to travel with her parents. Tori had never left the country.

Sierra was already seated next to Lisa and Kristi when Tori entered the classroom. Both of the girls evaded each other's eyes, and Tori sat in the corner opposite Sierra's. The same thing that had drawn the two girls together that morning drove them apart now.

Eventually, though, Sierra was once again seated behind Tori. Tori turned to say something to Sierra at the end of the hours, but Sierra had already turned to talk to Lisa, who sat next to her.

Tori was furious! Nobody had ever dismissed Victoria Paige Chancellor before! Yet, as the anger burned inside her, a calming curiosity began to sooth the fury. Tori still found herself gravitating to Sierra Delauney.

Sierra only pretended to be listening to Lisa's comical account of her first day of classes; her mind was pulled in Tori's direction. She felt badly for her, because everyone needed someone to love them. Sierra was determined to show Tori this.



Weeks passed and Sierra tried to befriend Tori, but the other girl kept her distance. Soon, their only contact was a brief hello in the corridor or a short smile in the quad. Whenever there was free time at the end of class, Tori always struck up a conversation with someone else or pretended to bury her nose in a book. Sierra often saw Tori on campus flirting with boys from Tate Academy, Beckenham's brother school. Tori often saw Sierra alone in the library, book in hand but unnoticed, staring out over the window past the gardens and clipped lawns over the ocean to the Far East.

It was a chilly day in early November when Tori saw Sierra sitting alone in the quad with an odd expression on her face.

"Sierra? What's wrong?" Tori ventured, sitting next to Sierra on the bench.

Tori knew better. She was looking at a girl almost successfully masking disappointment. Anyone else would have believed it, but Tori knew all too well the too-bright smile, too-cheery voice, and eyes glistening with unshed tears yet dull at the same time. Tori herself had perfected the masquerade.

"Can it, Sierra. I've been there before. What's wrong?" Tori repeated firmly.

Sierra blinked. Only Lisa, Kristi, and Samantha knew her that well and they had been friends for years. Tori did not know her, but Sierra instinctively suspected that this girl would understand her better than her friends would at this point. She relaxed.

"I won't be seeing my parents until at least Christmas. Maybe not even then." The unshed tears rolled down Sierra's smooth cheeks and all of a sudden she poured her heart out to Tori. Her sentences tripped over one another and Tori had a hard time keeping up with images

of Sierra's family gathered at her grandmother's large house with dozens of relatives from both sides. Thanksgivings abroad. Descriptions of her family. Her father, the intellectual. Her mother, the creative. Mallory, the independent. Josh, the sensitive. The special Delauney bond. Her uprooted childhood. Words came pouring out of Sierra's mouth, toppling over one another. It was as if a dam had burst, but Sierra felt much better sharing all of this. Tori was fascinated by the description of a family. A loving family...

"I know how you feel," Tori sympathized. This time it was she who stared past the gardens and clipped lawns over the ocean to Europe. "All of those times that I hoped it would be different. I eagerly opened letters, hoping against hope that that year would be different. All of those bitter disappointments." Suddenly she remembered she was Tori the unbeatable and her face closed up. "But, hey," he voice was suddenly callous. "You get over it. Pretty soon it's no big deal."

Sierra recalled the first day of school when she had been surprised and taken aback by Tori's brashness. Now Sierra found it natural to incorporate Tori's brashness into her own personality.

"What are you afraid of?"

Tori froze. "What?"

"Are you afraid that if you give a little of yourself to someone you'll be vulnerable? That someone will be one up on you? That isn't what friendship is. Friendship is spilling your guts, knowing that your friend can and will help you pick up the pieces. It makes you feel stronger, not weaker. You just need someone to give you that security, Tori." Sierra's voice had grown excited during her impassioned speech.

"You, Sierra, do not know what you are talking about." Tori's voice was frosty as she stood and left. Sierra knew that the chill she felt was not from the early November air.

*I've blown it*, Sierra thought to herself as she lay in her bed that night. *Tori was just starting to open up when I alienated her.*

For some reason, Sierra trusted Tori as she trusted Lisa, Kristi, or Sam. True, Tori lacked Sam's dependability, Lisa's serenity, and Kristi's genuine friendliness, but Sierra was drawn to her just the same.

Tori was the rough sea beating against Sierra, the shore, while Sierra was only used to the gentle waters of the bay. Like the rough sea, Tori was intriguing, and Sierra wanted to get to know the rough sea and calm it.

She was reminded of a long ago family trip to the sea that was cut short by a sudden summer storm. She had only seen calm, sapphire seas before this and was astounded by the angry emerald waters. Sierra was terrified at first, but as everyone hurried and gathered their belongings, Sierra sleepwalked to the water's edge. She had never seen waves so big and even though she was afraid, Sierra wanted to splash about in the threatening but intriguing green.

Sierra was drawn to Tori, yet afraid. Many years ago she had not run into the sea and had always regretted not experiencing the ocean at its angriest. She would not make the same mistake twice.

Sierra drifted off into a troubled sleep.



Tori changed after that day in the quad with Sierra. Ignoring her goal of having the best year ever and creating as much trouble as she could for the school's administration, she hardly

left her room. She thought about how she had spent her life and what it meant to be a true friend. She had always put down girls like Sierra out of jealousy, but now she realized that she was only protecting herself from an imagined enemy. Sierra had made her admit that, and now Tori longed to be friends with her. She needed a rock to lean on.

Sierra ventured a smile at Tori one day, but Tori looked away quickly out of fear. Sierra, interpreting this gesture as anger, felt her smile quickly fade.

Sierra tried to concentrate on her studies that night but gave up in favor of a walk. It was almost 9:30 but Sierra knew she could be back in the dorm before lights out at ten o'clock. As she walked along in the brisk night air, her feet crunching in the new fallen snow, she tried to figure out where she was headed. Without thinking, she followed a familiar path to a nearby river that acted as the natural border between Beckenham and Tate. Sierra, lost in thought, did not notice the bare birches, snow-covered evergreens, or the stars dancing above her. She was brought out of her reverie at the scene she stumbled upon at the riverbank.

Tori was with two boys from Tate, a can of beer in her hand and several empties scattered around her.

"Tori!" Sierra gasped.

"Sierra!" Tori slurred. "Mother and Father are sending me to finishing school in Switzerland after I graduate. Come celebrate!"

"Tori, look what you're doing to yourself!" Sierra cried as she rushed toward her friend.

"Isn't it great?" Tori started laughing wildly and uncontrollably. The two boys joined in. Sierra, panic-stricken, looked at the three of them. Suddenly, Tori began crying great heaving sobs that shook her entire body. Sierra knew that by the depth of Tori's sobs that this was the release of someone who had kept the tears pent up inside her for a very long time. Too long.

Sierra helped the shaking girl to her feet and led Tori through the woods back toward the dorm. She figured the boys could fend for themselves and didn't give them a second thought.

"Tori," Sierra said after they were safe in Sierra's room and Tori was sipping a cup of hot tea. "What happened?"

"I got a letter from them last week. They said I'd be spending Christmas with them. I believed them. I was totally excited. Then today I got a telegram. A telegram if you can believe it! 'Sorry Victoria something came up stop will see you this summer stop found finishing school in Switzerland in fall for you stop mother and father.'" Tori started sobbing again and Sierra held her. As that moment pure hate for Matthew and Claire Chancellor swelled inside her, but an instant later it was gone and happiness replaced it. Tori had broken down her wall.

"They hate me," Tori said after a while, in a small, sad voice. "I didn't do anything and they hate me." Tori looked at Sierra. "Why do they hate me? What did I do to deserve parents like that?"

Sierra was speechless. She didn't know the answer to those questions any more than Tori did.

"You're a rock, you know," Tori frankly told Sierra.

Sierra did not bat an eye. "You were a stormy sea, but you're not so frightening now."

Glistening jade eyes met serious black ones.

"You've got a family now, Tori."

The two girls' smiles sealed their friendship.